
Life on Poorhouse Knob: Poor-relief in Montgomery County, Virginia, 1830–1860

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In 1850, a twenty-seven-year-old woman named Maria Rose resided atop Poorhouse Knob in the Montgomery County (Virginia) Poorhouse, sharing the dwelling with eleven other “paupers,” the supervisor of the poor, and his wife and four children.¹ A full decade later, Maria’s economic circumstances had apparently not changed, as she was still living on Poorhouse Knob. She was now, however, surrounded by entirely different people. In 1860, she was keeping company with only six other “paupers,” a different supervisor, and his wife and five young children.² As is often the case for society’s most vulnerable citizens, history has only left us the barest glimpse of Maria’s life. She lived in the poorhouse during the prime of her life, at least from ages twenty-seven to thirty-six, and possibly longer. She could read and write, and she was a native Virginian. She most likely had a daughter living with her in the poorhouse because in 1850, an eleven-year-old named Amanda Rose was listed as a resident.³ Although we can speculate on what life may have been like for Maria and her daughter on this rural poor farm in southwestern Virginia, their actual daily experience cannot be retrieved from the depths of more than a century. Taken together with other historical fragments, however, our limited history of Maria Rose can provide a window into how rural, southern communities understood and addressed poverty in the nineteenth century.

This article will examine how government officials perceived poverty in the community of Montgomery County, Virginia, from 1830 to 1860 and will also attempt to shed what little light history will allow upon the daily experience of recipients of poor relief. The source base will be comprised of claims for poor relief housed in the Montgomery County Courthouse; county order books, which detail county expenditures; Virginia law codes; and newspapers and other publications from the period. Although these documents are sparse and contain only brief mentions of our historical subjects, they can provide a worthwhile glimpse of poverty in nineteenth-century rural Virginia. These documents will illustrate how government officials spoke about and legislated for the poor. This article

will complicate the narrative that the nineteenth-century poor were solely viewed as worthless, lazy, and shiftless burdens by their fellow citizens.⁴ A study of poor relief in Montgomery County will demonstrate that, in fact, during the early to mid-nineteenth century, the poor were seen as neighbors in temporary need of help.⁵ This is not to say that the lives of the poor were easy or comfortable, however; to the contrary, their status as poor meant that they were given enough help to survive, but in exchange they were often required to sacrifice their own personal and bodily autonomy.

The field of poverty studies is relatively small, and the field of southern poor relief is even more limited. When discussing the history of poor relief in this period (1830–1860), two bodies of scholarship must be consulted. The first is the historiography of American poor relief, which spans the whole of U.S. history from the colonial era to the present. This research speaks of general trends in poverty relief and how they developed over time.

Scholars within this field, such as Michael Katz, David Lightner, Stephen Pimpare, and David Wagner, refer to the historical tendency to divide the poor into two categories: the worthy (of aid) and the unworthy. The worthy poor consisted of the elderly and infirm, and widows and children. The unworthy poor were unmarried mothers and any adults deemed capable of work. These two categories of “unworthy” poor were accused of the moral failings of promiscuity and laziness, respectively. Relating to the concept of the undeserving poor, scholars of poverty also referred to the role of the poorhouse as a means of both caring for and controlling those living in poverty in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Admittance to the poorhouse required adherence to a number of rules regulating the lives of the inhabitants, with the purpose of “moralizing” the poor and teaching them the value of labor. Within the walls of the poorhouse, residents lost much of their personal autonomy. They were told what to eat and drink (or not drink, in the case of alcohol), what work they must perform to earn their keep, whether they could leave, and whether they could receive medical treatment. The poorhouse was meant to serve as a refuge for the truly destitute but, at the same time, be unappealing enough to discourage citizens from relying on it and be morally reformatory to those who did rely on it.⁶

The historiography of national poverty and welfare has focused on the concepts of “worthy” versus “unworthy,” the controlling and reformatory intentions of poor relief, the value differences between indoor and outdoor relief (money or goods provided “outdoors” of an institution), and (more recently) the impact of race on the experience of poverty. This body of research tends to focus on the urban areas of northeastern and midwestern states. Within this historiography, however, sits a smaller body of research

specifically on southern poor relief. These scholars identify the ways in which the South followed national trends and which policies and attitudes were unique to the South.

Writing in the 1970s, historian John Hope Franklin discussed poor relief in the South as it related to changes resulting from the Civil War. He argued that southern states had neglected social problems during the antebellum era since they were focused on maintaining slavery and little else; he argued that they only began to take notice of social issues such as poverty during Reconstruction.⁷ In recent years, this argument has been refuted by historians such as Elna Green and Timothy Lockley, both of whom argue that poor relief existed in the South to a degree equal to, or even greater than, in the North.

In her work on poor relief in Richmond, Virginia, from 1740 to 1940, Elna Green argues that poor relief indeed existed in the antebellum South and that it was primarily offered by local governments, with private organizations filling in gaps where needed. She maintains that contrary to popular assumption, Southerners did look to their governments for relief, especially during times of great economic stress, such as the Civil War. She places the history of southern poor relief within the national historiography, noting that there were small local variations but that, in general, poor relief in the South followed national trends. Specifically, she argues that poor relief in the South was just as focused on the dichotomy of worthy/unworthy as in the North and that it was also equally concerned with keeping the costs of serving the poor as low as possible.⁸

In the most recent and comprehensive work on the subject, Timothy Lockley argues that poor relief was even more prevalent in the South than in the North and was comprised of both public and private efforts (as Green also notes). Acknowledging that his conclusions were drawn from a severely limited source base, Lockley still maintains that antebellum poor relief offered a uniquely southern approach that included both governmental solutions and private charity work. Furthermore, he maintains that in many cases, relief was more generous in the South than in the North.⁹

By shifting the focus of the histories of welfare reform and poverty from the national or state level to the very local level, insights can be uncovered that have until now been obscured. Montgomery County adhered to the national distinctions of indoor and outdoor relief, but the extant sources regarding this county's treatment of the poor lack the scorn and disapproving judgment of more populous areas. Rather, the sources in Montgomery County support Timothy Lockley's assertion that poor relief in the South was both generous and abundant (in comparison to the North).¹⁰ Notions of obligation permeate

the records: the obligation of citizens to provide support to their own family members if they are able to do so, and the obligation of the government to step in if they cannot. Through a discourse analysis of county records regarding the poor, as well as an examination of the goods and services provided to the county's destitute citizens, this article will argue that the county government viewed the poor (of both races) in their community as neighbors in need of assistance, but that in exchange for this assistance, the poor were required to relinquish a great deal of their personal autonomy.

