



# Gateway to the West



Lee County Historical and Genealogical Society P. O. Box 231 Jonesville, Virginia 24263-023

July 2022

## President's Report

By Becky Jones



It sure is good to be back having in person meetings! I certainly hope things remain this way.

The Lee County Historical Society had it's first meeting this year in May. The last time we were able to meet was in July 2021. It was a long year! Covid19 hit us hard, as it did in many places. We lost several members who had always helped work with the Historical Society here in our county and surrounding.

With our building used very little over the last year, there was a lot of cleaning that needed to be done. There were so many Lady Bugs to get up, windows to be cleaned and a lot of dusting. We needed to plan what we needed to get done before we could host a meeting after being away for so long. We were able to clean out a storage area to make room for more resource material. We got more peg board up to display more pictures. We are rearranging our library so that materials are easier to find.

A few of the things we had to get done were; some trees on the bank beside our building had to be taken out. The security system was down and new phones were . A huge Thank were able to get these things done for our Society. needed. As you know there is always something that needs to be done. Please be thinking about us and what you can do to keep Lee County Historical and Genealogical Society going. Pay your dues and if you can, make a donation. It ALL helps.

A little of our history: In February 2002, the Lee County Historical and Genealogical Society was given the Old Friendship Church Building and property. We worked continuously until the Open House in 2006.

By June 2002 a new roof was completed and trees and weeds had been cut around the building. By June our workers started cleaning out stuff inside the building and accessing what needed to be done. Most of the water damage was done to the added on Sunday School rooms area of the building. The first room had completely fallen into the basement and the stairs leading to the basement were gone. The whole basement was in bad shape. Some of the flooring and walls had to be replaced. None of the doors worked properly, they were mostly standing open and windows were mostly gone. There was no glass in them at all.

In July we started working on the added on rooms, all the ceiling and walls had to have the sheetrock redone and some of the flooring replaced.

In August we took all the paneling off the walls in the main room and found underneath waynes coating with the cap cut off that met wide boards that ran all the way up to the bead board on the ceiling. With part of the ceiling open, all the paneling and base boards and cap for the wainscoting removed, the electrician (John Jones from Mulberry Gap, TN) was able to rewire the building.

From the start of the project Gary Chambers and my husband, Tom Jones were the main overseers, they would go to the local jail and get a couple of inmates to help with the work. We had some good help out of a few craftsmen but had to pay very little. A

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stop at the local quick mart for a pack of cigarettes and a pop and then back to the jail. The jail would send a lunch with the inmates.

By October, we were able to build new steps to the basement. October 29, 2002 new metal doors were installed, two in the basement and two on the main floor. The old windows were reworked and the glass put in so we could use them for a while. The windows on the side of the building covered up by the addition we found when we removed the paneling. We decided we needed more light so we used these old window openings to put in fluorescent lights with plexiglass and new window sashes, seals, caps to the wainscoting. My nephew, John Hines, made the window sashes, seals, caps to the waynes coating. We were lucky enough to find a piece of the original caps to the waynes coating and John was able to reproduce it for us. He made all the door frames and pretty much anything else that we needed for the building.

We continued to work throughout the next several months. We wanted to take one of the rooms and add a restroom and a small kitchen.

By September of 2003, Reed Williams sent his workers from Old Virginia Log Homes to power wash the outside of the building and paint the back side that did not have aluminum siding on it. Reed Williams' workers are the ones who ran our water to the building from the old Ewing Spring, which is right down below the old church. The story goes that the early settlers would camp at the Ewing Spring and they knew that from that post it was one days journey to the White Rocks by wagon.

to be continued next month....

## ***History of the Poor Farm of Lee County, Virginia*** *by Ken Roddenberry*

The Poor Farm of Lee County is not widely known nor has it received the attention I think it deserves. Nestled in a valley to itself, about a mile southeast of Jonesville, the Poor Farm served the citizens of Lee County in meeting the challenges of caring for the poor, the indigent, and the defectives. Some were orphans with no place to go, others were unable to work and support themselves or their families. The burden was upon the County Court to see that the poor had the basic necessities of life, thus Lee

County's Poor Farm was established about 1846. Associated with the Poor Farm was a cemetery to bury their dead. The graves are unmarked except for one lone headstone that is not legible. The County Board of Supervisors ceased the Poor Farm operation in late 1939. In the following brief is my research on the Poor Farm of Lee County. It includes the Poor Farm's formation, who lived there, who took care of them, and their stories.

