

# Records of the Commissioners of the Alms House (Poor House), 1800–1923

*The Charleston Archive, Charleston County Public Library  
Compiled by Nicholas M. Butler, Ph.D., Manager, and Laura Barfield, 2006*

Collation: 11 linear feet

Description: This collection contains the records of the Commissioners of the Alms House (also known as the Poor House), 1800–1923. The records consist of Journals, Records and Minutes (1800–1917); Register of Transient and City Poor (1803–1916, incomplete); Letter Books (1822–1876); Ledgers (1827–1910, incomplete); Indentures (1832–1859); Ration Book (1835–1846); Hospital Register (1841–1856); Day Books (1845–1863, incomplete); Physician’s Register of the Cell Department (1848–1849, incomplete); Registry of Deaths (1852–1877); Register of Out-Door Pensioners of the Upper Wards (1852–1865); Register of the Out-Door Pensioners of the Lower Wards (1852–1861); Register of Outdoor Pensioners and Index (1897–1913); Rough Minutes (1872–1911, incomplete); Miscellaneous Loose Materials (1876–1923, incomplete).

The Journals, Records and Minutes (1800–1917, 15 volumes) consist of reports to and from the Commissioners of the Alms House and their committees. In the early years, these volumes serve as an annotated daybook, minute book, and ration book. Mainly, these books reflect the daily operations of the Alms House, including inmate inventories; household and kitchen inventories; master’s reports; physician reports; distribution of clothing; financial records; and purchases, including groceries and sundries. The records also reflect that a few persons of color were inmates of the institution (as early as 1809). Although in 1836 a resolution was passed to prohibit blacks as inmates because separate accommodations were not available. However, the records do show exceptions were made in special cases.

The Register of Transient and City Poor (1803–1916, incomplete, one volume) is not entirely chronological: 23 February 1803–14 Nov 1829 (pp. 1–138); 3 January 1913–6 March 1916 (pp. 139–145); 1 January 1866–27 Dec 1912 (pp. 168–296). Information includes: name, date of admission, by whose order, birthplace (range of countries shows large immigrant population), date of discharge, occupation, date of decease, length of time in house, date of removal to hospital, and remarks, which note the circumstances of disposition from the Alms House, such as eloped, adopted, employment obtained, death and place of burial, or whether sent to the hospital, Orphan House, Old Folks Home, etc.

The Letter Books (1822–1876, two volumes) contain transcriptions of letters and reports received by or sent to the Board of Commissioners. Many letters contain details of individual inmates, including admission and discharge circumstances, and in the case of lunatics, their symptoms, treatment and disposition, many of whom the city transferred to the State Insane Asylum in Columbia.

The Ledger Books (1827–1910, three volumes, incomplete) contain financial records of the Alms House. The first volume (1827–1844), an “invoice book” (notation scratched on back cover), includes a running record of accounts, listed by individual and/or firm. Of note, the first

volume also contains an inventory of “articles in store” and “articles in use,” a list of donated books, and a list of books lent to the inmates from the Alms House library. In the list of accounts receivable, the majority of transactions are for mortuary services, which were provided to Charleston’s poor on a fee basis as a source of revenue for the Alms House, such as horse and hearse, coffin, grounds fee, and interment fee. The other two volumes (1886–1910) contain monthly balance sheets of the institution. In the back of these volumes are “Free Transportation” lists (1891–1896 and 1897–1904) of transient poor, listed by name, destination and fare amount. This money, provided by a city appropriation fund, was for the return of the transient poor to family and friends outside of Charleston or the state of South Carolina.

The Indentures Book (1832–1859, one volume) contains printed agreements for indenture of Poor House residents, usually teenagers, to be bound out as apprentices, although 4-year-old Sarah Hill was bound out as a “housekeeper” for a 17-year term of indenture on 27 March 1835.

The Ration Book (1835–1846, one volume) is a daily tally of inmates—men, women and children—and the number of rations dispensed by category (bread, beef, milk, and oil—added in 1837). Daily accounts of bread and beef rations dispensed to outdoor pensioners is listed as well.

