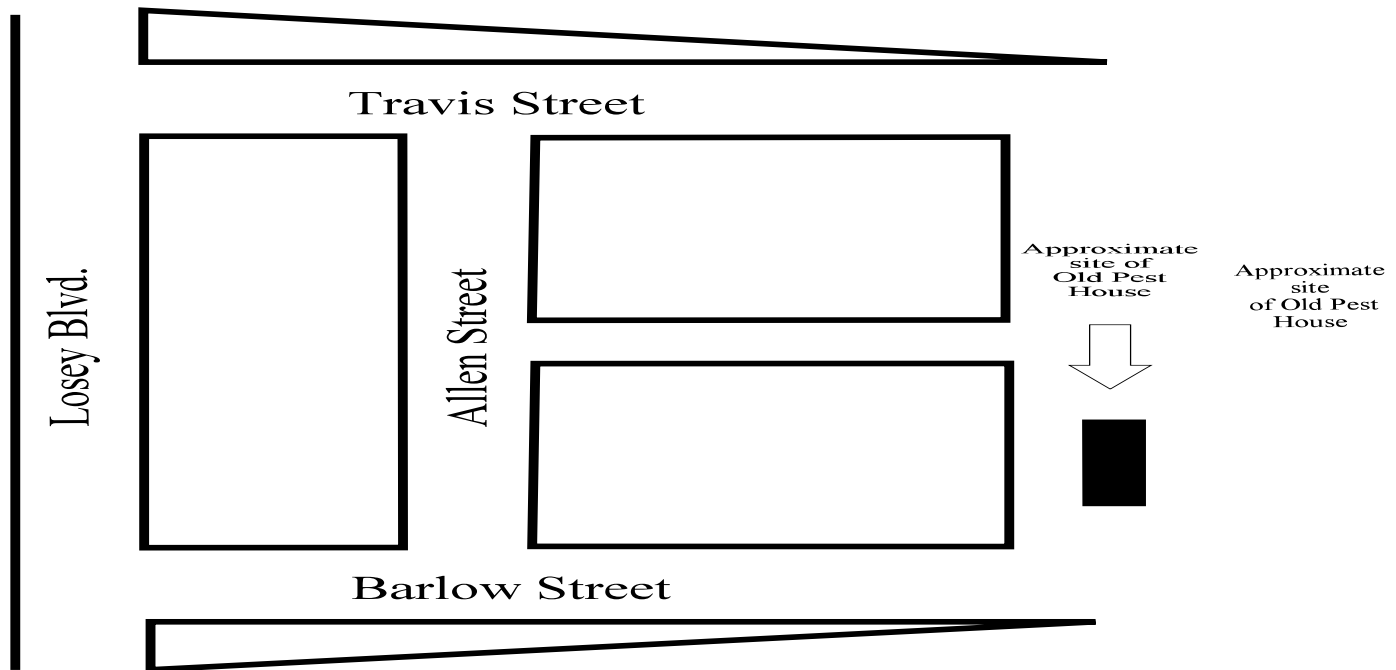


THE POOR AND PUBLIC HEALTH IN LA CROSSE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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February 13, 1998
Rev. November 17, 1999

Although every community deals with its destitute residents and rampant contagious disease, it is interesting that there is almost no mention of these problems in secondary historical sources concerning La Crosse in the nineteenth-century. The City Pest House, a municipal isolation “hospital” of sorts, was located just south of where Central High School is now, very near where Barlow and Strong Ave. intersect [now part of the Tanner Addition to the City of La Crosse]. The acre of property was purchased from Samuel T. & Sarah Smith for \$500 August 19, 1868 [vol. 33 Deeds, page 316] and was described as a portion of SW¹/₄ of the NE¹/₄ of Section 9, Township 15 North, Range 7 West. The City sold this property August 19, 1919 [vol. 121 Deeds, page 465] to William Linse.¹ At the time of purchase, the property was considered to be out in the country, being in the Town of Shelby. The area was not platted into the City of La Crosse until 1926.



¹Pest House, 9 Dec. 1932, Buildings & Grounds, Resolutions & Reports, Common Council, City of La Crosse [WI], La Crosse Series 23, *La Crosse Public Library Archives*.