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*Clyde Bledsoe, Jr. and the Poor House Buildings*

## *History of the Poor Farm of Lee County, Virginia* by Ken Roddenberry *continued from page 2*

### Early Poor Laws of Virginia

As one might expect, Colonial Virginia enforced many of the poor laws that originated from mother England. These were complex codes developed in the 18th century, designed to reform a pauper's behavior resulting in his or her rise out of the poor ranks. Parish vestries were charged with the care of the poor and could deny relief to strangers if they could not legally claim residence in that parish. By order of two justices of peace, strangers could be removed back to their place of residence. Another problem was the vagrants or vagabonds that blended in with the poor community. Virginia described them as "idle and disorderly" and authorized their arrest in 1776. Post-Revolutionary Virginians had the opportunity to change many of the laws governing its citizens. However much of what was established regarding the poor remained the same. In 1792, a Virginia statute authorized the county courts to apprentice poor orphans whose parents were incapable of supporting them.(1)

### Overseers of the Poor and Out-Relief Support

The Lee County Court Order records show a glimpse of how the county treated the poor from 1808-1840. Court records are missing from 1792 to 1808. On May 26th, 1808, the Court of Quarter Sessions "*ordered that the overseers of the poor receive Vincent Hobbs and his wife on their list and provide for them according to law.*" (2) From this court record we learn that there were overseers, not parish vestries, who took care of the poor and provided for them according to law. The court also relieved persons from paying the County levy and poll tax on account of their "age and bodily infirmities" such as James Trotten and John Graybell in 1810. Likewise, in 1811 the court provided relief to slave owner Nathaniel Ewing whose slaves, Henry & Ceasar, had bodily infirmities and whose value, he argued, were not worthy of taxation.

The Virginia General Assembly required each county to have a Board of Overseers of the Poor that identified those who were destitute and provided for their general welfare according to law. The ultimate goal of the Overseers and the County Court was to find paying work for the poor, and move them out of the poor ranks thus lessening the burden of the taxpayer. However much of the poor relief was in the form of "out-relief" whereby a poor person was bound to a reputable person who saw to their care. Some were provided a stipend to cover basic expenses while others were entered into an apprenticeship. This practice of out-relief continued as the dominant support system of the poor until the advent of 20th century social welfare programs.

The following are examples of poor children who were bound out as apprentices. In the August 27th, 1808 Court Order record, the overseers were ordered to "*bind William Polson, a base born child to William Graham*". On July 27th, 1814, the court "*ordered that the overseers... examine whether Betsy Benge, Micajah Benge, Thomas Benge, Polly Benge, Barbara Benge, James Benge and Charley Benge are poor children... that they bind them out as apprentices*". Betsy Alexander, a poor girl whose parents could not maintain her, was bound out to James Boggs as an apprentice in 1815. (2)

In an 1810 Lee County Court case, Commonwealth vs. Isaac Chisman, the defendant was adjudged to pay the overseers of the poor for the maintenance of a bastard child twenty dollars per year for seven years and that he post a security bond of two hundred and eighty dollars. Measures like these were supported by a 1792 Virginia statute. (2)

The County Court exercised their power to impose a tax or head-tax on the *tithables* in the county for the total cost of the county expenses including out-relief support of the poor. Tithables were males, age 16 and older, who owned property whether it was slaves, land or livestock.(3) For instance in 1840, the poor cost was \$612. There were 1,801 tithables and the proportion on each tithable was 34 cents. This amount paid for provisions, clothing, medical attention, burial clothing or shrouds, making of coffins, overseer services, sheriff fees, and administration costs. The Sheriff was responsible for collecting tithables and maintaining a delinquent list. (4)

### How Care was Provided to the Poor

As we have seen, the Overseers of the Poor were a bridge between the poor and the County Court who administered the laws of the General Assembly of Virginia. Lee County was divided into an Upper or Eastern District and a Lower or Western District with three overseers each. The earliest list, I have found, of overseers of the poor for the county was in 1815. They were: James Sheppard, John Flannery, Sr., and Drury Fletcher in the Upper District and Noble Covey, James Borgan, Sr., and Thomas Warren in the Lower District. They usually served three year terms. Minutes of their annual reports are preserved on microfilm for 1838 to 1870 and provide insight into their actions regarding the poor.

