

## **From the Assessor's Office: Records of the Hanson Overseers of the Poor**

*By Mary Blauss Edwards, Curator of the Hanson Historical Society*

The Hanson Overseers of the Poor were a town committee that served in Hanson, Mass. from the 19th century into the 20th century. They oversaw the budget of the Hanson Almshouse, and occasionally provided funding to private families who agreed to take in individuals who would otherwise live at the almshouse, or provide temporary funding to town residents who requested financial "relief" (such as recent widows). The Overseers of the Poor also had the ability to deny paupers support if they were not considered residents and require that they either remove from town or receive financial support from the town they originally came from, following the New England tradition of "warning out".

In some towns, Overseers of the Poor were a distinctive committee; however in Hanson, every member of the Board of Selectman held three official titles: Selectman, Assessor, and Overseer of the Poor – therefore all of the selectmen were Overseers of the Poor. In 1884, social scientist and reformer Frank B. Sanborn wrote that in several New England towns, including Hanson, "the almshouse is used as the place for keeping the town records and transacting a large part of the town business, the "selectmen," or chief officers of the town, being in such cases "overseers of the poor".

In 1837, the town of Hanson purchased the Josiah Cushing house (built in 1763 by Josiah Cushing) and used the home as an almshouse until 1902, when a new almshouse was built and the "Old Almshouse" was sold to the New England Helping Hand Society (who turned it into the Gordon Rest Home Annex). Today, the property is the site of the Sullivan Funeral Home. In 1901, C. Gilman Whiting built a new almshouse across the road on Indian Head Street near Wampatuck Pond. The new almshouse was referred to as the "Hanson Town Farm", which cost \$4,819.08.



Alms House, Indian Head St. Courtesy of the Hanson Historical Society.

Sanborn wrote, "Occasionally, though not often, one of these overseers of the poor is actually the keeper of the almshouse; but this officer is generally appointed from a class of persons who devote themselves to the occupation of almshouse keeping, and who therefore remove from town to town as their occupation ceases in one place and begins in another. Some of these keepers remain in one position for twenty years; but this is rare... The average length of service in the towns visited this year is about four years, and the average salary of the keeper is \$387. This is a sum too small to secure the best service, and in less than half the Massachusetts almshouses is the management up to the standard which would be maintained in a State establishment for the same class. On the other hand, there are few instances of gross neglect or abuse on the part of the almshouse keepers."

Inmates of the Hanson almshouse typically had no income or were actively in debt, and usually did not have family nearby to help support them. These residents worked for their board at the almshouse by tending the farm on the almshouse grounds or providing domestic labor at the almshouse. Healthy but impoverished residents were not usually permanent, and often seasonal, based on their ability to find work during the warmer months. Sanborn wrote, "Many of the rural [Massachusetts] almshouses have room for twice their present number of inmates; and, in half our towns at least, the almshouse population is not increasing from year to year."

Residents at the Hanson almshouse also occasionally included orphaned children, impoverished widows with young children, or unmarried women who had recently given birth to illegitimate children. The Hanson almshouse also served as a residence for the disabled of any age, or the elderly suffering from Alzheimer's, who either had nearby family, or whose families could not support them.

The manuscript "Town of Hanson, MA Overseers of the Poor 1867 - 1875" was preserved using [Community Preservation Funds](#). Upon the recommendation of the Hanson Community Preservation Committee and approval at Hanson Town Meeting, the [Hanson Board of Assessors](#) contracted the services of [Browns's River Marotti Company](#) to digitize the manuscript, the [original manuscript](#) is housed in the at the Assessors Office. The manuscript consists of "Book No. 2 Records of the Overseers of the Poor for the Town of Hanson Commencing Jan. 21st 1867".

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References:

Frank B. Sanborn, *The Management Of Almshouses In New England* (Boston, MA: Press of Geo. E. Ellis, 1884). (available [online](#))  
Plan No. 6, House Nos. 81 & 82. Joseph B. White, *History of Houses in Hanson, Mass.* (1932).