The Pest House was a quarantined area that was also called the Small-Pox Hospital. It was for persons with a pestilential disease, such as tuberculosis, malignant fever, small pox, or other infectious disease. It was under control of the City Physician and the City Health Department, as specified in Ordinance 28.² However, it is likely that this isolation hospital was intended for the city's poor, since the lines of control of the Pest House seem blurred between the Common Council's Committee on Health and Committee on Poor.

As early as 1866, the pest house stood on the S.T. Smith property and the City paid rent for the site.³ Two years later, the Council directed the Committee on Poor (not Health) to "purchase a pest house, not exceeding the sum of five hundred dollars."⁴ During 1872-1873, La Crosse experienced a severe outbreak of small pox, and the Pest House (referred to as Small Pox Hospital) was put to use then according to a City Physician's report in 1882.⁵ Later, in a report to the Common Council by the Committee on Grounds & Buildings in 1879, it is stated that the "[Small Pox Hospital] has been unoccupied for about five years by sick persons...."⁶ Many reports by City Physicians complained about the small facility and its inadequate furnishings.

Theft and supervision of the building and grounds was difficult. Superintendent of Poor, Augustus Steinlein, in a report to Council in 1883, urged the city to build a "larger and more appropriate building at the South end of the City Poor Farm, and the present Poorhouse might then be reserved for a Hospital for contagious diseases, which would be under the eye and supervision of the Poorhouse keeper[,] and not isolated and deserted as the present Pest House[,] and subject to be robbed of [its] pump and contents of the building."⁷ He reiterated this idea in an 1886 report as well, "The present [Poor House] building might be kept for contagious diseases and would be under supervision. The solitary Pest House on the Prairie with the acre of land could then be sold by the city."⁸ As a side note, it is interesting that Augustus Steinlein not only

²Charter and Ordinances of the City of La Crosse with the Rules of the Common Council (La Crosse, WI : Republican and Leader, 1888):202-209.

³Proceedings, 13 Jul. 1866, Common Council, City of La Crosse [WI], published in the Republican & Leader.

⁴Proceedings, 14 Aug. 1868, Common Council, City of La Crosse [WI], published in the Republican & Leader.

⁵Health, 22 Jul. 1882, Reports of Officers, Common Council, City of La Crosse [WI], La Crosse Series 22, *La Crosse Public Library Archives*.

⁶Pest House, 9 May 1879, Buildings & Grounds, Resolutions & Reports, Common Council, City of La Crosse [WI], La Crosse Series 23, *La Crosse Public Library Archives*.

⁷Poor Superintendent, 1 Apr. 1883, Reports of Officers, Common Council, City of La Crosse [WI], La Crosse Series 22, *La Crosse Public Library Archives*.

⁸Poor Superintendent, Apr. 1886, Reports of Officers, Common Council, City of La Crosse [WI], La Crosse Series 22, *La Crosse Public Library Archives*.

served as the City's Superintendent of Poor, but also was a justice of the peace, notary public, and a real estate agent in 1884. He also was a member of the Board of Education.⁹ It was commonplace for La Crosse city officers before the turn of the twentieth-century to have a thriving private business and be involved in one or more civic endeavors simultaneously.

In the Board of Health minutes of 1894, the Board decided to "suitably repair the old Pest House" for the sum of \$25.¹⁰ By 1902, the Board was considering building a new isolation hospital.¹¹ In 1908, the Franciscan Sisters opened St. Camillus Hospital, an isolation hospital connected to St. Francis Hospital.¹² The trend at that time was to work heavily with schools to isolate contagious disease, and to individually quarantine houses.¹³ Children who came from quarantined families were sent home from school. The friends of those children were strictly forbidden to visit quarantined homes. Citizens were taught about burning bedding, clothing, and keeping the house, grounds and barns clean and free of garbage. The Board of Health waged a constant battle in La Crosse to keep the streets and alleys clean, to force residents to hook up with the city sewer where possible, to bury dead animals left about the town, and teach physicians (and others "practicing" medicine in a very loose sense) the dangers of contagious disease. When tuberculosis, a highly contagious disease, became a serious problem, La Crosse County Board of Supervisors opened Oak Forest Sanatorium in 1918.¹⁴