In these records (4), we find that the overseers had the authority to order someone to be on the Poor List. For example, Elizabeth [a.k.a. Betsey] Holland on or before June 4th 1838, was sick and being cared for by her mother, Patsy Holland. The overseers ordered Betsy to be placed on the poor list. They arranged for Elizabeth Ligin to nurse her and paid her Six dollars for her services. The

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following year the overseers ordered that *Betsey Holland* be "put to keep" with her mother at the rate of \$24.00 per year. Her case was reassessed at the next annual meeting in June 1840. At that meeting, it was noted that *Patsy* was paid \$16.00 for keeping *Betsy* from the *3rd day of June 1839 to the 8th day of February 1840*, the end date presumably the day she died. The overseers paid *Samuel H. Duff* five dollars for her "burying clothes" and *Charles H. Havelly* two dollars to make her coffin. From 1839-40, *Dr. Christan M. France* provided medical attention to *Mrs. Rachel Fouch*. *Noble Covey* made her coffin soon after. *Dr. France's* wife, *Elizabeth*, was paid to keep *Rachel*, "a Negro woman", in 1841. These stories are repeated over and over again for hundreds of poor people.

One noteworthy event reported at the 1839 Overseers Board meeting was the arresting of a vagrant. *Alexander W. Miles*, Clerk, arrested *James Carrell*, a vagrant, and summoned witnesses to support his case. It was duly noted that "*Noble Covey paid into the hands of the Treasurer One Dollar, Sixty-two and a half cents on account of the sale of James Carrell and he paid the same to the Sheriff of this County.*" (4) This can be interpreted to mean that *James Carrell* was auctioned or "sold" as an able-bodied laborer to *Noble Covey*, who was an overseer in the Western District.

### Establishing a Poor House for Paupers and Stewards

The first mention of a Poor House was recorded in the annual Board meeting of the Overseers of the Poor

on June 1st 1846.(4) For example, *Thomas Warren*, an Overseer, was reimbursed for making "bed ticks, quilts, and sheets for [the] poor house" in 1846 and 1847. Not much is known about the Poor House itself. It was likely a log building with weatherboards fixed to its sides. In 1851 *John Graham* purchased 800 feet of plank for the side of the Poor House and spent \$35 to cover it. Annual repairs were noted (1853-57) for the house, a barn and outbuildings and clearing of 3 acres of land. In 1856 a deed was recorded by the Clerk of the Overseers of the Poor, *J.W.S. Morison*, and tax paid on the land that the poor house was built on. However this deed nor the tax record has not been found to date.

From the Board of Overseers of the Poor records, *John Graham* was the first Steward of the Poor House in 1847 for which he was paid \$275. However his services for keeping the poor predate his service as Steward. For example, *John Graham* and others furnished provisions for *Wesley Hall's* family in 1841, who had recently died and whose burial was paid by the Overseers. *John Graham* received \$21.00 in 1843 "for keeping" *William Fleenor* and \$7.11 in 1846 "for keeping" *Susan Miller*.

The 1850 U.S. Census, recorded on Sep. 7th, lists the following residents at the Poor House: *John W. Graham*, his wife, *Nancy*, and 10 children and six paupers. *John* listed his occupation as farming and not as Steward of the Poor House. His real estate was valued at \$900 and perhaps it was his farm near *Green Chapel* on the *Powell*

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*Clyde Bledsoe in The Poor House Chicken Coop*

## *History of the Poor Farm of Lee County, Virginia* continued from page 4

River where the Poor House was originally located. There were six paupers as follows: Jane Spurlock, age 73, b. VA; David W. Jackson, 71, b. NY; Mitty Lewis, 34, b. VA; Hanah Lewis, 16, b. VA; Acy Burk, 25, b. NC; Sarah Hyden, 10, b. VA (5)

While census records provide benchmark data for each decade, records of the Overseers of the Poor and the Lee Co. Board of Supervisors (9) provide monthly / yearly insights. For instance, John Graham brought Elizabeth Hyden's child to the Poor House on Jun. 5th, 1850. Her child's name was not recorded but I believe Sarah Hyden may be that child listed on that year's census. John Graham received \$33 for boarding David W. Jackson in June 1851. And he received \$27 of medical attention paid to Edward Campbell on the same date. John Graham removed "Rebecca" to the Poor House in May 1853.

Andrew Johnson/Johnston was the second Steward of the Poor House. He served from 1852-70 with exceptions during the Civil War period. He was a carpenter by trade. Andrew Johnson was the informant of Jane Spurlock's death and listed himself as a "friend". She died Aug. 10th, 1853, from "old age". The death register listed no relatives. She was probably buried in a nearby graveyard. The Widow Brewer was removed to the Poor House in May 1854 and received medical attention in 1857. She is not mentioned again. William Vaughn was removed to the Poor House in May 1857. He died as an inmate there on Oct. 10th 1860, age 107, and probably is buried near Jane Spurlock.

