

Almshouse, Almshouse Cemetery, Town Farm, Town Forest

Little remains today of the Town's Almshouse complex, tucked away at the corner of Poorhouse Lane and Archelaus Place. Only a surrounding stone wall and birch trees at its entrance mark the [Almshouse Cemetery](#) on Poorhouse Lane. Adjacent to the south and east, a straggly collection of pines lingers as the Town Forest. At the dead end of Archelaus Place, the Almshouse and its barn stand as a private home. Aerial photos outline ghostly foundation ruins of the Town Farm, which became a subdivision in the 1980s.

In [1837](#), the Town bought the farm and homestead of Mary and Stephen Adams for \$2,100 and advertised for a ["person wishing to take charge of the Alms House in West Newbury."](#) According to [The Poorhouses of Massachusetts](#), Josiah Quincy's influential 1821 report to the Massachusetts legislature established a belief that inmates at almshouses would earn their own keep. This was untrue generally, and particularly here, where the Town Farm, the Almshouse, and support for the poor always required significant taxpayer funding.

Substantial improvements to the Almshouse complex were, in the main, few and far between. In [FY1887-88](#) the Town built and furnished a new almshouse (still standing) for \$4,690.47 and razed the old one. In [FY1911](#), when the average number of inmates present over the year had dwindled to 1.25, and the Town had begun a decades-long debate about what to do with the Almshouse complex, \$3,029.29 was spent to replace the burned-down Town Farm barn.

Around 1912, the Town stopped paying the Almshouse Master a salary. Instead it rented the complex to him, paying him for the board and care of the few if any inmates he took in—still at net loss. West Newbury long aided the poor outside of the Almshouse, subsidizing such costs as wood for heating, clothing, burial, medical care, and board for indigent townspeople. The state also assumed various responsibilities over the years for the poor or disabled.

In 1925, the Town began advertising to sell the Almshouse complex. No buyers appeared, even when in [1929](#) the Town offered to fund a mortgage worth 75% of the purchase price. In [1946](#), the Town voted to sell the Town Farm, including the Almshouse (with Town retention of "full ownership of the Town forest, and a right of way to the forest") for \$3,500. The Cemetery went unmentioned in the transaction.

Life at the Almshouse is mostly lost to history. An 1898 [state report](#) offers insight into conditions in West Newbury: "The management at this almshouse is the same as when last seen. The house was not as clean and orderly as it should have been. No changes have been made during the year. A bathroom and a furnace are greatly needed improvements. There is no provision for separation of the sexes. There are five inmates, one of whom is insane." Aside from financial summaries in annual Town reports and a handful of references in vital statistics, no available Town records describe the home or its inmates. Census data capturing those present on the day of enumeration provide the key unlocking some residents' stories.

Many—maybe most—who entered the Almshouse left only at death. Martha/Marcia Emery Rogers, a widow old, poor, and alone, arrived at the Almshouse in her 80s, sometime before 1860. She remained there until she was just shy of 100, dying in 1874. William Sylvanus Noyes, described as "idiotic," was an inmate between at least 1855 and his death in 1876 at age 44. Elizabeth M. Tewksbury, who contracted tuberculosis, began living in the Almshouse in her 20s and died there in 1866 at age 44. She is one of the few whose burial at the Almshouse Cemetery was recorded. In 1891, the Town paid \$1 to carry Priscilla Barton Pillsbury Place to the Almshouse just before she died.

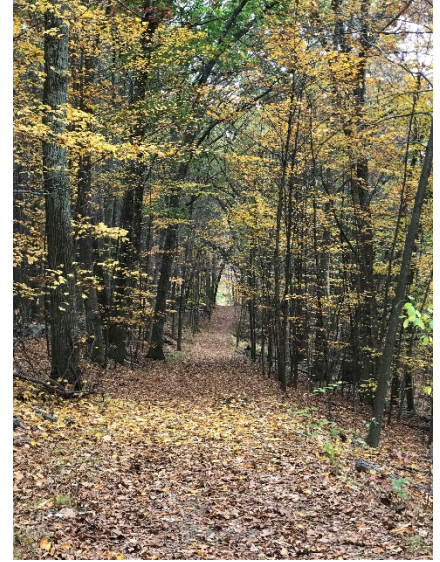
Some passed through. Charles Smith was a 5-year-old "mulatto" boy at the Almshouse in 1855. He was still there, attending school, in 1860, but left Town thereafter. John Cross was an inmate in 1850, when he was 16. Four years later he was a bridegroom in Lawrence and three years after that he had a son. John Cross worked for decades in Lowell textile mills.