It is unknown when the Pest House was razed, but it no longer stood by 1932, and as previously mentioned, the City sold the property in 1919. The Board of Public Works was directed by the Common Council in Nov. 1915 to "sell the building known as the City Pest House for the best price they can obtain..."¹⁵

The City Physician also sent paupers in need of medical attention to the hospital connected to the City Poor Farm, located further out in the Town of Shelby. In the fall of 1860, Miss Dorothea Dix, described as a militant Massachusetts woman, visited the City Poor Farm with Marcus "Brick" Pomeroy, famous Copperhead editor of the Democratic newspaper in La Crosse. The

⁹Bunn & Philippi's La Crosse City Directory, comprising.... (Winona, MN : Jones & Kroeger, 1884): 219.

¹⁰Minutes, 17 Sept. 1894, Health Department, City of La Crosse [WI], La Crosse Series 18, *La Crosse Public Library Archives*.

¹¹Minutes, 15 Mar. 1902, Health Department, City of La Crosse [WI], La Crosse Series 18, *La Crosse Public Library Archives*.

¹²"Amid Doubts, City's First Hospital was Opened in 1883," La Crosse Tribune 9 Jun. 1963:18.

¹³For an excellent overview of public health in La Crosse from 1900, consult Stanley N. Miller, A History of La Crosse, Wisconsin 1900-1950 (George Peabody College for Teachers, 1959):73-82.

¹⁴"County's Oak Forest Sanatorium has Interesting 24-Year History," La Crosse Tribune 19 Jun. 1942.

¹⁵Pest House, 12 Nov. 1915, Buildings & Grounds, Resolutions & Reports, Common Council, City of La Crosse [WI], La Crosse Series 23, *La Crosse Public Library Archives*.

newspaper account tells us that Eliakim Barlow was the caretaker who was contracted to take care of the Poor Farm at that time, and that he received three dollars a week for each person in his care. Barlow subcontracted out the actual care to a Mr. and Mrs. Burch. Miss Dix told of the deplorable conditions in the facility, the routine of the poor during their stay, and the questionable ethics of Barlow. In summary, Pomeroy stated, “The way the house is managed is a disgrace to the city...it was the poorest poor house she [Dix] had seen in five years — and the poorest she had seen in the United States, that we were fairly sick.”¹⁶

From approximately 1873-1889, the Poor Farm was in the capable hands of Mr. and Mrs. Frank Metz. City Physicians and Superintendents of Poor praised them and their nursing abilities for over a decade. Included in the City Physician’s report from April-October 1875, “the following table embraces the cases admitted into the Hospital connected with the Poorhouse. The number enjoying the benefits of the same had been 11:

confinements of deserted women	4
acute rheumatism	1
syphilitic ulcers	1
malaria fever	1
intermittent fever	2
Brights disease	1
Phthisis pulmonntis.	1

The patient suffering from Bright’s disease died; all others have been discharged as recovered.”¹⁷

This arrangement was convenient, since there were round-the-clock caretakers at the Poor Farm to receive and care for the sick. The Pest House was most likely staffed as necessary when vast outbreaks occurred, rather than having a staff at the ready as in a true hospital setting.

According to the History of La Crosse, Wisconsin (1881), the City Poor Farm property of 120 acres in the Town of Shelby was purchased in 1857 at a cost of \$6000. This land was described as being located in the N½ NW¼ of Section 15 Township 15, Range 7 West. The Metz family leased the farm and contracted to “feed and keep the poor who may be sent to them to receive their care and attention at \$2.50 per week.” As there was no County Poor House at that time, the County sent its charges to the City Poor Farm, and compensated Mr. & Mrs. Metz 50¢ per day per person.¹⁸

¹⁶Marcus Pomeroy, “La Crosse Poor House Deemed Poorest in Country,” La Crosse Union & Democrat, 5 Sept. 1860.

¹⁷Health, Oct. 1875, Reports of Officers, Common Council, City of La Crosse [WI], La Crosse Series 22, *La Crosse Public Library Archives*.