History of Montgomery County and Poor Relief in Virginia

A brief history of the county will prove useful before beginning an analysis of the sources. Located in southwestern Virginia, Montgomery County was created from portions of Fincastle, Augusta, and Botetourt counties in 1776. By this time, the land had already been inhabited for millennia by Native Americans. English explorers began arriving in the mid-1600s, and the area was the site of numerous exploratory expeditions over the next fifty years. English, and possibly German, settlements began to emerge as early as the 1730s. By 1750, the region that would come to be known as the New River Valley was home to the native population and roughly three hundred additional people of mostly English, German, and Scots-Irish ancestry.¹¹ Over the course of the next fifty years, the European settlers raised livestock, farmed, and engaged in trade by way of a trail connecting the New River Valley to the Shenandoah Valley to the north, in addition to engaging in a number of violent conflicts, first with the native population and during the Revolutionary years, with the British as well.¹² During the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the county's economy began to transition from a primary reliance on raising livestock to an increasing dependence on farming.¹³

Rural Montgomery County experienced a number of changes over the three decades leading up to the Civil War. In 1830, the county's population sat at 12,306 and fell significantly during the 1830s as parts of the county were carved out to form the neighboring counties of Floyd and Pulaski. By 1850, the county's population totaled 8,359. The antebellum period witnessed significant development in the county, including the opening of mineral springs tourist resorts, the development of turnpikes, and the arrival of the Virginia & Tennessee Railroad.¹⁴

Throughout its history, the ways in which residents of Montgomery County cared for their poor was heavily influenced by the practices of poor relief throughout the state. As in the other colonies, the Virginia colonists

brought English poor laws across the sea with them. Michael Katz identified the characteristics of poor relief that American society adopted from Britain: the notion that the responsibility for caring for the poor fell first to the individual's family; the obligation of the local government to fill this role if the family could not; and the practice of apprenticing poor children to local farmers or artisans.¹⁵ In colonial Virginia, poor children were indeed apprenticed out, and poor adults were given outdoor relief. A special poor tax was collected for this purpose.¹⁶

In 1755, the colony enacted legislation allowing counties to erect poorhouses to accommodate the growing population of the poor, having concluded that outdoor relief alone was no longer sufficient:

Whereas, The number of poor people hath of late years much increased throughout this colony, and it will be the most proper method for their maintenance, and for the prevention of great mischiefs arising from such numbers of unemployed poor, to provide houses for their reception and employment.¹⁷

From 1755 to 1785, the operation of the county poorhouse fell to the vestry, a group of local leaders responsible for the civic and religious administration of the parish. In 1786, Virginia's General Assembly passed the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, disestablishing the Anglican Church as the official state religion. The collection of taxes for poor relief, as well as the administration of poor relief, transferred to the newly created constitutional office of the Overseer of the Poor.¹⁸ Each locality elected its overseer for a term of three years, followed by eligibility for reelection, and it was not unusual for an overseer to remain in office for multiple terms. This office remained in existence until poorhouses fell out of use in the early twentieth century.¹⁹

The Montgomery County Poorhouse was established in 1830 and remained in use at least until 1927.²⁰ In Montgomery County, the house was often referred to as a "poor farm" since it was not just a residence, but an actual working farm. If the residents were physically able, they were expected to perform labor to help with household chores, farming, or tending the livestock. Census records and poor-farm reports, however, suggest that during any given time, a significant percentage of residents were either mentally or physically disabled and unable to perform work. In many cases, the poorhouse stood in for what would later emerge as mental hospitals, orphanages, and old age homes, and it was common for the majority of residents to suffer from physical or mental disabilities.²¹

In the nineteenth century, the county's poorhouse was most likely located atop Poorhouse Knob outside Christiansburg and several miles from the town center in a period when transportation was not easy, especially for the impoverished. The poorhouse was overseen by an appointed supervisor of the poor. This appointee lived on the farm with the residents, as did his wife and children. The supervisor's family contributed the majority of the labor on the farm, including fixing meals and taking care of the infirm. The supervisor was paid for his service and was sometimes only slightly financially better off than the residents he oversaw.²²

Indoor and Outdoor Relief

As noted previously, the institution of the Virginia poorhouse was overseen by Montgomery County's overseer of the poor, who was charged with administering the county's poor-relief efforts. This included not only the functioning of the actual poorhouse, but also the administration of outdoor relief, or providing funds or goods directly to individuals who did not reside in the poorhouse. The overseer also paid out funds to private citizens who agreed to house the indigent for both short- and long-term periods. This article defines indoor relief as accommodation within the poorhouse and outdoor relief as the provision of cash or goods to individuals within their own homes or the binding out of the poor to live with other community members. Prior to 1830, the county provided relief solely through outdoor relief, but the construction of a poorhouse in 1830 allowed for a combination of the two. For the remainder of the antebellum period (and indeed, until the closing of the poorhouse in 1927), the county provided both indoor and outdoor relief.

Although their construction of a poorhouse appears to confirm that Montgomery County's government ascribed to the national trend toward moving the poor into institutions in an attempt to reform them, documents suggest that they did not, in fact, view the poorhouse as a punitive or reforming institution. In their own documents, the overseers of the poor make no mention of a reforming agenda for the poorhouse. Edmund B. Goodrich, clerk of the Board of Overseers of the Poor, made the following notation at the end of the 1830 report to the auditor of public accounts in Richmond:

You will see from reference to the last [year's account] that there is a great difference between last [year's account] and this. The reason is this that the court of this county has purchased land and erected a poor house and the \$2000 is for the purpose of furnishing it with cooking utensils & bedding and the Overseers were uncertain as to the number of papers that would go to the Poorhouse.²³

As with the vast majority of the existing overseers-of-the-poor documents, this notation by Goodrich does not convey any sense of moral condemnation of the poor or reluctance to provide for their needs.

Goodrich's note also makes clear that the overseers were not planning to move all recipients of outdoor relief into the poorhouse. Their yearly records indicated how many individuals were receiving outdoor relief and who they were; Goodrich's statement that they did not know how many residents to expect indicates that they did not intend for the poorhouse to completely replace outdoor relief. This suggests that although they constructed a poorhouse, they saw it as a last resort to provide relief to individuals who could not get by with outdoor relief. In other words, their main concern was relief, not moral reform.

