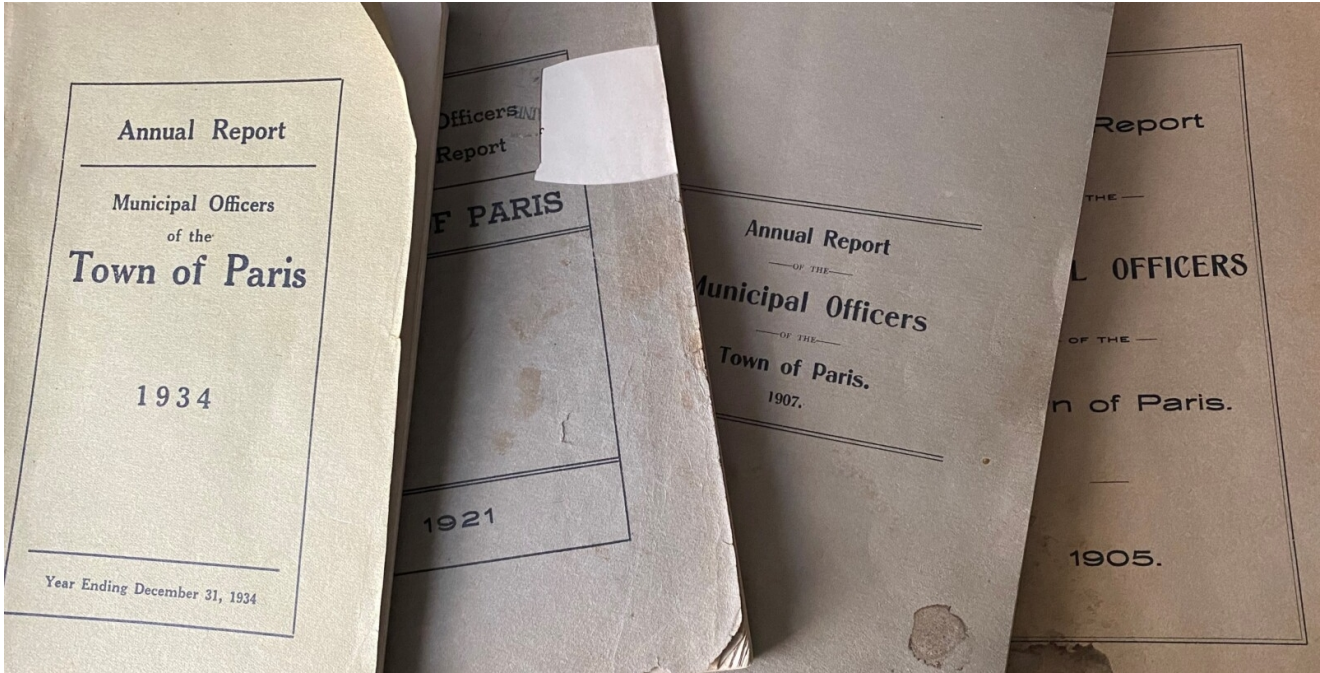
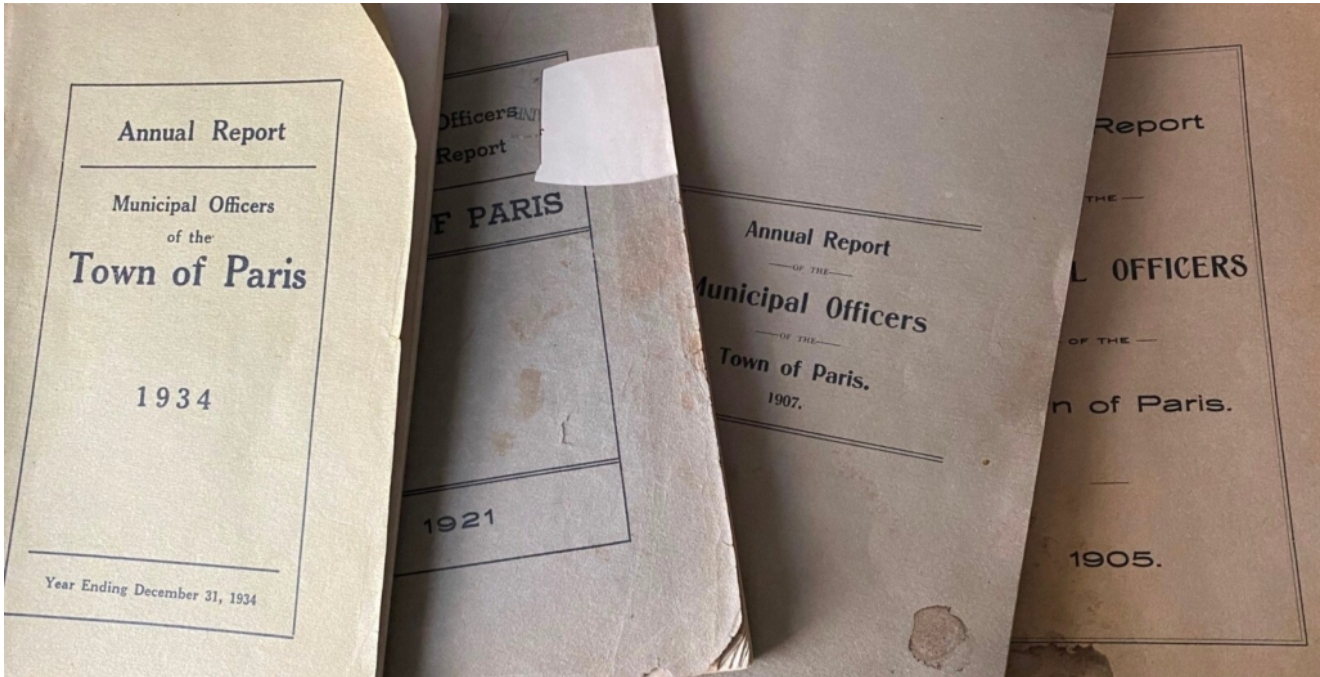


