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## Coles County Poor Farm (Ashmore Estates)

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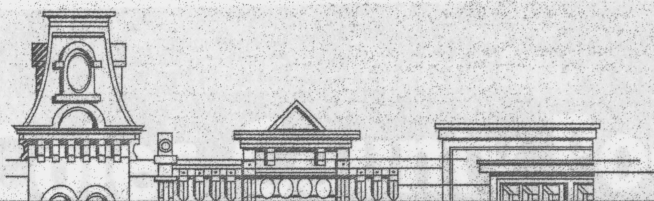
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## The Coles County **POOR FARM**



The Coles County Poor Farm, established in 1857, once housed forty-one residents in an almshouse that was inadequate for the large local indigent population. The much larger structure pictured here was not completed until 1916.

Inset: Playground equipment can be seen in this historical photo, evidence that children lived on the poor farm. As laws governing care for the poor evolved, the almshouse eventually gave way to more modern public welfare systems, which allowed the poor greater independence. (Photos courtesy Michael Kleen)

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## From Poor House to Haunted House

# The Coles County Poor Farm



*The Coles County Almshouse has stood vacant for nearly twenty-five years. Located in rural Coles County, the structure had long been a target for vandals until purchased in 2006 by local residents who now operate a haunted house in the once-handsome structure. (Photo courtesy Michael Kleen)*

For a little over a century—from 1857 to 1959—the indigent population of Coles County lived in the almshouse (poor house) on the county poor farm. Between 1959 and 1987, the old almshouse served as a private care facility for the mentally ill and developmentally disabled and after that it became a magnet for local curiosity.

As the adults of the community fought over its future, their children

risked arrest and injury to explore the building. In the words of one *Daily Eastern News* writer and student at nearby Eastern Illinois University, “for years, teenagers and college students alike have journeyed to this decrepit tower of terror.” In 2006 new owners opened the building as a commercial haunted house. Despite the controversy caused by this action, the history of the Coles County

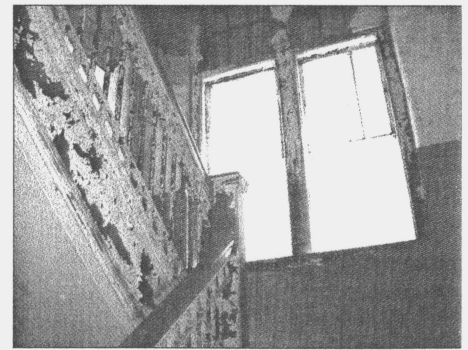
Poor Farm (and of its almshouse) remains largely unknown.

The poor have always been with us, and they were certainly in Illinois from its earliest days. One of the first acts of the Illinois legislature after Illinois became a state was to provide for care of the most vulnerable members of society by establishing Overseers of the Poor, who outsourced supervision of orphans and the destitute to private citizens.

In exchange for labor and a small stipend, these “guardians of the poor” clothed, fed, and housed individual paupers. That practice continued until February 1839 when an amendment to “An act for the relief of the poor” authorized county governments to establish almshouses and levy a tax for their support. Nearly every county maintained an almshouse and a poor farm, where the indigent, elderly, or chronically ill lived and worked.

The poor-farm system lasted one hundred years. After the Public Assistance Code of Illinois (1949) specifically forbade almshouses from taking in children or “feeble-minded” women under the age of 45, fewer people found themselves on the county poor farm. In 1967 the Public Aid Code of Illinois de-authorized the system of county farms, forcing the few remaining almshouses in Illinois to close. By that time, most of Illinois’ almshouses had been sold to private companies or torn down.

The first Coles County Poor Farm was located in Charleston Township near the small town of Loxa from 1857 until 1869. The inadequate almshouse there housed twenty-seven residents. In 1870 the county purchased 260 acres in Section 35 of Ashmore Township, which sat astride the Indianapolis & St. Louis Railroad. Ben R. Maxwell, a contractor from Charleston who had worked on the project as a young man, wrote in a letter to the *Daily Courier* in 1916 that “the brick for the building was made and burned on the county farm just across the railroad on the south side.” The two-story timber and brick building, constructed by H. B. Truman, was the first to sit on that property. The small 38-x-58 foot structure included an attached kitchen. According to the 1879 *History of Coles County*, the initial superintendent or overseer of the poor of the county farm was Oliver D. Hawkins, who migrated to Coles County from Kentucky in 1841. Hawkins quickly rose to



*The interior of the home is badly deteriorated, but evidence of the solid construction techniques remains. (Photo courtesy Michael Kleen)*

become a prominent member of the Ashmore community and served as superintendent of the farm for three years.

The resident population at the almshouse, which peaked at forty-one people in 1870, began to gradually decline. According to Coles County census data, the farm supported thirty-five residents in 1880, twenty-three in 1900, and eighteen in 1910.

Many of the residents, generally referred to as “inmates,” died at the farm, and the county maintained a small cemetery somewhere north of the grounds. In 1879, Joshua Ricketts, superintendent of the county farm at the time, had recorded 32 deaths out of the roughly 250 inmates who had stayed at the farm between 1870 and 1879. Another pauper cemetery, established a few years later, still exists south of Route 16 and now contains the graves of between sixty to one hundred persons.