William R. Graham, John Graham's oldest son, continued the public service work his father had started. William served on the Board of Overseers as Clerk and Treasurer. He removed Darcus Rutherford from her residence to the Poor House in 1856. He made a coffin for Martha Carroll's child in 1859. He kept Elizabeth Alsop at his residence for 10 weeks in 1861, and made two coffins in 1870 for Mrs. Sullivan and Ad Warner, an African American man.

The Overseers of the Poor authorized in their May 23rd, 1856 meeting the recording of a deed and payment of taxes for which the Poor House was built. Improvements and repairs were noted in the annual meetings that followed. The deed has not been found.

During the Civil War, the Overseer records were few and incomplete as may be understood. But the need remained to care for the poor. Out-relief continued for those in need of provisions or medical attention and the making of coffins. Moses Pendergraft was removed by the Wythe Co. Overseers of the Poor to the Poor House in Lee County in 1861 at the cost of Twenty-four dollars. Peggy Smitty was removed to the Poor House in 1861. Hannah

and Mitty Lewis died in 1863 and 1865. Both were residents in 1850. In 1866, a "*negro man named Evan*" was removed to the Poor House.

Following the Civil War, the Poor Farm was "let" to the lowest bidder. Andrew Johnson was the low bidder at \$15 per month for the 1867-68 year. In 1866, Henry J. Morgan, Clerk, was paid for his services in writing indentures for boarding children. In 1868 the overseers found Andrew Farley, age 68, a tailor, to be a "*proper subject to be provided by them*", and was conveyed to the "*House of general reception... until such time as he shall be able to provide for himself*". (4)

William H. Warner served as the third Superintendent (Steward) of the Poor from 1871-72. He was single and died Oct. 2nd, 1872, at age 35 from fever. In the 1870 census there were 12 paupers at the Poor House. Ms. Elizabeth Alsup, age 80, was there making this her 11th year as a resident. Two were listed as insane and three were children. In the Overseers of the Poor of Rocky Station Township records, Harriett Ward, "col'd", age 42, and a child were removed to the Poor House in 1872.(6) Two years earlier in the census record, Harriett was housekeeping six members of her family. When removed in June, 1872, she was described by the overseers as a "helpless woman".

John Miller served as the fourth Supt. of the Poor from 1873-74 following William Warner's untimely death. Miller served previously as an Overseer of the Poor from 1839 to 1851 and was well familiar with the program. Under his watch, James Eagle from Rocky Station Township was removed to the Poor House in 1874.

The Board of Supervisors wanted the farm to be rented to a suitable person and was awarded to Nathan S. Cox for two years. Cox served as the fifth Superintendent of the Poor from 1875 to July 1879. With the increasing number of paupers removed to the Poor House, the Board approved building of an additional house. Nathan Cox built this house for \$226 in 1875. His wife, Mollie Gobble, died in 1875 leaving him with two young boys, Charles and William. They graduated from Emory & Henry College and became farmers and educators in the County.

### Relocation of the Poor Farm

The Board of Supervisors decided to sell the Poor House and farm in 1877, now referred to as the "Poor Farm", and buy the Mill's farm located southeast of Jonesville which is the current site of the County's solid waste facility. This farm already had some buildings but others were needed for the "*comfort and accommodation of the poor*". In 1879, William Crowell and H.C. Joslyn built

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a four-room house for the poor and added one room for the use of the Superintendent.



*Clyde and Lora Bledsoe and Adam Clouse*

William Sullivan served as the sixth Superintendent of the Poor from July 1879 to March 1881 where his status was later noted as "the late Superintendent". It is unknown for certain but it is assumed that he died about March 1881. Under his watch, there were 20 paupers at the Poor House in 1880: fifteen whites and five blacks, ages 2 months to 93 years old. The 1880 Federal Census also created a Special Supplemental Census entitled *Schedule of Defective, Dependent, and Delinquent Classes* to list the Blind, Insane, Idiots, Deaf Mutes, and Inhabitants in Prison for each Township or District.(7) This census gave further insight into the conditions many of the poor of the County and their families or guardians faced.

