

## Snow Hill/Poor Farm/ Jefferson County Alms House

Tucked away on Poor Farm Road, on the north side of the Old Leetown Pike between Ranson and Leetown and adjacent to an animal control facility, is a building of considerable architectural significance, one rich in associations for the community, and well worthy of recognition. It represents in a single structure the economic extremes of Jefferson County, and a past both honorable and ignoble. Architecturally, it is one of the finest houses in the county built within the first two decades of the 19th century. This is the Jefferson County Alms House, also known as Snow Hill, the Poor Farm, and later as the County Infirmary.

The main residence is a brick structure built in 1813 for John Hurst (1766-1850) and his family. The exterior walls of the house are laid in Flemish bond. The gable walls have burnt header bricks, giving the walls a checkerboard appearance. The building stands two-and-a-half stories, with five bays on the front elevation and three bays on the rear. The house originally had a paired door entry with a five-light transom.

The interior has excellent millwork for the period. The elegant stair has shallow risers with incised stair bracket ends and turned newel. The parlor (west room) has an overpaneled mantel wall with crown molding. The breakfront mantel rests on a punch-and-dentil band. The firebox surround has a two-field crossette casing. The doors in the house have six raised panels. The panels of these formal doors are molded and hung on large H&L hinges (that is, hinges shaped in the letters "H" and "L"). The dining room (east room) has a less ornate mantel with paneled frieze. This room also had a large built-in cupboard with paneled doors. This piece now sits on the rear porch. The second floor has more understated millwork. The original mantels have been removed or remodeled in the two large bedrooms. A small room at the top of the stairs includes an enclosed stair to the attic. This stair wall is built with beaded plank boards.

By 1857 Snow Hill Farm had passed into the hands of Dr. Minor Hurst, and was about to undergo a dramatic transformation. In that year the Overseers of the Poor of the County of Jefferson sought a farm for the county's indigent and contracted with Dr. Hurst to purchase 218 acres of Snow Hill, plus the house, for \$11,000. The following year the county added a large brick rear west wing, providing an additional six bedrooms for the use of the new occupants (around 1880 a matching wooden east wing was also constructed, but it was destroyed by fire and is no longer present). The east elevation of the wing has a two-story porch with exterior stair to access the upper rooms. The windows of the house were changed from 9-over-9 sash to 2-over-2 during the county's ownership

The idea of a farm for the poor became widely popular throughout the country in this period, the intention being that the inmates would grow their own food, thus decreasing the expense of their upkeep. Another method the county's Overseers of the Poor used to defray costs was to hire out boys and girls to labor. For example, the County Order Book for the December 1857 term shows that George Robinson, a free negro, age five, was bound to Jacob Fulk until the boy reached the age of 21. Robinson was to bring the Overseers \$65 at age 12, with an increase at regular intervals until he attained his majority, when he was to bring in \$75.

The federal census, taken every ten years, affords us periodic glimpses of the farm residents, recorded under the Middleway Magisterial District. In 1860 32-year-old native Virginian Thompson B. Robey was shown as Manager of the County Poor, living on the place with his 30-year-old wife Mildred A. and 11-year-old son James W. , along with 13 "paupers," only two of whom (Letty Davis, age 80, and Nelson

Green, age 87) were African American. Among the whites were two males born in Germany, and a woman age 40 described as “idiotic,” one age 53 and deaf and dumb, and one age 73, “insane.” The whites were notably younger than Davis and Green. The status of 43-year-old illiterate George H. Hartman, born in Germany, is unclear, as the word “pauper” does not appear beside his name.

The year following this census saw the country engulfed by civil war, and Jefferson County stood in the path of the armies. This is illustrated by county Confederate Veterans marker number ten, which stands on the Leetown Pike just past the county fairgrounds, and in close proximity to the Poor House. This small obelisk commemorates a sharp cavalry skirmish on August 21, 1864, during Gen. Philip H. Sheridan’s Shenandoah Valley Campaign. That same month the Poor House was visited by a detachment of Col. Henry A. Cole’s celebrated 1st Maryland (Union) Potomac Home Brigade Cavalry, which made off with superintendent George T. Watson’s flea-bitten horse, an animal he valued at \$100, and for which he was never reimbursed. Superintendent Watson had voted for secession under pressure from family and friends, but his pro-Union sentiments led him to avoid conscription by decamping with like-minded neighbors to Maryland or Pennsylvania whenever Confederate forces were in the vicinity.

As memories of fratricidal strife receded, the 1880 census provided another snapshot of the Alms House residents. Charles White, age 59, was there listed as Keeper, along with his wife and three daughters. At that time there were 32 white inmates, ages 1 to 86, and eight black inmates ages 1 to 80. In this period also men such as John Gibson were paid to work the farm, receiving \$1.50 per day and 30 cents per mile travel time. When county surveyor S. Howell Brown compiled his map of 1883 the property had by then become designated the County Infirmary.

In 1910 the census informs us that Miss Cate Littleton was manager of the Infirmary. She was age 50, and lived there with her three sisters, one brother, and four other relatives, in addition to two black servants. There were 12 white inmates, including one born in Austria who spoke only German, and another born in Maine; all the others are shown as born in West Virginia. The number of black inmates had risen to 23.

Two decades later the local newspapers were viewing the County Infirmary, once a resplendent manor house, as a scandal. The Spirit of Jefferson excoriated its “almost unmentionable condition.” It was denounced as a menace, with its residents reduced to an animal-like existence. In 1931 the County Commission acted to correct this deplorable state of affairs.

Mrs. Daisy Fritts was hired as supervisor that year, and in a remarkably short time the refuge for the indigent enjoyed a rebirth. In 1932 one paper enthused that “We had occasion to go to the Alms House a week or two ago and the transformation was so great it seemed impossible. Floors, ceilings and walls were clean, the quarters had been made more attractive....The Court is to be congratulated on having a woman there who is interested in her work and effective. She deserves the thanks of the people of Jefferson County....”

Mrs. Fritts stayed at the Infirmary for 28 years. When, at age 77, she looked back on her life, she thought of that period as the most satisfying of all. Her superintendency was a highpoint in the 102-year record of the Alms House. She was still in charge when it was closed in 1959 and the last nine inmates relocated, whereupon she retired, fondly regarded as the most caring person ever to have run the place. No doubt she would have subscribed to the famous sentiments of Thomas Gray’s “Elegy” when she reflected on those whose lives she did so much to improve:

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil;  
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;  
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile  
The short and simple annals of the Poor.

Though the inmates were gone, the story of the Alms House continued. On May 26, 1994, the Jefferson County Commission deeded the property to the county's Solid Waste Authority, including not only the main building, but also outbuildings such as a spring/dairy house, summer kitchen/carriage house, and the ruins of various other structures. In a fitting appreciation of the importance of the site, on April 14, 1995, it was added to the National Register of Historic Places. In December 2009 it was acquired through the collaborative efforts and generous donations of the Solid Waste authority and Rock Spring Church by the Jefferson County Historic Landmarks Commission.

#### Selected References:

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U.S. Manuscript Census, Population Schedules, Jefferson County, West Virginia, Middleway District: 1860; 1910

[www.poorhousestory.com](http://www.poorhousestory.com) [a website devoted to the history of Poor Houses in the U.S. and Great Britain]