EMPLOYMENT OF PAUPERS AT PHILADELPHIA'S ALMSHOUSE BEFORE 1861

BY BENJAMIN JOSEPH KLEBANER*

"HOUSE for the Relief and Employment of the Poor"—such was the descriptive official title of a Pennsylvania almshouse a century ago. This article examines the institution in its less well-known role as a house for the employment of the poor, using Philadelphia's experience as a case history. Much the same set of problems confronted every community with an almshouse: What kind of work should be given to paupers? What incentives would induce them to labor? What obstacles stood in the way of realizing the goal of keeping the inmates fully occupied and self-sustaining?

That paupers should be put to work was not in doubt. Financial and moral considerations argued in favor of this approach. By having inmates contribute to their own support, and by discouraging idlers from seeking admission, the taxpayers’ burden would be kept down. Regular work would also improve the paupers' habits: it was desired “to inure them to labour,” in the favorite phrase found in the rules governing the poorhouse of Philadelphia and of many other localities.¹

The guardians of the poor of Philadelphia were numbered among the adherents of the philosophy that one who was fed at public expense had the obligation to labor to the best of his abilities for the benefit of the community. Thus in 1791 they refused to exempt blind Malcolm McLean from picking oakum so that he might visit his friends twice weekly, fearing the bad precedent that this

¹Dr. Benjamin J. Klebaner, Assistant Professor of Economics at The City College, New York, has recently published a number of articles on the public poor relief in America before the Civil War.

¹Ordinances, Rules and Bye-Laws for the Alms-House and House of Employment, appended to A Compilation of the Laws of the State of Pennsylvania relative to the Poor, from the year 1700, to 1795, inclusive. Published for the guardians of the poor (Philadelphia, 1796), p. 6. The earliest use of this phrase I have come across is in the “Ordinances, Rules and Bye-Laws, for the Poor-House of New-Castle County (Del.)” (Wilmington, 1791). Broadside, Library of Congress.
might set. After 1804, paupers were required to work on Saturdays until 2 p.m.; previously, when they had had the day to themselves, many had been found begging on the streets. When it came to July 4th, however, the realistic guardians of the poor who served on the manufacturing committee in 1811 gave the paupers employed in the poorhouse factory a holiday because they did not believe that much work would be done on that day in any event. Another instance of the desire to find “constant employment” for those poor who were able to work, was the unwillingness of the guardians to replace the treadmill with a steam engine in the new House of Employment.

A visitor to the poorhouse in February, 1768, would have found sixty paupers engaged in spinning, cooking, washing, caring for the aged, infirm, sick, and children, as well as in similar domestic employments. An equal number were picking oakum (that most prevalent of almshouse occupations), mending shoes, and doing other things to contribute towards their support. The other 164 inmates presumably were not in a position to labor. A more detailed breakdown of occupations in September, 1827, listed 149 paupers at “housework,” 31 sewers, 28 spinners, 17 on the treadmill, 16 picking oakum, 6 carpenters, 5 shoemakers, and 4 each tailors, weavers, and knitters. Ninety-nine of these 264 at work were over sixty years old. The hours were from 7 a.m. until noon, and again from 1 to 6 p.m., except for those on the treadmill who worked and rested at ten minute intervals. The shoemakers as well as the women on spinning, sewing, and knitting were tasked.

The labor of the inmates not only contributed to the proper functioning of the almshouse and the supplying of some needed products, but also was applied to the making of wares sold to outsiders. The year ending in March, 1790, saw £242 ($646) worth of manufactures disposed of for specie; in 1808 the amount was almost $6,000. In June, 1835, however, the guardians decided

2 Material for this article was taken from the ample records of the guardians of the poor (abbreviated GP in the footnotes) unless otherwise specified. These invaluable manuscripts are at the Old Blockley Historical Museum, Philadelphia General Hospital. The author is indebted to Dr. Robert J. Hunter, chairman of the museum committee, for making them available.

3 GP, XX, March 31, 1834.

4 Pennsylvania Archives, Eighth Series, VII, 615.

5 Report of the Committee appointed at a town meeting of the citizens of the City and County of Philadelphia, on the 23rd of July, 1827, to consider the Subject of the Pauper System of the City and Districts, and to Report Remedies for its Defects (Philadelphia, 1827), appendix Table 2, pp. 23, 24.
that the manufactory was thenceforth to make articles chiefly for the use of the poorhouse. Only oakum and marble continued to be sold. Two years later a stop was put to the practice of having paupers work up flax and other raw materials brought in by interested persons and sold for their joint benefit. Nevertheless the almshouse rules formulated in 1835 did make an allowance for paupers "whose services may be wanted occasionally outside the walls" of the institution.