James R. "J.R." Ely served as the Superintendent of the Poor from 1881-84 and 1887-1910. Under his leadership the re-location of the Poor Farm was established. The existing road to the farm was not suitable for the intended use, so funds for a new road up a branch east of M.D. Richmond's home was granted in 1882. The record does not reflect the relocation of paupers and

personal belongings to the Poor House. However, it is known that one pauper, Thompson Harris, age 86, died on Aug. 14th 1882 and may be the first person to be buried in the Poor Farm Cemetery. J.R. Ely was listed as a friend of T. Harris. He made Harris' coffin and dug his grave according to the Supervisors' records.

The need arose for more buildings to be constructed and were done while John Wesley McPherson "J.W.M." Ely was Superintendent from 1884-87. In 1884 a contract was let to build a [corn] crib and a smokehouse. Also a house for the insane was built suggesting that mentally impaired individuals needed to be separated from the general population. This trend of building additional houses for the comfort of paupers continued into 1888. Previously, J.W.M. Ely and his family moved from Lee Co. to Missouri before the civil war where his wife died in 1878 and a son in 1881. He returned to Lee County in 1884 and filled the vacancy of the Superintendent of the Poor Farm.

### Poor Farm: 1885 - 1930

William Davis and his wife, Selah, were residents at the Poor House since 1880. With them were six Davises, 2 adult women and 4 children, presumably related to William Davis. In July 1885, William Davis died of old age, about 100 years old. John (J.W.M.) Ely was the informant of his death. He was probably buried at the Poor Farm Cemetery.

It is noteworthy of the following actions taken by the Board of Supervisors. In 1887, Martha Moore was ordered to leave the Poor House for at least 12 months. Likewise, George Williams was ordered to leave in Nov. 1899. The record is not specific to the reasons but perhaps they violated the resident laws of the county.

The Board seemingly allowed unfettered physician charges for the poor. Some charges were argued before the Board by legal representation. In order to control costs, the Board established fee limits known as a "pauper practice". Dr. M.B. Spencer was the first physician appointed to the Poor House "pauper practice" and was paid \$30 in 1897. Drs. Samuel C. Stallard, Boyd Dickinson, Joshua Ewing, S.E. Shelburn and a number of doctors were appointed a "pauper practice" throughout the county.

In 1900 there were 16 paupers living at the Poor House. Of this number there were 3 Blacks: Curtis, age 5; Lucy Fulkerson, 44; and Maria Persifield, 100; and 13 Whites: William Osbern, age 67; Tildy Osbern, 40; Martha Shakley, 36; James R. Shakley, 5; Leiga Shakley, 5 mo.; Mary Web, 2; Golden Web, 1; Joell Gallaway, 29; Sallie Blair, 24; Polly Templeton, 24; Fannie Stanley, 23; Malana Merida, 50; and Obin Young, 23. Many of the names do

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not appear in the Board records suggesting the transient nature of the poor. Given her age, Maria Persifield was probably buried at the Poor Farm Cemetery. However no

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death record has been found to support this claim.

There were several persons brought to the Poor House in the ensuing years: Kate Poteet in 1904, Fred Kieffer and Peter Carroll in 1907, Frank Mulwee and his family, James Sargent and wife, and Martha J. Davis all in 1908, Zeb Phillips in Jan. 1910. W.N.G. Barron hauled the Bledsoe children "to and from" the Poor House in Feb. & Apr. 1910 suggesting that their situation was dire but someone agreed to take care of them.

The resident numbers at the Poor House appear to fluctuate from year to year. This was evident for the 1910 U.S. Census. Only seven paupers were residing at the Poor House. All were white adults, no children. They were: Johnnie Gilam, age 21; Francis Daugherty, 35; Annie Blair, 39; Fanny Stanley, 77; John Dinkins, 80; Jeams (sic) K. Davis, 80; and John Wood, 100. I list these names in the hope that someone will have information on them. Perhaps one or more died at the Poor House and were buried there but there is no evidence.

One factor that might have impacted the Poor House was the smallpox epidemic from the 1890's - 1910's. The Board of Supervisors reported in 1905 that *"smallpox in a malignant form exists in the Rose Hill District.... [and] the Board of Health.... [do] all things necessary to eradicate said disease or to prevent it spreading"*. The County hired "smallpox guards" at 75 cents per day and posted sentries at the major roadways along the County boundary. The County provided *"flour, meal, meat, coffee and rice [and] medicine"* to paupers with the disease whether at the Poor House or as out-relief assistance. The Board approved Board of Health resolutions in Feb. 1911 *"that we establish compulsory vaccination at St. Charles, Va... at Boone's Path Iron Company's works... [and] all the surrounding county including all public works. We consider this absolutely necessary and the only way to stop the spread of smallpox which is now raging in our County."* (4)

Concerned with the overall conditions at the Poor House, a majority of Supervisors made a visit in Aug. 1909 to view the repairs to the roofing and guttering. A coal bin sufficient in size to hold 1,500 bushels of coal was constructed. Also the waterworks from a nearby spring being used was upgraded. The Board approved Dr. J.S. Ewing with the Poor House pauper practice from 1909 forward.