An examination of the records reveals that this community primarily housed the infirm, elderly, and very young in the poorhouse and provided outdoor relief to everyone else. During the antebellum years for which data on physical infirmity is available, the majority of poorhouse residents are listed as "unable to work."²⁴ The Overseer of the Poor Reports, which provide this data, do not include the residents' ages, but the U.S. census can provide that information for the years 1850 and 1860. In 1850, twelve individuals resided at the poorhouse. Of those, five were more than fifty-five years old, four were less than twelve years old, and three (all women) were middle-aged.²⁵ In 1860, of seven residents, three were more than fifty-five, one was a child, and three (all women) were middle-aged.²⁶ These numbers indicate that the Montgomery County poorhouse provided aid primarily for the aged, the young, and the infirm, while the "able-bodied" poor were provided with outdoor relief. This stands in contrast to the recommendations of the Quincy and Yates reports, which suggest exactly the opposite: that the able-bodied be sent to the poorhouse for punishment and reform.²⁷

If it holds true that a community's values are reflected in its budgets, Montgomery County possessed a strong commitment to its poorest residents. The \$2,000 expenditure referred to by Clerk Goodrich for furnishing the house followed an initial expense of \$1,760 for purchasing the land and constructing the house and outbuildings. The county's expenses for 1830 came to \$2,209.33, making the poorhouse expenses nearly 80 percent of the total year's costs. The construction of the poorhouse raised the individual tithe for the annual levy from \$0.30 to \$0.95, a significant increase.²⁸ Additionally, the overseers made frequent purchases throughout the year to support the residents. In 1846, the county submitted twenty-nine payments totaling \$351.16 to individuals or businesses for supplies and services at the poorhouse.²⁹ Two years later, in 1848, they made twenty-five payments for

a total of \$335.50.³⁰ Unfortunately, comprehensive records only exist for these two years, but individual invoices throughout the period reflect that the supervisor of the poor made regular purchases for medical care, food, and supplies for the residents in his care.

Although one may be tempted to argue that county officials were motivated by efforts to decrease poor relief costs and not a commitment to supporting its poor neighbors, the data again prove otherwise. Reformers of the period did indeed argue that indoor relief would be less expensive than outdoor relief, but this was never the case in Montgomery County, where indoor relief was significantly more expensive, per person, than outdoor relief during the entire antebellum period.

Although the county employed indoor relief more often than outdoor relief in the 1840s, by the 1850s, outdoor relief had become more predominant. This relief could take the form of goods or services or a cash payment. The goods could be provided outright, as when eighteen bushels of corn were provided to Thomas Littens' family (see Image 1), or the recipient could receive credit for goods with a local merchant.³¹ Credits and cash payments could be provided on a one-time basis or continually at regular intervals, such as when the board approved in 1849 to "continue to furnish Mr. E Woods supplies at the rate of two 50/100 dollars per month from date until otherwise directed [see Image 2]."³² The increasing use of outdoor relief, combined with the general infirmity of individuals in the poorhouse, suggests that the county's main concern continued to be providing a basic

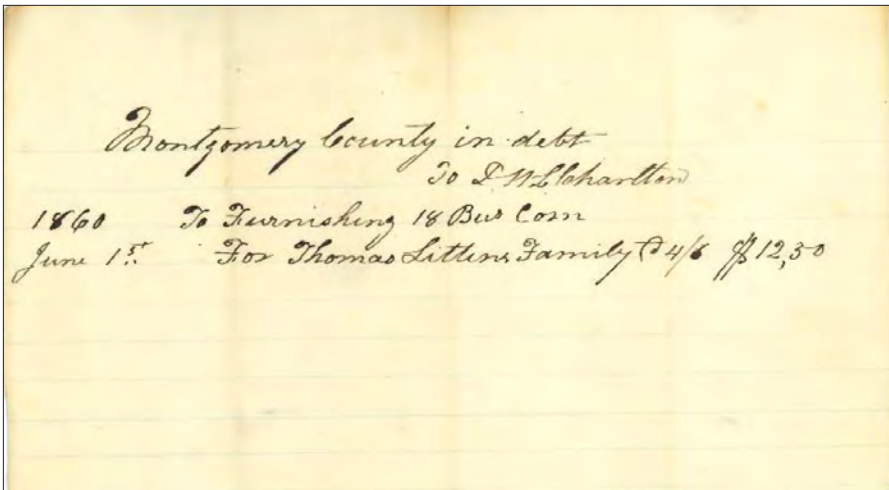


Image 1. From the John Nicolay Papers, Ms1987-027, Special Collections, University Libraries, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia (photographed by Jennifer A. Gallagher)

Christ Church V. A. July 1st 1849
 M^{rs} W. Spindle & Mr. W. A. H. will continue to furnish
 the Comm. supplies at the rate of 5 or 7 1/2
 dollars per month from date until otherwise di-
 rected.
 H. D. Hurler (S)

Approved
 W. Spindle
 Secy. Approved
 Emis. Chapman
 Supt. Poor

Image 2. From the Nicolay Papers, Special Collections, Virginia Tech (photographed by Jennifer A. Gallagher)

level of subsistence; if an individual was able to remain in his own home or the home of another community member and could survive with the assistance of cash or goods, that situation remained preferable to moving him or her to the poorhouse.

In lieu of providing cash or goods, or moving an individual to the poorhouse, the county also frequently bound out struggling citizens, both children and adults, to live with other members of the community. Such was the case in this 1831 entry from the county court’s order book: “Ordered that the overseers of the poor of this county bind out according to law, Patsy, Mary Ann, Sally, Susan Williams & James Trusler orphans of William Trusler deceased.”³³ Demonstrating the biracial nature of this type of relief, a similar entry from 1832 orders that “overseers of the poor for this county, bind out according to law Dana a mulatto child, to John R. Guerrant.”³⁴ Although the county employed the practice of “binding out” as a means to provide relief, recipients would have sacrificed a great deal of their own autonomy in exchange for the “privelege” of this relief. They would be in an unfamiliar home and would be expected to carry out whatever work or tasks were required by their host. Similar to residents of the poorhouse, the recipients who were bound out to third parties would have had little control over their own lives; their daily activities, living arrangements, food, and access to medical care would all have been primarily determined by someone else.

