

Exhibit Review:

"The Display of Destitution:

The Lancaster County Almshouse and Hospital, 1800-2000"

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The Lancaster County Historical Society's exhibit "Two Centuries of Caring, 1800-2000: The Lancaster County Almshouse and Hospital," is important for two reasons: first, because it covers a topic that has received little attention in museum exhibitions, and second, because the Lancaster County institution is the second oldest continuously operating hospital in the nation, predated only by the Pennsylvania Hospital in Philadelphia. For those unable to make the trip to Lancaster to see the exhibit in person, it has been accompanied by a high-quality "virtual exhibition" that will be a useful tool for researchers now that the exhibit has closed.

The exhibition was created as part of a year-long celebration commemorating the opening of the Lancaster County House of Employment in 1800 and the institution's subsequent 200 years of continuous care for the county's disadvantaged citizens. Initially constructed in 1799-1800, and followed by the addition of a first hospital building in 1806, the House of Employment and Hospital housed a mixture of destitute, injured, ill, or abandoned residents of the county at state expense. The construction of poorhouses in Pennsylvania including Lancaster County, Chester County (1799), Delaware County (ca. 1806), and Bucks County (1810), was part of the new republic's move toward institutional solutions for a range of social problems including poverty, insanity, and crime. This movement has been intensively examined by historians since the 1960s, but poorhouses have very rarely been the subject of exhibits. This relative inattention has presumably been due to the sensitive subject matter, and to issues of documentation (records for most institutions, especially non-urban ones, are often patchy, and artifacts can be difficult to locate).

"Two Centuries of Caring" traces the institution's incarnations from

one of the first county-funded poorhouses in the state, through the nineteenth century as the County Home and Hospital, and through its eventual transition in the mid-twentieth century to Conestoga View, a long-term nursing facility for 450 residents. The exhibit, curated by Dr. Page Talbott of Bala Cynwyd, PA, opened on March 22, 2000, and closed on October 20, 2000.

Moving down a hall from the building's main entrance, the visitor encounters large reproductions of nineteenth-century images of the main residential building and grounds, and a panel with the exhibit's credits. The exhibit is entered through a large iron gate, created especially for the exhibit by a local craftsman in imitation of those in the images. The relatively small exhibit space inside is divided into areas mirroring the functional divisions of the institution: almshouse, hospital, asylum, farm, and store. Each of these sections examines that part of the institution's operations through time, and places that function in the context of the institution's development. Each space includes pictorial representations of the buildings, artifacts, and label copy that combines the curator's analysis and description, and extracts from contemporary accounts which describe the institution's appearance, its inmates, and its internal operations. Curator Talbott has made effective use of the rich primary textual sources including local newspapers and personal accounts such as the diaries of Thomas Cope.

One of the real strengths of the exhibit is the range of artifacts it employs to place Lancaster County's poorhouse in the context of its region. One might ask (and I did) how an exhibit focused on poverty could possibly contain sufficient artifacts to convey any sense of what institutional life may have been like, what the relationships with the community may have been, or what being poor meant in the nineteenth century. In fact, the exhibit features over 200 objects and images from Lancaster County museums and historical organizations, as well as from other museums in southeastern Pennsylvania and the Mid-Atlantic region. Because the artifacts preserved over the years from the busy poorhouse were few, much of the evidence of institutional life was borrowed from other organizations. Thus the most direct documentation for life in the Lancaster County poorhouse comes from the representations of the buildings and grounds, from folk art to surveyors' maps and early twentieth-century photographs of staff, interiors, and the construction of new buildings. The borrowed artifacts are evocative of early nineteenth-century institutional life all the same: manacles once used to shackle the violently insane; a "cooling board" used for laying out bodies for burial; medical equipment used by local physicians.

More important, these artifacts from other institutions underscore a message of the exhibit: that poorhouses were common features in the nineteenth-century Mid-Atlantic landscape; and that they were integral parts of their communities. The 1890 transom over the entrance to the exhibit, pulled from one of the buildings, proudly lists the institution's commissioners responsible for rebuilding the building, and the board's clerk. The transom also underscores how delicate the history of an individual community can be: no records exist to indicate which building the transom came from, or if 1890 is the correct date for its reconstruction. The 1873 painting of the Berks County almshouse, which depicts the buildings and grounds in a blaze of sunshine and bucolic human and animal activity, was probably painted by one of three itinerant folk painters who lived in and painted several of the region's almshouses for cash, all of whom were plagued by alcoholism and its attendant effects: Charles Hofmann (1820-82), John Rasmussen (1828-95), or Louis Mader (1842-99). The 1801 painting of the Chester County Home, painted by an unknown artist and facing the Berks County painting from across the exhibit, suggests the potential isolating effect of institutional life as it stands starkly on a hill with no human or animal figures at all. The sections on the farm and the store outline important financial connections between the poorhouse and the city of Lancaster: both the store and the farm served as sources of goods for the poorhouse's neighbors and employees, and as sources of employment for inmates and members of the community. The poorhouse was also a regular customer for the goods and services offered by local farmers and artisans.

Another of this exhibit's strengths is its handling of the relationship of the institution to its inmates. Historians have argued for decades about whether the poorhouses of the early republic isolated their inmates from their communities and harshly imposed standards of morality dictated by a growing middle class. Most recently, arguments have raged about how much agency the poor have had in shaping their own lives, in and out of the increasingly bureaucratic system of poor relief in nineteenth-century America. Curator Page Talbott has struck a fine balance in this exhibit between playing up the clearly negative possibilities of institutional life — for example, the regimentation represented by the bell regulating inmates' work, meal, and sleep times, or quotes from reports by reformer Dorothea Dix on treatments of the insane in the Mid-Atlantic's poorhouses — and emphasizing the gentler connotations of inmates' part of a large household suggested by the

farm and domestic implements (a plow, a mousetrap). What emerges is a more nuanced view of an institution than that offered in many historical texts, and this view is the more powerful for being so beautifully illustrated.

The Lancaster Historical Society's "virtual exhibit" (posted on the Society's website at <http://www.lanclio.org/highlights/exhibits/almshouse>) repeats the themes of the "real" exhibit, with some useful additions: a plan of the exhibit; additional text in each area of the exhibit, including some primary materials; activities which urge the "visitor" to examine changes in the institution, its inmates, and its staff over time; and a page of links to web resources on the history of poverty in America. The site chronology is of particular interest to the visitor attempting to understand the physical changes to the site over time, and the physical context in which Lancaster County's poor were assisted. The links page is especially valuable, because it is eclectic: its contents include tastes of popular culture (such as the lyrics to a popular song from the 1920s called "Over the Hill to the Poorhouse"); articles which describe the transition of other institutions from poorhouse to state-funded home for the elderly; and links to other historical institutions such as the Baltimore County Historical Society's restored almshouse (open for tours). The virtual exhibit was produced by Tim Brixius. The pages include a number of small typographical errors, but the "virtual exhibit" is easy to navigate, visually attractive, and informative — nothing to take for granted with any website.

Both "real" and "virtual" versions of "Two Centuries of Caring" are well worth a visit. The Lancaster County Historical Society deserves special praise for making the effort to make a web-based version of the exhibit available, and for providing materials that will be of scholarly value now that the exhibit has closed: in addition to the virtual exhibit, the Society devoted an issue of its journal to articles on the institution's history. These efforts are important steps in the process of better-documenting the troubled past of social welfare in the United States.