The aging James R. Ely resigned as Superintendent in 1910 but worked at the Court House as their Janitor for \$100 per year. He applied for and received

a Confederate Veteran pension in 1912. He died on May 16th, 1913 and was buried at the Ely Grove Cemetery. The next Superintendent was Squire A. Lockhart. He served from 1910 to 1929. Not much is known about the Poor Farm during these years as the Board of Supervisors records are missing from 1912 - 1927. Likewise, the Overseers of the Poor records are missing.

However, the Virginia Department of Health's Vital Statistics Bureau began standardized reporting of deaths in 1912 and this alone has provided valuable information. For instance, from 1912 to 1919 there were twelve burials at the Poor Farm cemetery and one pauper in another graveyard. Note: a listing of those buried at the cemetery can be found at the Lee County Historical and Genealogical Society website. (8)

The 1920 U.S. Census listed nine paupers at the Poor House and included four members of the Clinton Clouse family. In 1928, Jack Smith and five or more unnamed paupers were sent to the Poor House. In March 1929, H.G. Poteet was paid \$10 for hauling paupers to Middlesboro, Ky. and in May, Willie Laningham was paid \$3 for hauling paupers to the Poor House. Tom Howlett was removed to the Poor House in Aug. 1929 along with another unnamed pauper in October of that year.

The County Poor Fund budget for 1929 was \$2,900 which paid for "out-relief" benefits to the poor who lived within the county and to maintain the Poor Farm and its residents. This amount included due bills for groceries, medical expenses, burial expenses, and salaries of overseers. With the growing budget for the poor, counties of Southwestern Virginia and the City of Bristol met in Wise, Va. on Aug. 15th, 1929 to consider consolidation of County Almshouses. Although the Lee County Board voted to consolidate, the efforts of this joint meeting failed to materialize and could have been impacted by the stock market crash later that year.

There were 22 burials at the Poor Farm cemetery from 1920-1929. All of these paupers were residents at the Poor House. One resident, Clinton Clouse, who died there was removed to a family cemetery in Hubbard Springs. Dr. T.B. Ely was the Poor House physician in the 1920's and 30's and undoubtedly tended to many if not all of these residents.

Emmitt W. Hines was appointed by the Board on Feb. 3rd, 1930, to serve the unexpired term of Squire A. Lockhart. On Apr. 7th, 1930 Mrs. Dean and her children were brought to the Poor House. Three days later the 1930 census was taken but the Dean's were not listed among the ten paupers at the Poor House. The census listed the following: Jane Carroll, 79; Alice Clouse, 77; Henry Fields, 26; Eli Hubbard, 56; James Marcus, 46; Charles A. Miller,

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66; Meda Roberts, 25; Samiel (sic) Thorp, 77; Margaret Vinsel, 73; and Mary Whitt, 71.

The Board of Supervisors wanted more control over burial expenses of paupers and passed the following resolution in May 1932: *"Be it resolved that the Board of Supervisors will pay no claims for burial of paupers, except those upon the pauper list, receiving Pauper Claims [bi-annual stipends] at the time of death... and in no case shall the Board allow any claim for more than \$12.50 for the casket and burial of any pauper."* (4)

### Advent of New Deal programs

President Roosevelt's "New Deal" brought relief to a struggling country and initiated many relief programs, such as public welfare and work programs. Congress enacted the Tennessee Valley Authority on May 18, 1933.(10) TVA's primary goal was to bring the watershed's population out of the poverty ranks by harnessing hydroelectric power from dams constructed on the Tennessee River and promoting best management practices in farming and soil erosion control. The Board of Supervisors realized an opportunity to aid the citizens of the county through the TVA programs, especially the farm demonstration program. The Board ordered that a survey plat of the Poor Farm be prepared showing buildings, barns, orchard, etc. and a deed was drawn in Feb. 1934 and recorded at the Court house in Feb. 1935.(10) Neither plat nor deed has been discovered in the Clerk's office. Improvements to the Poor Farm continued by the County and others, such as planting a fruit tree orchard, road work to the Poor House, work on the barn, sowing Lespedeza seed to nourish the soil, and fertilizer for the fruit trees. The County hired Byrd Sexton as the Poor Farm foreman in 1934.