Just as the nature of the poor relief that was provided suggests that Montgomery County was defying national trends, so does the manner in which the county spoke about the poor. Two aspects of its language, in particular, demonstrate that community leaders considered poverty to be a natural condition of life and viewed the poor as neighbors in need of temporary assistance as opposed to morally deficient, lazy citizens. In the extant documents, the poor are nearly always referred to by name; they are rarely identified as simply “pauper.” Additionally, although the designation of “pauper,” or “poor person” is usually appended to their names, these identifiers seldom contain any pejorative adjectives. Both of these characteristics sit in opposition to documents from other localities during this period.

According to historian Nancy Isenberg, the decades leading up to the Civil War gave rise to the term “poor white trash,” as poor white southerners began to be “classified as a ‘race’ that passed on horrific traits, eliminating any possibility of improvement or social mobility.”³⁵ She provides this scathing summary of attitudes toward poor southern whites in the antebellum years:

Few were concerned about, much less offered any solution to, their terrible poverty. Regarded as specimens more than cognitive beings, white trash sandhillers and clay-eaters loomed as abnormalities, deformities, a “notorious race” that would persist, generation after generation, unaffected by the inroads being made by social reformers.³⁶

Supporting Isenberg’s claim, numerous references to the white poor in antebellum publications cast the poor in an extremely negative light. A short piece in the *New York Observer and Chronicle* from 1856 conveys a common theme:

WHY THE POOR ARE POOR. – Recently I had an interview with the minister of a parish in Scotland – (and I may observe he was not an abstainer) – when he said, “I am trustee for some money which is for the *virtuous* poor. Two things in my opinion are essential to virtue – 1st, industry; 2d, sobriety. The result is,” said the minister, “I cannot get quit of the money, for all the needy poor about here are either *drunken or idle*” [italics in original].³⁷

This brief article manages to encapsulate nearly all of the prevailing attitudes about the poor in antebellum America: the dichotomy of the worthy versus the unworthy poor, the belief that poverty resulted from personal moral

failures such as laziness or drunkenness, the implied connection between an individual's worth and his capitalist output, and the insinuation that a government's role rests primarily in providing reform rather than relief.

These attitudes were reflected in the terms that Americans used to speak about the poor. Newspaper articles on the subject of pauperism contain morally loaded phrases such as “unrestrained indulgence of vices,” “drunkard,” “prostitute,” “deterioration of public morals,”³⁸ “evil,” “indolence,” “poor beggars . . . clamorous and importunate with open hands and extended fingers,”³⁹ “abuse of ardent spirits,” “below the level of a brute,” “an outcast from all respectable society,” and “habitual indolence,”⁴⁰ to provide a small representative sample.

Whereas the poor during this period were consistently characterized as lazy, dissolute, or drunk, this did not appear to be the case in Montgomery County. This author did not find any such references to recipients of poor relief during the period 1830–1860. Rather, the recipients were almost universally referred to by name and characterized as “pauper” or “poor person,” if they were characterized at all. This is significant considering the rise of denigrating language about the poor during this period; despite the prevalence of negative attitudes toward the poor in national publications and documents of the era, none of this condescension and judgment exists in the Montgomery County sources.

The poor in Montgomery County were referred to by name, occasionally with an added designation of “pauper” or “poor person.” The nearly universal use of individuals' names in poor relief documents in Montgomery County illustrates that community leaders had not dehumanized them as merely “paupers”; rather, they were neighbors in need of assistance. A few examples will demonstrate the point. On November 26, 1837, a claim was submitted to the overseers for “making a coffin for Ann Shelor.” Similarly, a claim from 1857 was submitted for “making walnut coffin for Martha Hundley[,] daughter of James Hundley.” The identification of Martha Hundley as the daughter of James Hundley is significant. This clarification suggests that the writer of the document knew the family well enough to identify the deceased as the daughter of Mr. Hundley. She was not simply a poor person who could not afford her own coffin; she was the daughter of James Hundley. The only circumstance under which a recipient of relief was not identified by name was when the claim referred to a child. For example, an 1860 claim requested repayment for “making one coffin for Wm Peilars child.” While children were seldom identified by name, this was a factor of their age, not their socioeconomic status.

TABLE 1: POOR RELIEF BY TYPE, MONTGOMERY COUNTY, 1829–1854

	Outdoor Relief - White	Outdoor Relief - Free Black	Maintained at Poorhouse	Boarded Out
1829	32	1		
1830	8	0		
1833	4	0	4	
1834	3	0	3	
1835	5	0	5	
1840	11	1	7	5
1841	14	1	9	6
1842	9	1	8	2
1843	11	1	7	5
1844	17	1	9	9
1851	9	1	12	10
1852	16	1	11	17
1853	26	3	12	29
1854	7	1	8	6

The historiography of southern poor relief focuses on relief for white citizens, as most scholars maintain that free black residents were not offered relief. The documentary evidence in Montgomery County suggests, however, that although government officials remained highly conscious of race while discharging their duties, they did not categorically deny relief to free black residents. Throughout the antebellum era, the county provided outdoor relief, indoor relief, medical care, and burial to free black residents. As was the case with white poor-relief recipients, officials generally referred to the black poor by name (albeit, often only by first name). The Overseer of the Poor Reports that were submitted every year to Richmond categorized the poor by four categories: (1) “poor whites maintained at public charge,” (2) “free blacks maintained at public charge,” (3) “poor maintained at poor or work house,” and (4) “poor boarded out” (see Table 1 above). In addition to listing total numbers, the reports for some years included addendums providing the names and races of the individuals in each group. Officials’ attention to categorizing poor relief recipients by race, as well as their practice of using the terms “free black” or “colored” when identifying

black recipients in the records, suggests that race was a relevant factor in providing relief but certainly not a disqualifying factor.

An examination of the Overseer of the Poor Reports over the antebellum period illustrates the biracial nature of Montgomery County's poor relief. An elderly black man identified only as Paul resided in the poorhouse for at least the five-year period 1850–1855. The only facts about Paul left to us by history are that he was approximately ninety years old in 1850, and he was described as “unable to work” by the overseer of the poor.⁴⁴ During the same period, a free black man named James Ligon was receiving outdoor relief.⁴⁵ We know a little more about James; he was in his forties in 1860 and described as “5’8”, ‘very black,’ two small scars over his right eye, several small scars on the right hand, and had his two middle fingers of the right hand cut off. He was the son of Sarah, who was emancipated by deed from Robert Shanklin.”⁴⁶ He had clearly fallen on hard times by 1851 and, thus, was receiving outdoor relief from the county.