Some miscellaneous types of employment may be noted. In the summer of 1811 paupers helped pave Spruce Street near the poorhouse. For several days in September, 1814, the steward, accompanied by a crew of paupers, participated in the erection of the fortification on the west side of the Schuylkill River. The quarry at Blockley afforded one hundred men "full employment" in stone-breaking. Paupers built a stone embankment along the Schuylkill in 1837.

Despite such diverse activities, the guardians could think of only one reason for opposing the addition of Moyamensing to the Philadelphia poor district in 1833. It was already "almost beyond the possibility of providing employment suitable for the inmates of the house." The manufacturing committee, lamenting in 1838 that most of the paupers were a "dead weight on the Institution," hopefully looked for some new way of employing them. Silk cultivation, they thought, might give useful employment to many of the aged and decrepit. At the former almshouse site a nursery of mulberry trees had been planted in 1830 as the forerunner of an orchard. Although the outcome of these projects is not known, it is reasonable to suspect they were both failures.

A pauper who refused to work or who spoiled his materials

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6 Frances Martin was discharged January 6, 1790, for breaking the rules "by taking in Spinning & doing it here; for the Factory, at the same time neglecting the Work she ought to do for this Institution, towards her support here." Book of Daily Occurrences, November, 1787-September, 1790 (kept by the Steward, J. Cummings). Microfilm copy owned by Dr. Robert J. Hunter. Philadelphia Guardians of the Poor, Laws Relating to the Relief and Employment of the Poor, in the City of Philadelphia ... (Philadelphia, 1835), p. 22.


8 GP, XX, December 16, 1833. Moyamensing finally was added to the Philadelphia poor district in 1844 (Pennsylvania Laws, 1844, chap. 251, sec. 8), GP, XXII, January 26, 1838.
or tools, could be deprived of his meals for a day or put in the
dark room on a diet of bread and water for as long as forty-eight
hours. Every Monday afternoon the steward was obliged, under
a 1799 order, to report all paupers who refused or neglected work.
Not always was the heavy hand used. The weekly report of the
manufacturing committee for May 14, 1810, records that Joseph
Harber's indolence during the previous week called for correction,
but that it was being "passed over for the present, with a hope
that he will be in the future more industrious." 10

To stimulate industry, positive rewards were relied on at least
as much as punishments. Spinners were divided into two groups
in November, 1791: (1) those capable of spinning four dozen
flaxen yarn or its equivalent, and (2) those physically incapable
of so much work. One ounce of tea and four ounces of sugar went
to paupers in each class who completed their four dozen of yarn,
and an additional ration of tea and sugar was granted for every
extra dozen. The shoemakers got a gratuity of twenty-five cents
for each pair of men's shoes over three per week. The bonus for
women's shoes was eighteen cents for more than five per week
(June, 1807).

The Committee on Manufactures was authorized in 1835 to
pay for "overwork" at the old rates, for as long as they thought
necessary. Twenty years later store orders in payment for "over-
work" were discontinued as "injurious to the good government of
the Alms House as well as leading to unnecessary expense." By
the end of 1858, however, the old policy of paying for overwork
was restored. 11

The use of rum as a reward was discontinued at the end of
1797 and replaced by clothing "or other articles." Money pay-
ments were stopped in 1811 because the inmates spent what they
got illegally on drink. In place of money, payment was thereafter
made in extra allowances of meat and coffee, and in better clothing.
Paupers engaged in unusually laborious work lost their spirituous
perquisite in 1821.

"1796 almshouse rules, loc. cit., pp. 9-10. The guardians could also order
a longer stay, or order the pauper to be discharged or brought before a
magistrate. See also Rules and Regulations for the Internal Government of
cit., p. 20.
11 Cp. IV, May 14, 1810.
11 Ibid. XXI, September 28, 1835; XVIII, March 5, 1855; XXX, December
20, 1858.
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The problem raised by alcohol is illustrated by two cases decided in October, 1821. John Thompson, a blacksmith, was deprived of further rewards because his services were "very trivial" and he spent his money on rum. The keeper of the bread room had his "salary" halved to two dollars because he used it for drink, thereby unfitting himself for the faithful execution of his duties.