The Register of the Out-Door Pensioners of the Upper Wards (1852–1865, one volume) and the Register of the Out-Door Pensioners of the Lower Wards (1852–1861, one volume) are ration books that list citizens who are residents of the upper and lower wards of the city and who receive rations as outdoor pensioners, rather than as inmates. Information includes: name, number of children, date when rations were granted or renewed, number of rations, date of increase or diminution, date discontinued. Occasionally, some miscellaneous pensioner information is provided, including date of death, transfer to another ward or to the Alms House. During the Civil War years, the Upper Wards book appears to have accounted for pensioners of both upper and lower wards, and is generally less carefully kept. This combined information appears on the reverse side of the Upper Wards’ pages, beginning with the last page’s reverse side, and continuing until the reverse of the “K” page.

The Register of Outdoor Pensioners (1897–1913, one volume) is a ration book that lists: name, date ration commenced, address, age, sex, color, number of children, number of rations, birthplace, last address, time of residence in city, rent paid, occupation, charity received from other institutions, “what property applicant is possessed of or interested in,” “why claiming public support,” recommended by whom, and remarks.

The Index to the Outdoor Pensioners (1897–1913, one volume) cross-references pensioners listed in the above register by year, name, and page number.

The Hospital Register (1841–1856, one volume) is an admission/discharge summary of the city hospital located in the Alms House. Information includes: name, date of admission, disease, occupation, birthplace (which reflects a large immigrant population), date of discharge, and result. Of interest, is a handwritten report on “Break Bone Fever” by Belin Flagg, M.D., physician to the Alms House, in which he describes the disease, its symptoms and treatment (25 September 1852). There is also a “House Fund” page, following register information, 1 September 1869–6 Oct 1869.

The Day Books (1845–1863, three volumes, incomplete) provide a statistical record of admissions and discharges to the Alms House. Information includes the number of: inmates (male, female, children); admissions; discharges; elopements; and deaths, noting cause of death

and birthplace of deceased. There is also a daily account of any cash received for temporary board of transient poor or for odd jobs performed by the inmates, such as picking oakum, picking wool, hauling furniture, etc. The major source of cash receivables was from Charleston citizens for coffins made by the inmates, which went into a “coffin fund.” Additional notations show funeral arrangements (coffin, horse and/or hearse) provided for poor citizens, including slaves, and by whose order.

The Physician’s Register of the Cell Department (1848–1849, one volume) consists of several surviving pages of a once much larger volume. The Cell Department was primarily for the poor insane, who were housed in “cells.” However, the register shows that most of the admissions for these dates were for “effects of intemperance” and a wide range of physical ailments, suggesting that the cells served as drunk tanks and as an overflow ward when the hospital was full. Extant pages (some partial): 15 September–11 October 1848; 20 October 1848–9 April 1849; 3 July 1849–30 August 1849. Information includes: date of admission, name, age, birthplace, occupation, date of discharge, result, disease or reason for admission.

The Registry of Deaths (1852–1877, one volume) includes: date of death, name, age, birthplace, race, occupation, cause of death, when admitted, and remarks, such as place of burial (Potter’s Field, Magnolia Cemetery, church cemetery) or body received by relative.

The Rough Minutes (1872–1911, four volumes, incomplete) are identical to the fair copy of the minutes for those years. For description, see Journals, Records and Minutes above.

The Miscellaneous Loose Materials (1876–1923, incomplete) include: an application for rations as a colored out-door pensioner by Clara Farr (1902); contracts and specifications for repairs to the Alms House (1867, 1888); vouchers (1876, 1879, 1923, incomplete), the 1923 vouchers are from the Charleston Home, the last vestige of the Alms House; supplier bids for food and clothes (1912); printed blank reminder for the weekly committee of the Poor House (1840s); *Rules of the Board of Commissioners of the Charleston Alms House with the Rules for the Government of the House, Together With an Ordinance Relating to the Alms House*. (Charleston, SC: The News and Courier Presses, 1884. 20 pp.)

Historical Note: Charity for the poor in Charleston dates back to at least 1712, and perhaps earlier.<sup>1</sup> Government relief began in 1736 when the Provincial Assembly legislated funds to build a “Work House and Hospital for the reception of the poor.”<sup>2</sup> Charleston grew rapidly, and so did its poor population, and the building soon proved inadequate to accommodate both the poor and the lawless under one roof. In 1768 the Assembly considered it necessary to separate the poor from “the company and noise of disorderly offenders” and passed legislation to build a new Poor House and Hospital adjacent to the existing Work House and Brick Barracks.<sup>3</sup> Located on the southwest corner of Queen and Mazyck Street, this building served as the city’s poor house and hospital for almost 100 years. Outdoor pensioners, or non-resident poor, also sought relief from the institution, which provided them with food rations on a temporary or long-term basis. A board of commissioners managed the institution, while a master, matron and clerk oversaw its daily operations. Capable inmates performed odd jobs and the proceeds helped fund the institution’s operation. The primary industry of the Poor House inmates was the funeral

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<sup>1</sup> *City of Charleston Year Book*, 1880, 42.