The historiography of poor-relief references black residents of antebellum poorhouses, usually in the context of how communities attempted to segregate the poor within these institutions based on race, but references to free blacks receiving outdoor relief are far more elusive. It is, therefore, significant that for ten of the fourteen years for which records survive, outdoor relief was provided to at least one free black county resident. Furthermore, the black recipients received a level of support comparable to that of their white neighbors. For the twelve months ending March 31, 1851, the county provided outdoor support to nine white and one black resident (Mr. Ligon). The average amount expended per person for the white residents was \$23.77; the amount provided for Mr. Ligon's care was much higher at \$50.00. For the following calendar year, the average amount expended per person for the white residents was \$18.03; for Mr. Ligon, \$25.00.⁴⁷ These numbers make it clear that Mr. Ligon did not receive an inferior level of service due to his race.

The Overseer of the Poor Report for the year ending March 31, 1853, provides further evidence that free black citizens received poor relief services. During this year, in addition to providing support to Mr. Ligon, the county provided outdoor relief to a black man identified only as “Simian” and to a black child who remained unnamed. The average amount expended per white citizen during this year sat at \$20.12; the average amount per black citizen, slightly below at \$19.16.⁴⁸ It should be noted that the three black recipients of outdoor relief – Mr. Ligon, Simian, and the child – were most likely not given the poor relief funds directly. Although they were not housed in the poorhouse and, thus, were technically recipients of

higher percentage of the free black population than of the white population (see Table 2) during the first four years of the 1850s (the only years of that decade for which comprehensive records have survived).⁵¹ As Table 2 illustrates, county officials did not consider race to be a (dis)qualifying factor for receiving aid.

The documentary evidence from Montgomery County supports the claim put forth by Green and Lockley that public poor-relief did indeed exist in the South. In Montgomery County, the local government saw to the needs of the poor throughout the antebellum period. In contrast to the negative narrative of poverty that was developing nationally, the documents suggest that the local government saw poor relief as an obligation to their fellow citizens, not as handouts to unworthy paupers.

Medical Care

The county's sense of obligation for providing for its most vulnerable citizens can also be surmised from their commitment to medical care. Invoices from doctors constitute a significant portion of the extant documentary body. One such example includes seven itemizations for treatment from July 1858 to July 1859. The \$29 invoice (see Image 3 on page 54) included charges ranging from \$1 to \$8 apiece. One poorhouse resident, Jessie Bornettes, was the patient of four of the seven visits. Interestingly, the physician characterized these visits as "med & attention to Jessie [Bornettes'] eyes," and also charged \$3 for pulling a tooth for another resident."⁵² These two items are of particular interest as reflections of societal obligations toward the poor because they do not pertain to life-threatening illness. Being willing to pay for eye care and tooth extraction for poorhouse residents suggests a greater concern for their welfare than simply maintaining their physical survival.⁵³

The act of caring for the poor upon death further illustrates this point. When a resident died and did not have family able to afford his/her burial, the county assumed responsibility. The county contracted a local carpenter to make a coffin, at \$3–\$6 apiece during this period.⁵⁴

Although the access to medical care does indicate an attempt to tend to the well-being of the poor, it is important to note that access to care was dependent upon the discretion of the overseers of the poor or the supervisor of the poorhouse. The residents did not have control over their own health; the summoning of the doctor and the administration of surgery or other medical care was determined by the administrators. This speaks to the trade-off that poor citizens were forced to make in exchange for assistance;

in order to receive shelter, they sacrificed their bodily autonomy. Someone else decided for them whether they were ill enough to receive medical attention and, if so, whether they could receive treatment.

It is also important to note the role that services to the poor played in the local economy. Elna Green identified the contribution of poor-relief efforts to local economies in her work on poor relief in Richmond, and the same principle applies in a rural setting.⁵⁵ Although no such documents exist from this period, documents from the early 1900s illustrate that local physicians placed bids to serve under contract as the doctor for the poorhouse, indicating that this was a coveted business opportunity.⁵⁶ It is not clear if doctors did or did not bid for contracts during the mid-nineteenth century, but whether one or several physicians provided medical services, the net impact on the local economy remained the same. It must be acknowledged that although the county government did indeed take responsibility for its poor, there was a tangible benefit to the community in doing so; this was not an entirely altruistic enterprise.

Similar to the poor claims for indoor and outdoor relief, the invoice requests for medical care also frequently identify the poor by name. This speaks to one of the fundamental differences between poor relief in the rural South and in the urban North. In Montgomery County, the recipients of poor relief are almost always referred to by name, whereas this is not the case in more urban, northern areas. Perhaps due to a greater sense of community obligation in Montgomery County, or the increased likelihood that the poor were known personally to the community (and were not “strangers,” to support Katz’s theory), the poor in Montgomery County were not denied their personhood in the documents. This suggests that they were seen by their neighbors as people first and as “paupers” second.

Daily Life

The sources for Montgomery County indicate that the local government sought to provide for its most vulnerable citizens by offering a range of poor-relief services. These included indoor relief, outdoor relief, and medical care. Although these services often literally kept people alive, it would be instructive to attempt a reconstruction of what daily life was like for the poor in order to appreciate the sacrifices they were required to make in exchange for these services.

Although officials referred to the poor with respect in their documents, poverty in nineteenth-century culture was considered a source of shame and was widely feared. Popular literature of the time contained numerous references to the misfortune of “paupers” and often offered them up as

June 2nd 1840
 Mr W. R. Staples
 Dear Sir if it will not inattend you
 I will again beg the favor of you to have
 an allowance made for me as I am very feeble
 and very needy I cant walk a step and
 cannot live without some helpe Your
 compliances will greatly oblige your
 most humble servant
 Andrew Pritchard

Image 4. From the Nicolay Papers, Special Collections, Virginia Tech (photographed by Jennifer A. Gallagher)

cautionary tales for their readers. For example, a *Harper's Weekly* article from 1859 suggested that “a visit to the paupers of a county poor-house should be a part of every boy’s education. Here, and here alone, is seen the denouement of unsuccessful life struggles.”⁵⁷ The message is clear: the poorhouse can (and most definitely *should*) be avoided through a commitment to hard work.