Ricketts maintained that alcoholism was the root cause for many of the problems that led to a stay at the farm. “I am convinced that fully nine-tenths of all pauperism in this county may be traced either directly or indirectly to the use of intoxicating drinks,” he wrote to the editor of the



*The original almshouse near the small Coles County town of Loxa proved inadequate for the number of residents who needed assistance. The original structure was replaced in 1916 by the much larger building that still stands. (Photo courtesy Michael Kleen)*

*History of Coles County (1879).*

"Not that there were that number who were drunkards, but the sin of others has, in many cases, visited the children to the third and fourth generations. It is but a few days since a poor, degraded creature left the house to return to his old haunts, where he can again wallow in the ditch, steeped in the fire of the still. This same man said that he felt as if [he] could drink fully three inches of whisky, so anxious was he to get back to his old rum-holes. I am thoroughly satisfied that there would be no real necessity for poorhouses if intoxicating liquors were banished from the land."

The Board of State Commissioners of Public Charities visited the poor farm on June 9, 1880, and was satisfied with the generally favorable conditions. "The inmates are well-fed and in good health," they reported. "Of the three insane, who are now in this almshouse, only one has been committed by a verdict of the court." The commissioners went on to describe the residents' meals in detail. "Breakfast: coffee, meat, biscuit, butter, molasses, rice and hominy. Dinner: meat, bread, milk, beans, potatoes and other vegetables. Supper: the same as breakfast, with the addition of fruit." Lastly, they reported on the cost of the institution, which was \$1,706 for the almshouse and \$3,676 for the farm in 1883. Seventeen years later, the committeemen described much the same conditions. "The heating is by stove and is sufficient," they reported. "There is no regular system of ventilation, but plenty of fresh air is easily obtained. There is no plumbing . . . there is no fire protection." As for the condition



*A full-time caretaker lived at the poor farm to oversee agricultural operations and to ensure that residents received proper care. Residents were assigned chores; some tended livestock or vegetable gardens, others did laundry or helped with meal preparation. (Photo courtesy Michael Kleen)*

of the mentally ill at the farm, they wrote, "There is no special provision for the insane. . . . None are locked up or in restraint."

After the turn of the century, however, conditions on the poor farm deteriorated, and the local newspapers reported on the deplorable situation. The Auxiliary Committee of the State Board of Charities condemned the almshouse for its "vermin infected walls," "rough floors," "small windows," and improper ventilation. It was reported that "flies swarmed everywhere" and "were especially noticeable on the poor food prepared for dinner." Additionally, the residents were found to be mostly elderly and unsupervised. The Auxiliary Committee felt so strongly about their decision that they remarked, "our pride and our humanity should make us determined to remove the disgrace of it from us."

Evidently the committee was

true to its word, and in January 1915, they received bids for the construction of a new "fireproof" building designed by Danville architect L.F.W. Stuebe. The construction contract for the new almshouse was first awarded to S.C. Sailor of Oak Wood, Illinois, but he backed out of the project in late February 1916. The contract was then granted to J.W. Montgomery in March for \$20,389, and the cornerstone was ceremoniously laid on May 17, 1916. While builders set the cornerstone in place, "spectators spent considerable time in visiting the inmates of the home and looking around the big farm."

Life on the new farm improved considerably. A full-time caretaker and his family took turns living in the almshouse and a white farmhouse that formerly sat on the property. Nancy Swinford, the daughter of Leo Roy and Lura Andrews, lived at the home for



*The solidly built almshouse was made of brick that was manufactured on the poor farm property. (Photo courtesy Michael Kleen)*

eight years, from around 1947 to 1954, starting at the age of eight or nine. Her father was the superintendent of the farm during that period, and her mother was known as the matron. Andrews was in charge of managing the farm, while his wife supervised chores inside the building, which included laundry detail and meal preparation for her family and the residents. "The county furnished all the food," Swinford recalled.

But the residents raised much of their food on the farm, tapping the maple trees for syrup and tending the cattle housed in the large barn. "We had some who would help in the kitchen," Nancy explained. "They would help with the cooking. Some helped with the dishes. They had responsibilities. They milked cows. They butchered all their own

meat. Those that were able . . . daddy gave them a job. They had to help earn their piece."

As the philosophy regarding care for the poor changed, so did the means of caring for them. Many of the buildings were sold off to farmers, while others were privatized as care facilities. Coles County retained the farmland around the property but sold the almshouse to Ashmore Estates, Inc. in February 1959. That corporation opened the building as a private psychiatric hospital by the same name.

Ashmore Estates suffered from financial difficulties from the very beginning. In October 1964, after only five years in operation, the psychiatric hospital closed down due to excessive debt. The institution reopened in 1965 but changed its focus from a private facility to one

that accepted patients from state mental institutions. New owners took over in July 1976 and invested more than \$200,000 in the construction of a modern addition. Construction began in 1977 but was not completed until the early 1980s. Financial issues led to the facility's closing in 1987.

It sat empty until a local resident purchased the building and opened it as a haunted house. Once populated by those who needed government relief, the old building is now a receptacle for local legend and scary stories.

Michael Kleen  
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