Overseers of the poor: Life on the farm

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Town reports provide historical background on how Maine communities cared for the poor. *Courtesy Ben Conant*

REGION — Many rural towns in Maine have a road called Town Farm Road and the reasons are simple.

Formed as a way to provide welfare to the poor and indigent, the town farm rose to prominence between the mid 18th and early 19th centuries.

The system replaced the long-standing practice of auctioning off those in poverty — from children to the elderly — during annual town meetings, establishing a residence where the poor would live and work, in exchange for food and board (if they were able). Town farms were something of an improvement of the paupers' lot by the standards of the day.

Paupers were sent to live on the town farm for a variety of reasons. In practice, the idea that people could be counted on to work to pay their share while living on the farm was overly optimistic; the majority of inmates (as its residents were called) were more often than not elderly, infirm or mentally incapacitated, not to mention children who were too small to perform labor in the fields or woods.

In Paris, the town farm was located at three different locations between 1838 and 1935. The sellers of its first, Joel Thayer and his wife, stayed on as overseers as part of the transaction.

Otisfield established its first poor farm in 1865, following the Civil War. According to Jean Hankins, archivist for Otisfield's historical society, the move may have been in anticipation of widows and orphans of 10 local soldiers who had been killed during the war who required town support.

Oxford established a poor farm in 1842. Ichobod Thomas was hired as its first superintendent for \$200, with his wife listed as the matron. The couple moved to the farm on April 5, the same day that the first two inmates arrived, Nathaniel Russell and his wife. The Russells brought with them food, furnishings and a number of household tools including plates, blankets and a shovel.

Also counted in the farm's initial inventory was clothing for four unnamed boys. Three had each one pair of shoes, pantaloons, socks, a shirt, vest and cap and the youngest of the four had two complete sets of clothes.

At times, the farms failed and had to be moved. In Otisfield, the farm formerly known as the Hancock Farm was used from 1865 until 1917, when its cows all perished of some disease and the barn was torn down as a consequence. Officials then purchased the George Bicknell farm and moved all operations there.