The Board of Supervisors requested that the County Agent ask the Tennessee Valley Authority to make the Lee County Poor Farm a Demonstration Farm. The Board passed the following resolution on April 29th, 1935: *"Whereas, it is the desire of the Board of Supervisors to make the Lee County Poor Farm a Model Demonstration Farm for Lee County, it is ordered that R.C. Carter, County Agent, be requested to cooperate with Mr. E.W. Hines, Supt. of said Farm and that he arrange a plan of rotation, for the next four years, in cooperation with the Tennessee Valley Authority, to which program, the Board pledged its wholehearted support."* (9)

The Board of Supervisors appointed E.C. "Clyde" Bledsoe as Superintendent of the Poor Farm beginning in Jan. 1936. He continued the work that E.W. Hines had begun with the County Agent. A brooder house was built by Jack F. Gilley for 300 'Barred Rocks' chickens, a close

kin to the Dominicker variety. The County purchased a pair of mares from J.B. Roop and farm implements from C.C. Roop.

Ms. Saluda Sewell was appointed Lee County Welfare Director by the Board in Jan. 1936. Soon after, she was ordered to investigate desirable homes for children kept at the Poor Farm and place them in those homes. The Virginia Public Assistance Fund administered by the County Welfare office began in Aug. 1936 and provided benefits similar to those provided through the "out-relief" program that began in the early 19th century. Qualified persons received cash allowances, store accounts for general merchandise, transportation fees, boarding fees, medical care including hospitalization, optical glasses, and burial expenses.

From 1930-1939 there were 10 burials at the Poor Farm Cemetery. Four of the Poor House residents were buried at local cemeteries. (11)



*Ray Bledsoe and Henry Fields c. 1950*

### Closing of the Poor Farm

The Board ceased operations of the Lee County Poor Farm in Dec. 1939 and began a lease program under the direction of the County Agent, R.C. Carter. The tenant would have use of all buildings, farm machinery and livestock. Clyde Bledsoe was awarded the first lease for \$127.50. In May 1940, E.C. Bledsoe and his family shared the farm with these boarders: Alice Clouse, 80, Olin Davis, 37, Dockie Crusenberry, 52, and Adam Clouse, 45. (5)

The Poor Farm was leased to Claude C. Roop for two years in 1942 and all tenants or occupants were

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## *History of the Poor Farm of Lee County, Virginia* continued from page 8

required to move by Jan. 1, 1943. The exceptions to the lease were the main dwelling, the garden, orchard, and one house occupied by an "old lady", probably Alice Clouse. Personal property belonging to the County Farm was sold at a public auction. Claude Roop's lease continued until Dec. 1947 when Clyde Bledsoe was again awarded the lease. For 12 years he and his family lived there, ending in Dec. 1959. Pete Williams leased the farm for 4 years and Jack Roop for 8 years thus ending the leasing of the County Farm in Dec. 1971.

From 1940-49 there was one burial at the Poor Farm Cemetery. Charlie Rose, a peddler, and a non-resident of the Poor Farm, died at the Lee General Hospital in 1948. Saluda Sewell made the arrangements for his burial with R.E. Estes Funeral Home, Pennington Gap. (11)

In the April 1950 U.S. Census, Alice Clouse, Adam Clouse and Olin Davis were living in one house at the Poor Farm supported by the County Welfare program. Two adjacent houses were occupied by Clyde Bledsoe, wife Golden, son Ray, and sister Lola, and the other by Clyde Bledsoe, Jr., wife Lena, and daughter Peggy. Alice Clouse, at the age of 90, died on Dec. 2nd 1950 and is believed to be the last person buried at the Poor Farm Cemetery by R.E. Estes Funeral Home. She had been a resident for about 30 years. Adam Clouse moved to the Dryden community and died at age 91. Olin Davis died at age 73 at the Southwestern State Hospital, Marion, Va.

### "A Special Place" - A First Hand Account

I interviewed Peggy Bledsoe Ely in 2021 and she shared with me some of her life experiences growing up at what was known as the County Poor Farm. Peggy was born at the farm in 1948. Her father was Clyde Bledsoe, Jr. and her mother Lena. There were three houses at the east end of the garden and one on the northside. They lived in the L-shaped house at the southeast corner of the

garden. Her grandfather and former Superintendent of the Poor Farm, Clyde Bledsoe, Sr., lived in the main dwelling along the northside overlooking the garden. She remembered some residents living in the adjacent house not related to her. After her grandfather moved out, her father moved the family into the main dwelling. Peggy remembered the graveyard beside the road leading into the farm and thought there was a "grave house" over the grave of Alice Clouse. She also remembered Henry Fields who was a resident there. She shared with me photos of her grandfather, father, and Uncle Ray at the farm. "It was a special place to our family," Peggy remembered fondly.