On occasion, the voices of the poor themselves have survived the passage of time, shedding light on how completely recipients of poor relief had internalized the prevailing societal attitudes towards poverty. In one of the few extant documents in Montgomery County written by a recipient of poor relief, as opposed to a third party, Andrew Pritchard pleads his case for outdoor relief in a clear, strong script (see Image 4).⁵⁸

His precise phrasing conveys his understanding of societal concepts of poverty. With his description of himself as “very feeble and very needy” and noting that he “[can’t] walk a step,” he qualified himself as being of the “worthy” poor; he was emphasizing that his need was due to infirmity, not idleness. His choice of the word “beg,” as well as identifying himself as “your most humble servant,” paid deference to the belief that recipients of relief should be sufficiently grateful for aid. Although the local government considered poor relief an obligation, they most likely expected gratitude and compliance from the recipients in exchange for their assistance.

When a resident, like Maria Rose from our opening vignette, found herself desperate enough to enter the poorhouse, she was removed to a farmhouse in the country, isolated from any friends or family. She was quite literally stranded, as she could not leave unless by foot (and with permission

from the superintendent), and the poorhouse was several miles from the town center in Christiansburg. Lockley illustrates this forced isolation by relating the experience of John Brown, a resident of a rural, North Carolina poorhouse. John asked the overseers to allow him to go back home because he missed his friends. His request was denied.⁵⁹

In 1850, Maria Rose was thus isolated in the Montgomery County Poorhouse. She lived on the farm with her eleven-year-old daughter; the supervisor, Nathan Buckingham; his wife; and their four children, who ranged in age from sixteen to twenty-one. Her fellow “paupers” were an elderly married couple, a middle-aged man, a middle-aged woman, a forty-year-old woman with her eleven-year-old son, a twenty-seven-year-old woman with her toddler daughter and infant son, and an elderly black man.⁶⁰ This was her community. Did her daughter play with the other children? Did Maria and her daughter work the farm? How were they treated by the Buckingham family? Did the other residents interact with the elderly black man, Paul, or was he socially isolated as the only black resident? We cannot answer these questions, but they are worth considering in order to obtain a glimpse of what life would have been like in the Montgomery County Poorhouse.

As a resident, Maria would have been under the supervision of Mr. and Mrs. Buckingham. She would be expected to follow their orders and would be subject to their constant authority. Mrs. Buckingham, most likely, prepared meals, leaving Maria and her daughter with little control even over what they ate. If one of them became ill, it would be up to Mr. Buckingham’s discretion whether to call a physician. If a doctor did see them, it would again be Mr. Buckingham’s decision as to whether they could receive treatment.

No documents exist to describe the physical condition of Maria’s poorhouse, but many of the poorhouses of this period were extremely unpleasant environments. An 1857 report on a Charleston, South Carolina, poorhouse described the environment thus:

The Yard was uncleansed – the surface drains filled with offensive matter – the Privies in a most filthy state – the floors most unwashed, many of the windows obscured by apparently many months accumulation of dust and cobwebs – nearly all the beds and bedding in a disgustingly neglected state, and in some localities swimming with vermin.⁶¹

Nor was this poorhouse an outlier; the secondary literature is rife with equally disturbing descriptions of abominable living conditions within poorhouses.⁶² The description of this South Carolina poorhouse provides an

opportunity to imagine what the conditions may have been like for Maria and her young daughter. Having only been constructed in 1830, it is likely that the Montgomery County Poorhouse was still structurally in good condition in 1850, but whether the living quarters were kept clean cannot be known.

The poor relief provided by the county allowed residents like Maria just enough support to stay alive but could not offer any substantial increase in quality of life. In exchange for housing, food, and basic medical care, Maria sacrificed not only her own autonomy, but also that of her young child. They both would have fallen under the supervision of overseer-of-the-poor officials, and choices about where to live, with whom to keep company, what to eat, what work to perform, and how to spend their free time would not have been their own.

Conclusion

Historians such as Michael Katz and Stephen Pimpare have eloquently demonstrated the plight of America's poor throughout history. Scholars of southern history, such as Elna Green and Timothy Lockley, have highlighted the obligation felt by communities in the South in the nineteenth century to provide for their poor neighbors. Although these two notions may appear to be mutually exclusive, an examination of poor relief in Montgomery County, Virginia, demonstrates that they are entirely compatible. The local government in Montgomery County *did* offer poor relief to the truly indigent who had nowhere else to turn, but the recipients of this relief still lived a hard, unenviable existence.

The local government of Montgomery County considered poor relief to be a governmental obligation. In contrast to officials in northern cities, the Montgomery County overseers did not denigrate or depersonalize the poor in their official documents; rather, they referred to them as if they were simply neighbors in temporary need of assistance. Without exception, the extant Montgomery County documents refer to aid recipients as “pauper” or “poor” without the addition of any denigrating adjectives or accusations of moral failure.

Several factors contributed to the significant difference in how the poor were talked about in urban northeastern and rural southern communities. Part of this difference resulted from the demographics, as Katz makes clear in his discussion of the role of strangers in attitudes about the poor.⁶³ The larger the population, the less likely it was that individuals would personally know someone who was receiving poor relief, and the easier it was to stereotype the poor and begrudge the resources they were provided. The high rates of foreign immigration in the urban Northeast further exacerbated this effect;

immigrants were seen as “other” and as taking resources away from the non-immigrant community.⁶⁴ In the rural South, where foreign immigration was minimal, social ties between members of a small community fostered a sense of obligation to one another that was lacking in the urban North.

The structure of government in the South further contributed to the differing perceptions of poor relief. Laura Edwards has described post-revolutionary government in the South as a hybrid system that developed as a means to restore and maintain the public peace. She describes this peace as “a hierarchical order that forced everyone into its patriarchal embrace and raised its collective interests over those of any given individual.”⁶⁵ Maintaining the peace took precedent over strict adherence to laws. She discusses the effect of this concept on poor relief, noting that the southern concept of the “kindness of friends” required that Southerners assist their impoverished neighbors.⁶⁶ This speaks to the sense of obligation evident within Montgomery County’s poor relief practices. Families were expected to help their struggling kin, and if they were unable to do so, the obligation for assistance fell to the local government.

This sense of obligation applied to both white and black members of the poor community. For nearly the entire duration of its existence, the poorhouse in Montgomery County was an integrated institution. Although some larger poorhouses segregated residents into different wings of the house, this does not seem likely in the smaller structures that were used in Montgomery County.⁶⁷ Therefore, residents of both races would have interacted freely with one another and with the overseer and his family.