<sup>2</sup> *Statutes at Large of South Carolina* (1840), 7: 90.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

business, in which they built and sold coffins and provided hearse and interment services for the city's most destitute residents and sometimes for slaves.

By the mid-1800s, after decades of hard use, the Poor House was dilapidated, unsanitary, and crowded. To improve the inmates' living conditions, in 1852 the city purchased a building from the Charleston Factory Company on Columbus Street to serve as the city's new "Alms House" and a lot on Drake Street, just south of the building, for a vegetable garden to provide food for the institution. The coffin fund financed the modifications to the factory building, and after its completion the inmates were transferred to the new Alms House on February 28, 1856.<sup>4</sup>

The turn of the twentieth century ushered in welfare reform, however, which swept the nation over the next fifty years. Throughout the United States, federal assistance gradually supplanted the archaic poorhouse system. In Charleston, these reforms began in 1913 as the city council changed the institution's name to "The Charleston Home" and the "Master's" title to "Superintendent." By 1924 the Council abolished the Board of Commissioners of the Charleston Home and created a centralized agency, the Board of Health and Welfare, to administer all city-funded provisions to the poor. The Bureau of Social Welfare, under the control of the Board of Health and Welfare, assumed direction of the Home. That same year the Council also discontinued the outdoor pensioner system, as it was "perpetuating pauperism" among individuals and families.<sup>5</sup> In 1932 the city Council restructured the welfare system yet again, abolishing the Board of Health and Welfare and appointing a Committee on Public Charities to oversee administration of both the Charleston Home and the Old Folks Home.

In 1949, following the examples of other American cities, the city discontinued all financial support of public welfare programs, closing both the Charleston Home and the Old Folks Home, as Social Security legislation enacted in the 1930s had established a number of federal social welfare programs. The city developed a humane course of action to provide for the remaining 19 inmates in the Charleston Home. Those who were bedridden were placed in a hospital or nursing home at the city's expense until they were cured. Charleston County Welfare Department assumed responsibility for the remaining inmates, placing them in available federal programs, and the city provided supplemental aid if necessary.

The Charleston Home building on 63 Columbus Street was soon demolished and an elementary school erected on the site, today known as the Wilmot J. Fraser Elementary School.

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<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Joseph Klebaner, "Public Poor Relief in Charleston, 1800–1860," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 55 (1954): 210–20.

<sup>5</sup> *City of Charleston Year Book*, 1924, p. xlix.

# Records of the Commissioners of the Alms House (Poor House), 1800–1923

## Collection Outline

### Series:

- |   |          |
|---|----------|
| I. Journals, Records, and Minutes   |          |
| a. Fair Copy (1800–1917)  | BOX 1–15 |
| b. Rough Minutes (1872–1911, incomplete)                                  | BOX 16   |
| II. Day Books (1845–1863, incomplete)                                     | BOX 17   |
| III. Ledgers (1827–1910, incomplete)                                      | BOX 18   |
| IV. Letter Books (1822–1876)  | BOX 18   |
| V. Miscellaneous Loose Materials (1876–1923, incomplete)                  | BOX 19   |
| VI. Registry of Deaths (1852–1877)  | BOX 20   |
| VII. Ration Book (1835–1846)  | BOX 20   |
| VIII. Register of Out–Door Pensioners<br>of the Upper Wards (1852–1865)   | BOX 20   |
| IX. Register of the Out–Door Pensioners<br>of the Lower Wards (1852–1861) | BOX 20   |
| X. Register of Outdoor Pensioners and Index (1897–1913)                   | BOX 21   |
| XI. Hospital Register (1841–1856)   | BOX 22   |
| XII. Register of the Cell Department (1848–1849, incomplete)              | BOX 22   |
| XIII. Register of Transient & City Poor (1803–1916, incomplete)           | BOX 23   |
| XIV. Indentures (1832–1859)   | BOX 24   |