Sarah Kennett French's story is among the saddest. Married in 1840, she had a daughter and son. With her husband no longer in evidence, in 1850 she was an "idiotic" Almshouse inmate while her daughter lived with the [Kennett grandparents on Coffin Street](#). Her son took the surname Merrill. After time at the Tewksbury state almshouse, Sarah lived here again with her parents and then her daughter and son-in-law. Her daughter, a young bride, died of typhus in 1865. Within a year Sarah committed suicide. Her [gravestone at the Bridge Street Cemetery](#) says "Wife of Hollis French."

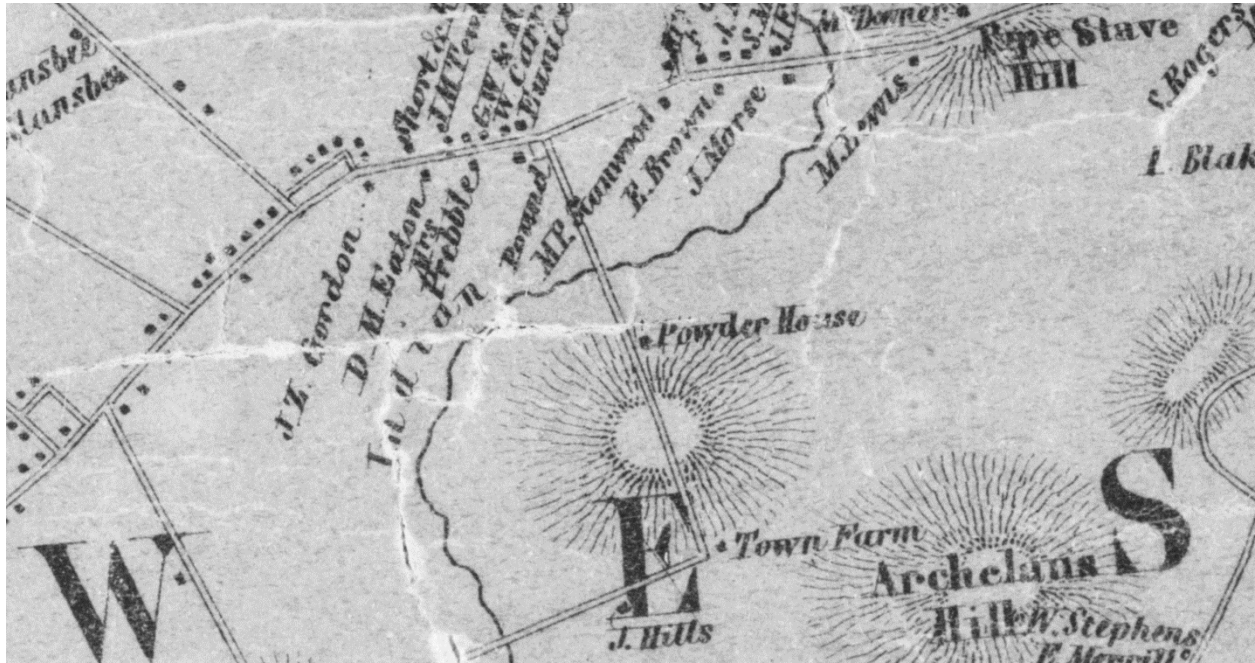
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West Newbury Almshouse



*Poorhouse Lane a/k/a
Maple Lane a/k/a
Powderhouse Lane*



Map of West Newbury, 1856

Courtesy of the Trustees of the Haverhill Public Library, [Special Collections Department](#)