

— HISTORY —

Windham almshouse had troubled history

The Windham town farmhouse, or almshouse was built in 1877 on West Main Street at the site occupied today by the VFW club house and Friendly's Restaurant. It housed the unemployed, homeless or the poor, and was administered on the basis of England's Elizabethan Poor Law, wherein the poor or the paupers of the parish were provided for by local charity.

The town selectmen appointed a local Board of Relief, which had the duty to decide who qualified for poor relief payments.

The board usually consisted of the community's wealthiest individuals, who chose the candidates for either indoor or outdoor relief.

It was their responsibility to decide which paupers were the "deserving" or "undeserving" poor.

Those qualifying for indoor relief were placed in the almshouse, but had to pay for their food and lodgings by either working on the town farm adjacent to the almshouse, or by cleaning the streets and maintaining public buildings. The sick and insane were isolated in small rooms or cells.

The superintendent and his staff fed them and the Board of Relief appointed local physicians to treat the unfortunate inmates.

Conditions in the almshouses were often scandalous, and at the end of the 19th century the Connecticut State Board of Charities embarked upon a series of inspections to evaluate whether the state's poorhouses met basic health and cleanliness standards.

Between October 1903 and July 1904, the Windham almshouse underwent three major inspections and the board compiled a highly critical report of the conditions encountered there.

The report commenced with a brief description of the property. The town of Windham owned and operated the almshouse, which was located one mile west of the railroad depot in 70 acres of land, of which 20 were under cultivation.

The keepers were Mr. and Mrs.



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A. H. Lyman. The cost to house and feed an inmate was \$600 a year. In July 1904, the almshouse had 27 inmates, of which 11 were women. Three of the inmates were insane, one was feeble minded, but 13 were able to work in the house and on the town farm.

The Windham almshouse was described as a large three-story wooden building heated by steam and lit by gasoline. It was supplied by city water, and the drainage was emptied about the grounds.

The fire escape and fire hosing needed to be replaced, and the bedrooms were seen to be in a shocking condition. The bed linen was soiled and infested with vermin, and a thorough cleaning of the place was urgently recommended. The report also ensured that action was taken to remove a 24-year-old insane man, who was confined to a cell in the basement, to the state hospital at Middletown.

Windham's First Selectman Isaac Sanderson was asked to comment on the report in March 1905 and he stated that the Connecticut State Board of Charities had no right to inspect

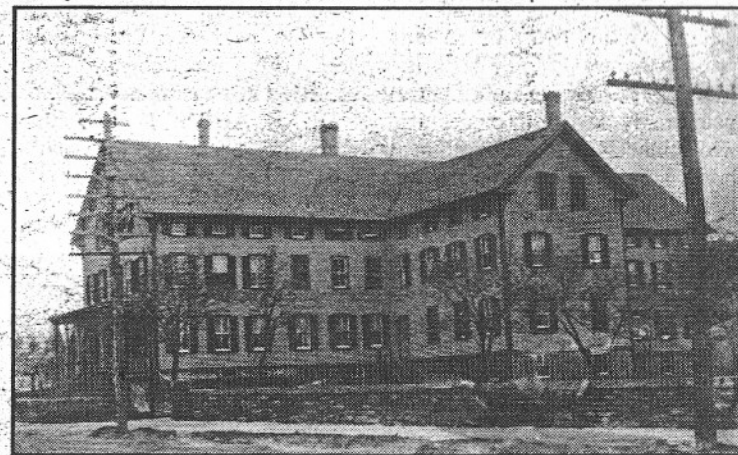
the premises, nor to write a report without the permission of the Windham Board of Selectmen. He added, however, that everything was now in a healthy condition.

The almshouse had recently been fumigated and renovated, and it would be connected to a sewer pipe as soon as the town sewer was extended up Main Street.

When the almshouse was eventually connected to the sewer, the

town planned to install baths and closets throughout the house. Sanderson also hoped that the town would have sufficient funds to replace the gasoline lighting with electric lighting.

Nevertheless, he did not think the fire hose and fire escape needed replacing. The hose was recently tested and the fire escape, a canvas chute, was in his opinion a "valuable and satisfactory" piece of equipment.



The Windham almshouse in 1910. The stone that went into the construction of the basement and first story is now part of the stonewall that separates the VFW building from Friendly's.

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