In addition to indoor relief, black residents were also approved for other services, such as receiving medical care and burial expenses. Although governmental officials were always careful to note the race of these recipients, they did not deny service because of race, at least in the existing records. This conclusion should be tempered, however, by the possibility that records of denials may not have survived. Indeed, in 1866, the local representative of the Freedman’s Bureau, Charles Schaeffer, reported that the overseers of the poor had instructed the county to ignore claims from black community members.⁶⁸ Willingness to provide relief to the black community may have been highly variable depending on the character of the officials during any given time period. Thus, although black residents were (at least at times) provided with poor relief by the local government, race was and continued to be an issue that complicated the sense of obligation felt by the community.

Although the extant records indicate that the rural, southern community of Montgomery County, Virginia, took pains to provide for the poor within the community, both black and white, the poor did not lead

easy lives. In exchange for services to literally keep them alive, they traded their personal—and often bodily—autonomy. They lived among strangers, ate what they were offered, were isolated in the countryside on a farm or in a stranger’s home, were told when to work and what work to do, and were told whether they could see a doctor and receive treatment for illness. Psychologically, the poor of this period would have most likely known that the larger culture categorized them as a sub-class, as an example of a life lived the wrong way. Their condition was the cautionary tale told to young people: “Don’t end up in the poorhouse.”

Although the poorhouse in Montgomery County closed down nearly a hundred years ago, citizens living in poverty today would have no trouble identifying with the psychological impact of poverty felt by Maria Rose and her companions in the poorhouse of 1850. Now, as then, recipients of welfare are expected to be subservient, grateful, and receptive to the moral reformation imposed upon them by the larger society.⁶⁹ Then, as now, much of society failed to recognize the social, economic, and medical forces that push people into poverty and hold them there. Modern society has made great strides towards the humane treatment of the poor during the last century and a half; we no longer remove poor children from their parents, bind the poor out to strangers, or remove those living in poverty to isolated poorhouses (yet we do still require them to relinquish a great deal of autonomy in exchange for help).

Although our methods of poor relief have improved, however, the same cannot be said for our beliefs about poverty or our discourse on the poor. One can still find numerous references in modern publications blaming the poor for their own condition, suggesting that they deserve their poverty and that their destitution results from poor personal choices instead of societal forces. These beliefs are exemplified by the following comments posted online in response to a *Roanoke Times* op-ed addressing the impact of poverty on Americans:

If there was a poverty of food in America, we would see pictures of malnourished youth and adults. The absence of which is prima facie evidence that there is no poverty like there is in third world countries like certain areas of Africa. . . . What we see everyday by walking out in and around our Great Country are images of obesity manifested in poor parenting decisions (influencing young people what to eat). . . . All the efforts of 50 yrs of federal policy and former First Lady Michelle to teach downward to parents is impotent because “parents do what they want to do” with their children and “society gets what it

gets from negligent parenting” Sorry to choose not to embellish your line of “political correctness” but the only poverty in America is a “Poverty of Spirit” There may be a violence connected to that but I would not want to follow into that “political correct trap” Only God knows where the money/income coming into the household is spent. The parents are responsible for its expenditure. Government cannot and should not be supplementing the mismanagement of household income. Just follow the money and see where it is spent. . . . It is called individual responsibility and not intended to morph into a “safety net.”⁷⁰

Here we find concepts that would have been entirely familiar in an industrializing, nineteenth-century America: that the poor suffer from a “poverty of spirit,” not a poverty of opportunity; that the poor create their own condition through poor decisions, financial irresponsibility, and a lack of personal responsibility; and that a governmental “safety net” would only exacerbate the problem. Fortunately for Maria Rose and her companions in the poorhouse, these views had not yet reached prominence in antebellum Montgomery County. Perhaps her story and the scraps of life stories that can be reconstructed about the other recipients of poor relief in antebellum Montgomery County can remind twenty-first century Southwest Virginians that the poor amongst us are neighbors in need of help, not morally deficient citizens in need of reform.

Endnotes

1. 1850 U.S. Census, Montgomery County, Virginia, population schedule I, forty-first district, dwelling 3, family 495, digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed February 9, 2018.
2. 1860 U.S. Census, Montgomery County, population schedule I, sheet 49, dwelling 349, family 334, digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed February 9, 2018.
3. 1850 U.S. Census, Montgomery County, family 495.
4. For a comprehensive history of the denigration of the poor, see Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (New York: Viking, 2016).
5. See Michael Katz, *The Undeserving Poor* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), for a further discussion on the “neighbors in need” philosophy of poor relief, which he argues was common in the pre-industrial era.
6. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse* (New York: Basic Books, 1986); David L. Lightner, *Asylum, Prison, and Poorhouse* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999); Stephen Pimpare, *A People’s History of Poverty in America* (New York: The New Press, 2008); David Wagner, *The Poorhouse: America’s Forgotten Institution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005).
7. John Hope Franklin, “Public Welfare in the South during the Reconstruction Era, 1865–1880,” *The Social Service Review* 44, no. 4 (December 1970): 379–392.
8. Elna C. Green, *This Business of Relief: Confronting Poverty in a Southern City, 1740–1940* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003).