### Reflections

While researching burial customs and funerary practices of Lee County, I found references in the public record of burials at the County Poor Farm. I had heard from others, some much older than me, of a farm where the poor were kept. At that time I did not think much about it and now realize a missed opportunity. Finding these burial records piqued my interest. I contacted the Lee County Administrator about the cemetery and any information he had regarding the Poor Farm. He arranged a visit with the Manager of the County Solid Waste Facility who took me to the cemetery's location. He showed me the grave depressions and one headstone he had found. He shared with me a sketch of the graves he had mapped. At a follow-up visit, I added several more depressions to his sketch that resulted in at least 46 potential grave sites. I found numerous rock fragments that could have been grave markers. Last Fall 2021, the Board ordered that the depressions be backfilled to facilitate yard maintenance. There are no fences or signage to identify the cemetery. It is my hope that the Poor Farm Cemetery will be preserved for generations to come and that a safe area be established for the general public to visit.

### Endnotes:

- (1) *Poor Laws of the Post-Revolutionary South, 1776-1800*, 21 *Tulsa L.J.* 1, 2013, 22 Oct. 2021.
- (2) Lee County Court Order Book, Lee Co. Courthouse, Jonesville, Va., 15 Oct. 2021.
- (3) <https://lva-virginia.libguides.com/tithables>, 11 Jun 2022. Also see, "What Genealogists should know about 18th Century Virginia Law", By Mr. John P. Alcock, Pres., Friends of the Virginia State Archives, Nov. 17, 1999, Library of Virginia, Friends of the Virginia State Archives.
- (4) Lee Co. Board of the Overseers of the Poor, 1838-1870, Lee Co. Courthouse, Jonesville, Va.
- (5) U.S. Federal Census, 1850-1950, Lee Co., Va.
- (6) Board of the Overseers of the Poor, Rocky Station Township, 1870-1875, Lee Co. C.H., Jonesville, Va.
- (7) National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington, D.C.; U.S. Federal Census - 1880 Schedules of Defective, Dependent, and Delinquent Classes; Year: 1880; Publication Number: T1132.
- (8) <http://www.leecountyvahistoricalsociety.org/index.html>
- (9) Lee Co., Va. Board of Supervisors records, Co. Admin. office, Lee Co. C.H., Jonesville, Va.
- (10) <https://archive.knoxnews.com/news/local/tvas-legacy-region-rose-from-poverty-to-prosperity-ep-411654291-359898501.html/>, 30 Jun 2022.
- (11) Va. Bureau of Vital Statistics, Certificate of Death, Richmond, Va.



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## *The First Lee Countian To Die In WW II*

*by Greg Edwards*



*Donald Edgar Bays Killed at Pearl Harbor*

December 7, 1941, a day that President Franklin Roosevelt said would live in infamy, a young man from Lee County Virginia was in Hawaii. Donald Edgar Bays was born on February 24, 1923. He had attended Flatwoods High School. His parents were Vernon Edgar Bays and Ella Bailey Bays of Hubbard Springs, Lee County, Virginia. He was the first Lee Countian to give his life in the service of his country in World War II. Donald Bays enlisted in the Army Air Corps on July 18, 1939. He requested foreign service. He sailed to Hawaii shortly after enlistment and was stationed at Hickam Field from the time of his arrival in Hawaii.

While at Hickam Field, Donald Bays signed for and completed a course as a airplane mechanic. He also qualified as a machine gunner and served for some time in that position as a regular member of the crew on a B-17 Flying Fortress. A short time before the war began, he had transferred back to his old job as a mechanic and was working there when the war began on December 7, 1942. Donald Bays was a member of the Tow Target Detachment.

When the Japanese planes attacked Hickam Field, Donald Bays and a group of other young men went onto the airfield and were firing at the planes with their .45 caliber pistols and .30 caliber guns. These were their only weapons. A Japanese plane flew in low and strafed them and dropped a bomb. Many of these young men were mangled beyond recognition. Donald Bays was one of them.

Donald Bays was posthumously awarded the purple heart by President Franklin Roosevelt and was awarded a Citation of Honor by H. H. Arnold, chief of the U.S. Air Force.