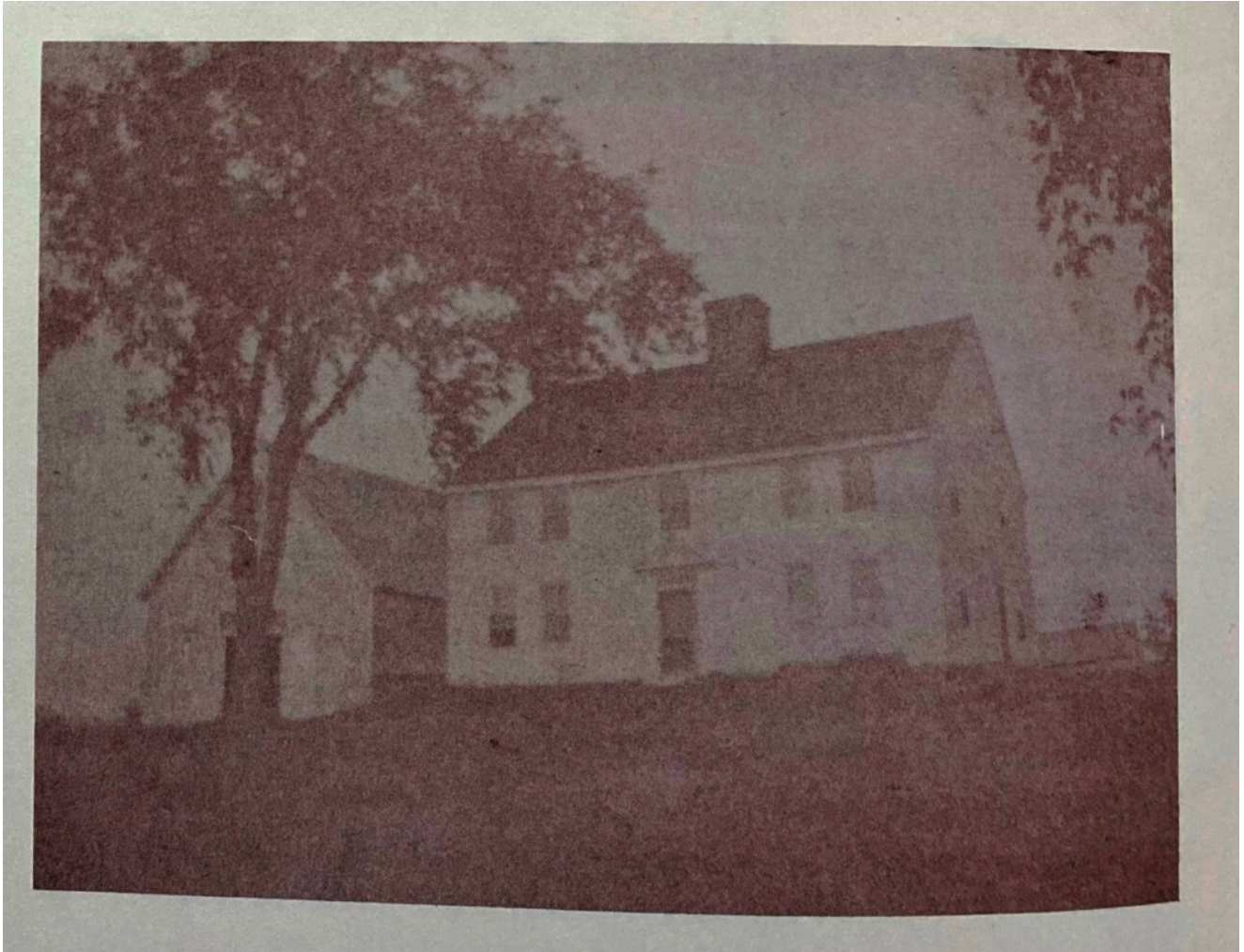


Overseers of the poor: Ending the ‘town farm’ experiment

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REGION — By the time of the Great Depression in 1929, town farms in Maine were being phased out as a means of supporting the poor, although some would continue operating for several more years.

While more people than ever depended on general welfare in the 1930s, often the only people dwelling on the poor farm were the superintendent and his wife, a few local residents who could not or would not support themselves, and a steady trail of tramps — what would today be more gently referred to as the homeless or unhoused.

Paris' 1934 town report reflects the shifts of how the poor were cared for during the depression. Once the Social Security Act became law in 1935, more poor people were provided with enough income to remain in their own homes.