The question whether paupers should be paid salaries came under discussion in 1824. The guardians of the poor decided that it would not be wise to eliminate the practice entirely, as it had become an established custom. But certain paupers whose work could be done by almost anyone were not to receive anything any more, while others were to have their salaries reduced. Merit, however, was to be recognized, as in the case of the clerk of the factory, whose salary was raised from two dollars to seven dollars a month because his position was one requiring "talent as well as great industry & involving considerable responsibility."\(^12\)

The payment of money or store goods for the labor of inmates was again prohibited in 1853. Five months later, the order was in part rescinded; a committee of the board, while considering it improper to pay regular "wages," felt that gifts of clothing "in cases of especial merit" were warranted. By 1854 other payments were restored. An account of $175 for paying the pauper assistants was passed by the guardians.\(^13\)

Perhaps as an economy measure the discontinuance of salary payments was ordered in the hard winter of 1855, though the same board of guardians of the poor declined to eliminate their fabulous dinners with liquors and cigars, which had become a tradition.\(^14\) In 1856, an economy-minded city council prohibited any payments whatever to paupers. Again in 1859, the council disallowed the accounts of the guardians for rewarding paupers, on the grounds that it was wrong in principle to pay for what the inmates were anyhow obliged to do, and that it led to frauds. The guardians, however, evaded the ruling. In October, 1860, ninety-one inmates were on the payroll, receiving a total of $288

\(^12\) *Ibid.*, X, February 2, 1824; XIV, January 9, 1826.

\(^13\) *Ibid.*, XXVII, October 31, 1853; March 6, 1854; May 1, 1854.

\(^14\) *Ibid.*, XXIX, April 2, 16, 1855. The president of the guardians explained that paupers whose services were considered as worth more than the cost of maintaining them were given one dollar or more per month "as an encouragement to fidelity and prompt performance of the duty required." *Philadelphia Select Council, Journal, May-November, 1855* (Philadelphia, 1855), appendix, p. 47; GP, XXIX, October 1, 1855.
a month, many of whom had been admitted to the house as paupers, but were no longer listed as such.

Some paupers were thus rewarded for their diligence, while others were expected to repay the city for the expense of their care. Various disorderly persons "by their own lewdness, drunkenness, or other evil practices" took sick and became public burdens. For the purpose of reducing expenditures and deterring such persons from relapsing into their old ways, the overseers were empowered by an act of 1781 to bind them out for not more than three years, in order to reimburse their cost to the city, paupers who were married or over forty being exempted. We find the guardians of the poor, accordingly, ordering that notices be inserted in the newspapers (1792) to the effect that "several strong hearty persons . . . will be sold for such terms as may be necessary to reimburse the public for their maintenance in this House. . . ." Reluctance to make use of this authority was evidenced in the decision of the guardians (1808) to bind out only those paupers who returned a second time with disease.\(^{15}\)

The law was said to be inoperative for want of persons willing to take out an indenture on such paupers. The city consequently gave the guardians the right to hire a "superintendent of labourers," to whom this class would be bound out. This did not seem to work, as several months later many able-bodied young men were under treatment, but little attention was being paid to noting the city's claims in an account book.\(^{16}\)

The 1828 poor law authorized the guardians to open an account with any pauper, whenever they deemed it expedient. Persons cured of disease brought on by vicious habits were to be removed to the house of employment. These and vagrants could be compelled to labor until they had recompensed the city for the expense of their care; they could be discharged earlier by special permission of the guardians. In 1835 the guardians resolved to keep accounts with all paupers at work and not to discharge a pauper working in the factory "until his account is balanced." Lists with the names of paupers required to work for a specified number of weeks before being discharged are to be found in the

\(^{15}\) The 1781 act is in Pennsylvania Statutes at Large, X, 404; GP, I, February 25, 1792; IV, December 26, 1808. For the case of Alice Brady, who had been bound out, see ibid., XXXIII, December 11, 1797.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., V, March 26, 1811; April 30, 1811; IV, July 24, 1811.
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minutes. Magdalena Stichler, for example, who requested her discharge in 1852, was ordered to pay ten dollars to cover the cost of caring for her, or to work six weeks; James Sanford was told to remain until his expenses had been compensated for by his labor, valued at three dollars per week.17

In 1805 Philadelphia's guardians of the poor decided to keep an account with each pauper for the sake of knowing the expense he entailed. Board, washing, and lodging was set at $1.25 a week, while the labor of oakum pickers was set at two cents per pound, and other labor at twelve and a half cents per day. Based on such calculations, the "profit" for the year ending May, 1807, was put at $5,200. As late as 1856, the rules of the board provided that manufactured articles were not, without special permission, to be charged to the house or sold at a price less than the cost of materials and labor. The guardians also wanted a monthly report of the "amount and value of labor performed, and whether profitable or otherwise."18

However dissatisfied economists or accountants might be with the concept of profit applied by the guardians of the poor, the latter would remain unperturbed. Their firm conviction was this:

The great object in conducting an Almshouse is to find constant employment for the poor who are able to work: that employment will be sufficiently profitable to the public, if it serves the purpose of preventing healthy persons from applying for relief.19

Numerous instances have been given of the awareness on the

17 Pennsylvania Laws 1827/28, Chap. 79, Sec. 14. Another act of the same session (Chap. 118) empowered the Directors of the Poor of Oxford and Lower Dublin Townships to detain paupers whose poverty had been produced by vicious habits until their expense had been repaid by labor. The same provision appears for another Philadelphia County locality, Germantown (1838/39, chap. 138). GP, XXXIV, August 21, 1835; the Manufacturing Committee suggested (Minutes, IV, September 9, 1835) that no pauper be discharged by the guardians until the institution had been remunerated by his work, except where this was impracticable because of age, illness, or "other causes." For lists of paupers detained see GP, XXXIV, July 8, 22, 1846; for the case of Stichler, ibid., February 20, 1852, and of Sanford, ibid., May 5, 1852.


19 GP, XX, March 31, 1834.
part of the municipal relief officers of the importance of employment for pauper inmates. Complaints nevertheless that paupers were being supported at the almshouse in idleness were not infrequently heard. An anonymous critic of the poor laws reproached Philadelphia in 1817 for treating its inmates as one would swine to be fattened, giving them “plenty to eat and nothing to do.”

Dorothea Dix observed with regret during her visit to Blockley about 1844 that “a vast number” of paupers had no regular employment. The illustrious humanitarian went away with the impression that the “original judicious plan of providing work for the paupers according to the measure of their strength and ability, had been superseded.”

Mayor Conrad referred in 1855 to the reputation at home and abroad of Philadelphia’s almshouse as “the refuge of the idle.”

Apart from administrative laxity, which undoubtedly prevailed at certain periods, there were two fundamental explanations for this state of affairs. One was the lack of adequate or suitable facilities. The first municipal almshouse, which opened its doors in 1731, on the square between Spruce and Pine, 3d and 4th Streets, soon became overcrowded. A second one, on Spruce and Pine between 10th and 11th Streets, admitted its first inmates in 1767. Hardly a generation had passed (1809) before this establishment was described as crowded “if not overflowing” (1809). A new poor farm was considered the solution. Philadelphia would soon enough be freed from heavy poor rates; indeed the farm would be self-sustaining, according to an editorial in the Aurora. The new institution at Blockley, where Philadelphia General Hospital now stands, occupied 180 acres; but, not many

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24 *Aurora*, February 3, 1809.
years after the million-dollar "Pauper Palace"\textsuperscript{25} was put in use in mid-1834, it was found to be inadequate. In the hope that poor relief expenditures could be reduced, the city council set up a joint special committee (December, 1858) to study the expediency of removing the almshouse from the now expanded city to a large farm where the paupers might be better accommodated and employed. At the same time the guardians spoke of their determination "to employ the pauper labour of the Alms House profitably."\textsuperscript{26}

Recognition of the inadequacy of Blockley's facilities also took the form of an 1854 act authorizing the erection of a House of Correction and Employment. All able-bodied paupers, except those needed to work around the almshouse, were to be sent there within a day after their admission. Not even the site of the workhouse had been decided on by 1860; a new two story workshop measuring 50 by 160 feet, however, was completed in that year. Thanks to "the successful effort of the Board to make available the unemployed labor of the Almshouse," additional funds for raw materials were needed in 1860.\textsuperscript{27}

The idleness of many paupers and the inability of the poorhouse to be self-sustaining can also be attributed to the characteristics of the inmates. A grand jury investigating conditions at the institution in February, 1849, found many hale and hearty persons "idly lounging away their time throughout the premises." The steward of the almshouse explained that very many who appeared to be able-bodied were actually suffering from one or another

\textsuperscript{25}This was the common appellation, according to the famous English phrenologist, George Combe, \textit{Notes on the United States . . .} (Edinburgh, 1841), II, 45. The Philadelphian Ph. Holbrook Nicklin, who wrote under the pseudonym of Peregrine Prolix, referred to the almshouse as "an enormous palace," \textit{A Pleasant Peregrination through the Prettiest Parts of Pennsylvania} (Philadelphia, 1836), p. 27. For the cost of the institution see Charles Lawrence, \textit{History of Philadelphia Almshouse and Hospitals . . .} (n.p., 1905), pp. 91, 137.