9. Timothy James Lockley, *Welfare and Charity in the Antebellum South* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2007).
10. Lockley, *Welfare and Charity in the Antebellum South*.
11. Despite the original ties of Native Americans to the land that would become Montgomery County, this article has not been able to include their voices in the history of nineteenth-century poor relief for one reason: if a native population still resided in the county by 1830, its members were rendered mute by the documentary body.
12. Mary Elizabeth Lindon, ed., *Virginia's Montgomery County* (Christiansburg, VA: Montgomery Museum and Lewis Miller Regional Art Center, 2009); Lula Porterfield Givens, *Highlights in the Early History of Montgomery County, Virginia* (Pulaski, VA: B. D. Smith & Bros., Printers, 1975).
13. Lindon, *Virginia's Montgomery County*, 208–209.
14. Lindon, *Virginia's Montgomery County*, 42, 132, 245, 297–301.
15. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, 13–14.
16. Virginia Department of Welfare and Institutions, *Disappearance of the County Almshouse in Virginia* (Richmond: Superintendent of Public Printing, 1926), 5.
17. Virginia Department of Welfare and Institutions, *Disappearance of the County Almshouse*, 8.
18. Carl H. Esbeck, “Protestant Dissent and the Virginia Disestablishment, 1776–1786,” *Public Policy* 7 (2009): 55.
19. Virginia Department of Welfare and Institutions, *Disappearance of the County Almshouse in Virginia*, 12.
20. John Nicolay, “Virginia Poverty: Paupers and the Almshouse: An Examination of Montgomery County’s Response to Poverty, 1790–1860,” 1984, in John Nicolay Papers, Ms1987-027, box 1, folder 5, Special Collections, University Libraries, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia; Poor Farm Report, June 31, 1927, Poor Farm Reports, Montgomery County Clerk of Court, Christiansburg, Virginia.
21. Lockley, *Welfare and Charity in the Antebellum South*, 16.
22. Wagner, *The Poorhouse: America's Forgotten Institution*.
23. Edmund B. Goodrich to the Auditing Office, Richmond, Virginia, November 30, 1830, accession APA 739, box 8, folder 4, Library of Virginia, Richmond.
24. Overseer of the Poor Reports, 1851–1855, Library of Virginia.
25. 1850 U.S. Census.
26. 1860 U.S. Census.
27. John Van Ness Yates, “Report of the Secretary of State in 1824 on the Relief and Settlement of the Poor,” reprinted in D. J. Rothman, *The Almshouse Experience: The Historical Record* (New York: Arno Press and *New York Times*, 1971); Josiah Quincy III, “Report of the Committee on the Pauper Laws of this Commonwealth” (Boston: Shaw and Shoemaker, 1821).
28. Montgomery County Order Book 25, June 1830, 78–79, Montgomery County Courthouse, Christiansburg, Virginia.
29. William Wade, A List of Claims Allowed by the Overseers of the Poor for Montgomery County, 1846, John Nicolay Papers, folder 5.
30. Wade, A List of Claims Allowed by the Overseers of the Poor for Montgomery County, 1848, Nicolay Papers, folder 3.
31. Nicolay Papers, folder 1.
32. Nicolay Papers, folder 1.
33. Montgomery County Order Book 25, October 3, 1831, 225.
34. Montgomery County Order Book 25, November 6, 1832, 347.
35. Isenberg, *White Trash*, 136.
36. Isenberg, *White Trash*, 152.
37. “Why the Poor Are Poor,” *New York Observer and Chronicle* (1833–1912), October 30, 1856.
38. “The Honorable the Delegates to the General Assembly of Maryland, from Baltimore City and County,” *Baltimore Patriot & Mercantile Advertiser* 21, no. 41, January 15, 1823.

39. "Pauperism," *Independent Chronicle and Boston Patriot* 21, issue 11, March 1, 1823.
40. "Causes, Consequences, and Cure of Pauperism," *Hampshire Gazette* 44, no. 2274 (Northampton, Massachusetts), March 31, 1830.
41. Nicolay Papers, folder 1.
42. Nicolay Papers, folder 1.
43. Nicolay Papers, folder 1.
44. Montgomery Overseer of the Poor Reports, 1829–1835, 1840–1845, 1851–1855, Nicolay Papers, folder 2.
45. James's last name was spelled in a variety of ways in different documents: Ligon, Liggins, Liggons, and Liggans.
46. Lindon, *Virginia's Montgomery County*, 620.
47. Montgomery Report of the Poor, 1851, Overseers of the Poor Annual Reports and Checklist, Montgomery County, 1800–1909, accession APA 739, Library of Virginia; Montgomery Report of the Poor, 1852.
48. Montgomery Report of the Poor, 1853.
49. Montgomery Report of the Poor, 1853. According to Daniel B. Thorp, history advisor for *The Smithfield Review* (electronic communication with the editor, March 11, 2019), this reference likely referred to King James, who was manumitted in 1849. In 1850, he purchased the land on which he was living outside what is now Radford. He left the county in 1858 and emigrated to Ohio.
50. 1850 U.S. Census.
51. Montgomery Report of the Poor, 1851, 1852, 1853, 1854.
52. Jackson & Templeton to Overseers of the Poor for Montgomery County, July 1859, Nicolay Papers, folders 6 and 1.
53. Jackson & Templeton to Overseers of the Poor.
54. Anonymous to Overseers of the Poor for Montgomery County, 1868, Poor Claims, Montgomery County Clerk of Court, Christiansburg, Virginia; Hickok & Brothers to Overseers of the Poor for Montgomery County, 1872, Poor Claims.
55. Green, *This Business of Relief*.
56. Andrew S. Ellett to Board of Supervisors of Montgomery County, 1912, Poor Farm Reports; F. Sidney Roop *et. al.* to Board of Supervisors of Montgomery County, January 15, 1912, Poor Farm Reports.
57. Ellett to Board of Supervisors; Roop *et. al.* to Board of Supervisors.
58. Andrew Pritchard to W. R. Staples, June 2, 1860, Nicolay Papers, folder 1.
59. Lockley, *Welfare and Charity in the Antebellum South*, 34.
60. 1850 U.S. Census, family 495.
61. Charleston commissioners, quoted in Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, 26.
62. See Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*; Wagner, *The Poorhouse: America's Forgotten Institution*; Lightner, *Asylum, Prison, and Poorhouse*.
63. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor*, 6–7.
64. Wagner, *Ordinary People: In and Out of Poverty in the Gilded Age*.
65. Laura F. Edwards, *The People and Their Peace: Legal Culture and the Transformation of Inequality in the Post-Revolutionary South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 7.
66. Edwards, *The People and Their Peace*, 150.
67. Virginia Department of Welfare and Institutions, *Disappearance of the County Almshouse in Virginia*.
68. Daniel B. Thorp, *Facing Freedom: An African American Community in Virginia from Reconstruction to Jim Crow* (The American South Series) (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017), 191–192.

69. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor*; Pimpare, *A People's History of Poverty in America*; Jennifer Sherman, *Those Who Work, Those Who Don't: Poverty, Morality, and Family in Rural America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Chris Hedges and Joe Sacco, *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* (New York: Nation Books, 2012).
70. Randy Scott, November 11, 2018, online comment on Sam Rasoul, "The Violence of Poverty," *Roanoke Times* (Roanoke, Virginia), November 11, 2018, www.roanoke.com/opinion/commentary/rasoul-the-violence-of-poverty/article_9c531220-1270-5b71-a5e7-36efea5cd9f2.html (reproduced as written; all errors in the original).

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