The Oxford Town Farm

The Oxford Town Farm was located on a road (now discontinued) leading from Paine's Corner to the Thomas Hill area of East Oxford. The Town purchased the land and buildings in 1842 from Samuel H. King. It was the primary homestead of Daniel Bullen.

The Barn was used for a Pound in the mid-1800's. In 1892, the old barn was taken down and replaced with a new one built by B. F. Elwell, who was Superintendent and Overseer from 1889 to 1893. Many of the poor lived here for many years. In 1924 it was voted to sell the stock and lease the farm. Several rented until the mid-1940's. It has since been torn down.

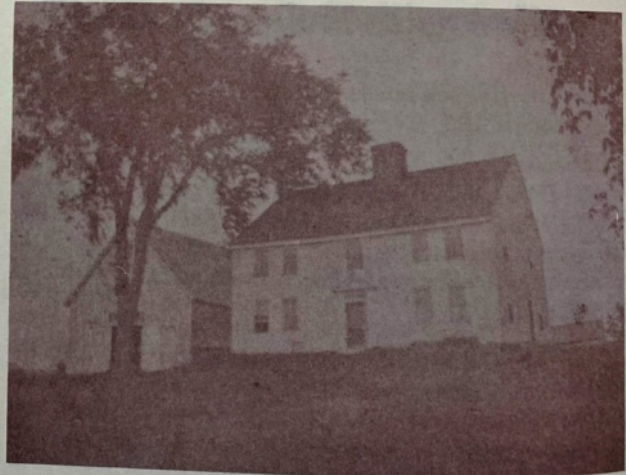


Photo records of poor farms in Maine are rare. This is Oxford's town farm during the late 19th century. Townspeople voted to close the farm in 1924. It was leased out until the 1940s, when it was finally torn down. *Courtesy Paris Cape Historical Society*

Conditions of almshouses, which included poor farms, degraded after the stock market crash in 1929, eventually transitioning into convalescent homes.

In 1934, only two "inmates" resided at Paris' poor farm, Fred LeBaron, age 66; Caroll Doten, 46. By comparison, a total of 120 homeless had passed through, transients who had lost their homes or roamed (often by rail) in search of day work or other means of scratching by.

The town farm property and its assets were assessed at a value of \$3,981 in 1934. Assets included tools, house and furnishings, livestock, feed, crops, food, firewood and ice.

John J. Mack was the overseer and pulled a \$575 annual salary. The town also paid out for labor to operate the farm. Services were typical of subsistence farming at the time — butchering, blacksmithing and farrier work; numerous charges for materials and repairs; utilities, medical care and groceries; seasonal services such as cutting and hauling ice, hay and firewood; and even \$2 for a subscription to the Advertiser Democrat.

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There was a fire at the farm during the year, causing unplanned expenses.

J.B. Cole & Son charged Paris \$52.81 for chimney materials, A.E. Estes received \$24.25 to build a chimney and Floyd Morgan was paid \$10.60 to repair fire damage. Other suppliers and tradesmen were paid for lumber and other materials following the fire.

In their report, selectmen itemized products from the farm that covered a number of food items, including processed goods like butter (356 pounds) and 157 dozen eggs (a value of \$34). Veal, hens and syrup were sold off the farm as well.

And the town report noted that 59 bushels of potatoes, 23 pounds of pork and 25 pounds of butter produced at the farm were provided to the poor living in their own, or boarding, residences. The concept of "food pantries" was in use to feed those in need.

Paris' accounts for the poor 1934 totaled \$17,281. Of this, \$7,000 had been appropriated from the town in March, with another \$3,500 approved at a special town meeting in October. The state contributed \$3,650 and the amount collected from other communities came close to \$1,500. A balance of more than \$1,550 had been carried over from 1933. After general welfare expenses and town farm maintenance, Paris had a balance of just under \$600 to carry into the next year.

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More than 80 individuals (and families) off the farm were listed in the town report as receiving aid during the year. The children from five families were noted as being in custody of the state, with three people residing at the state sanatorium. Aid to veterans of World War I totaled \$253.

The third and final town farm to be run in Paris was in the north area on Elm Hill (also known as Perry Hill). Lewis W. Mack was the last overseer to manage the farm. Paris phased the farm out of operation in 1935, selling the livestock off for \$350 and renting the property to John J. Mack for \$120, 1934's farm superintendent. From there the farm passed into private hands and out of the town's welfare annals.

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