Similarly, Paris' second poor farm was heavily damaged by a tornado in 1905. The town sold it at auction and purchased another in a different section of town.

Superintendents were hired as a married couple, with the wife never identified by name. The husband's responsibilities were primarily to make sure the farm produced food, not only to provide for the inmates, but also for any surplus foods to be sold. Most years, the town farm operated at a loss, but on occasion it did turn a profit.

In 1877 in Paris, the poor farm recorded \$731 in expenses and \$651 in receipts, with a deficit of \$81. That year, six inmates were living on the farm. Two were men, aged 57 and 72; two were women, aged 31 and 36; and two were boys, aged 11 and 14.

The year earlier, however, the farm had eked out a profit of about \$20, showing expenses of \$799 against receipts totaling \$819.

The superintendent's wife was tasked with managing the household, feeding the farm's inmates, managing housekeeping and acting as nurse for the elderly and ill.

Annual inventories of poor farms reveal ownership of livestock and equipment commonly found on most subsistence farms of the day. In 1882 in Paris, the farm housed one horse, a pair of oxen, eight cows, two sheep, two shoats (young female pigs), 24 fowl, 15 tons of hay and a half ton of straw. It had on hand 25 bushels of oats, 10 of corn, 85 of potatoes and smaller amounts of beans and peas and dried apples. Other food items included 60 pounds of lard, 300 pounds of pork, 120 pounds of ham, 45 pounds of butter and a "good supply" of vegetables.

Much of the food produced was sold. That year, the farm made \$726 selling milk, butter, eggs, various livestock, crop harvests and lumber.

That year, selectmen reported in the Paris town report that under the management of Superintendent Mr. Mason, the quality of the farm's livestock improved. Despite a drought that caused the farm's main crop of sweet corn to fail, officials were satisfied with his services and those provided by his wife who was singled out for praise in her handling of the household affairs and the "convenience and comfort of the inmates."

The town report included vital statistics for the farm from year to year. During the 1870s, as many as 14 inmates were cared for at the Paris farm. Most years, like in 1882, an average of five and a half people were supported at the farm. That year, there were four men listed with ages between 62 and 78, with another dying midway through. Two women, ages 41 and 17 were also inmates. One man, with no age included, had been sent to the United States Military Asylum at Togus.

Paris recorded other expenses for its paupers, those who were still able to reside in their own homes and several whose legal settlement was in other towns, but were supported in Paris.

One resident mortgaged his homestead to the town in exchange for support; his expenses for the previous year were listed as \$51.15. Paris managed to collect from other towns the money they spent on paupers from Rumford, Woodstock and Otisfield.

Around 1890, Maine towns were hit with new laws making tramps (homeless) their responsibility. Fewer and fewer local inmates lived at the town farm, while more resided in their own homes.

By 1934, one of the last year's that Paris maintained its farm and well into the Great Depression, only two inmates were listed, men aged 46 and 60. But the town report showed that 120 tramps had to be fed and lodged in a year's time.

That year, Paris recorded receipts from the state of \$3,650 to care for its poor. Other towns reimbursed Paris \$1,477 for support of its citizens within the town, while another \$1,851 remained unpaid.

Care for the poor had become something of a local industry. According to the itemized listing in the annual report, goods and services such as groceries, hardware, clothing, blacksmithing, medical care and livestock supplies. Business names that are still familiar today are recorded, such as Paris Farmers Union and C.M. Power Co. A total of \$14,822 was paid out to local individuals, businesses and neighboring towns.

More than 100 individuals and families were listed in the report as receiving some type of town aid, totaling \$9,395. Another \$5,426 was paid to other towns and to the state. Whole families of children were listed as being in state custody and a handful were listed as requiring their sanatorium board be paid. Aid given to veterans of the Civil War and World War I was a major drain.

The needs of the poor were far beyond Paris' capacity to care for them within the town farm system.

Programs from the New Deal, including social security, relieved much local burden of supporting citizens fallen on hard times or permanently disabled. By 1935, Paris ended its town farm system. Its final overseer sold off the remaining stock for \$350 and the operation was closed down.

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