\textsuperscript{27}Pennsylvania Laws, \textit{1854,} chap. 510. An almost identical law was passed in 1860. \textit{Pennsylvania Laws,} \textit{1854,} chap. 510. An almost identical law was passed in 1860, chap. 312. Philadelphia Common Council, \textit{Journal, November,} 1860-\textit{June,} 1861 (Philadelphia, 1861), Appendix, p. 312. For description of the new workshop, see \textit{ibid.,} p. 492. Most of the 350 able-bodied men in the institution on an average day in 1858 were without an opportunity to contribute by their labor to its support: \textit{ibid., November,} 1858-\textit{May, 1859} (Philadelphia, 1859), Appendix, pp. 543, 582. Facilities existing in 1859 are described, \textit{ibid.,} \textit{1859/60} (Philadelphia, 1860), Appendix, p. 495. The request for materials funds is \textit{ibid., May-November,} 1860 (Philadelphia, 1860), appendix, p. 160.
affliction. Moreover at this time the house was filled with the seasonal influx of “the most improvident, if not the most vicious” of paupers. Few of these had a mechanical background, and because of the weather it was difficult to furnish such large numbers with continuous employment on the farm and about the grounds. Those who were not suited for anything more profitable would be set to picking oakum.28

The quality of the human material left much to be desired. Probably not atypical was the attitude of Elizabeth Clifton, described by the almshouse manager in these words: “Quite well & hearty & hath been so all Winter while here, yet did little or nothing as to labour—but is a great Grumbler—& finder of fault tho she never mends any.”29

The constant influx and efflux of inmates was another source of difficulty. The average population in the 1830’s was estimated to be about 1,100 in the summer and 1,600 in the winter.30 Hibernation is illustrated by the following analysis of the poorhouse population in January and June, 1859. Noteworthy, too, is the large proportion of inmates physically or mentally incapable of any significant amount of labor; most of the fit were in the out-wards.

Instructions to discharge all “paupers as may be in health, and able to take care of themselves out of doors” were common.31 As jobs opened up in the warmer months, those inmates who could contribute the most towards the upkeep of the institution would leave of their own accord or be sent away.

In the face of inadequate facilities and inmates who were unable or unwilling to labor, it was impossible for Philadelphia’s guardians of the poor to show a profit from the employment of paupers. To hope that a new almshouse might be “self-supporting” (as did the city council as late as December, 185832) was unreasonable; the experience of previous generations furnished ample testimony to the contrary.

28 Philadelphia Guardians of the Poor, The Reply... to Certain Remarks made in their presentments by the Grand Inquests inquiring for the County of Philadelphia... (Philadelphia, 1849), p. 11.
29 Book of Daily Occurrences, June 4, 1790.
31 GP, XIV, March 5, 1827. See, e.g., I, March 4, 1795; IX, May 3, 1819; XXXVI, May 5, 1838.
### ALMSHOUSE POPULATION, 1859

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<thead>
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<th>Division</th>
<th>January 1, 1859</th>
<th>June 18, 1859</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White Women's Out-Ward</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>172</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot; Old Women's Asylum</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>160</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot; Obstetrical Ward</td>
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<td>88</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot; Nursery</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>106</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot; Children's Asylum</td>
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<td>206</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot; Women's Hospital</td>
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<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot; Lunatic Asylum</td>
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<td>287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colored Women's Out-Ward</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot; Obstetrical Ward</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot; Nursery</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot; Women's Hospital</td>
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<tr>
<td>White Men's Out-Ward</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot; Old Men's Incurable Ward</td>
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<td>261</td>
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<td>&quot; &quot; Hospital</td>
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<td>257</td>
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<td>&quot; Men's Lunatic Asylum</td>
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<td>&quot; Boys' Ward</td>
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<td>Colored Men's Out-Ward</td>
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<td>&quot; &quot; Incurable Ward</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>&quot; &quot; Hospital</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Almshouse Population</td>
<td>2,911</td>
<td>2,260</td>
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MIDDLE OCTORARA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The congregation, founded in 1727, first worshipped in a log church on this site, five miles east of Quarryville. The main section of the present church was erected about 1790. Among its early elders were General John Steele of Revolutionary fame and Robert Bailey, father of Francis Bailey, the printer. A history of the church, by Madison E. McElvain, is reviewed on page 176.

COVENANTERS' CHURCH

Now preserved as a "Shrine Church" by the United Presbyterians. It occupies part of the hundred-acre tract purchased in 1738 by the Presbyterians for the Middle Octorara Church. In 1754 six acres of this tract were deeded to the Covenantter Society under the leadership of the Rev. John Cuthbertson, the first Covenantter minister in America.