¹⁸History of La Crosse, Wisconsin...(Unigraphic, 1977) 1881 reprint.

There was an infirmary or hospital associated with the Poor House as stated previously. In 1872, Council directed the City Physician to “visit the City Poor House at least once a week, and report such paupers who are capable to work to Superintendent of Poor, who shall take measures to have such persons discharged from the Poorhouse as promptly as possible.”¹⁹ Superintendents of Poor complained to the Council about the abject condition of the Poor House and Hospital. Around 1894, Superintendent C.F. Scharpf told Council in a report, “I have to call your attention again to the miserable condition of the Poor house[;] thank providence that we have a mild winter or else the old People would freeze.”²⁰

The Common Council adopted a resolution in 1893 to contract with La Crosse architects Stoltze and Schick for plans for a proposed poor house.²¹ Plans were drawn up, and City Council approved payment of the \$125 bill in May 1894.²² Yet in April of that year, the Council adopted a resolution to sell what now amounted to 80 acres of poor farm property for \$4000 to the County Board of Supervisors for “land now owned by the City, situated in the Town of Shelby and known as the city poor farm...”²³ Eventually this property was sold in 1894 or 1895 to the County and became the County Poor House and the County Home & Infirmary.²⁴ The current name of this facility is Hillview Health Care Center. A small cemetery is also associated with this property.²⁵

An equitable system of public welfare was always a goal, but one that city administrators and taxpayers never thought was completely achieved. By 1891, the position of Superintendent of

¹⁹Proceedings, 17 Apr. 1872, Common Council, City of La Crosse [WI], published in the Republican & Leader.

²⁰Poor Superintendent, Mar. 1894?, Reports of Officers, Common Council, City of La Crosse [WI], La Crosse Series 22, *La Crosse Public Library Archives*.

²¹Poor House, 18 Aug. 1893, Buildings & Grounds, Resolutions & Reports, Common Council, City of La Crosse [WI], La Crosse Series 23, *La Crosse Public Library Archives*.

²²Poor House, 14 May 1894, Buildings & Grounds, Resolutions & Reports, Common Council, City of La Crosse [WI], La Crosse Series 23, *La Crosse Public Library Archives*.

²³Poor House, 13 Apr. 1894, Buildings & Grounds, Resolutions & Reports, Common Council, City of La Crosse [WI], La Crosse Series 23, *La Crosse Public Library Archives*.

²⁴For information about the facility after it was purchased by the County, consult the La Crosse Area Clipping Files at the *La Crosse Public Library Archives* for newspaper articles on this topic. Older information is difficult to locate, although some information can be found in: Poor Superintendent, Reports of Officers, Common Council, City of La Crosse [WI], La Crosse Series 22, *La Crosse Public Library Archives*, and Poor House, Buildings & Grounds, Resolutions & Reports, Common Council, City of La Crosse [WI], La Crosse Series 23, *La Crosse Public Library Archives*.

²⁵It is unclear whether burial records were kept before 1915 for this cemetery. The graves are marked with numbers in lieu of names. The *La Crosse Public Library Archives* has a list of the burials copied from records at Hillview Health Care Center.

Poor was a full-time job. Superintendent C.F. Scharpf stated in his annual report of 1891, "It has been my aim to do justice to the poor and needy and to the tax-payers of this city and county of La Crosse; have put in all my time, evenings and even Sundays, and find it a hard task to do justice all around...I give for publication the following rules, and those persons who expect aid from the city can govern themselves accordingly:

1. The city does not pay for beer, wine or other spirituous drinks, delicacies, stylish clothes, jewelry or other notions;
2. Refusal to perform labor, which is paid for, excludes from assistance by the city;
3. Untrue and false representation as to circumstances of poverty will not only injure the cause of the applicant, but the person will be brought before the courts and duly punished for such misrepresentation;
4. All persons able to work, and parents having grown-up children, receive no aid from the city, and when such children refuse to help their parents they will be punished under the state law."²⁶

A newspaper article in 1947 summarized the operation of public welfare. In 1884, the La Crosse County Board of Supervisors and a Common Council committee met in special session to discuss "the economy and practicability of establishing a county system for the care of the poor and insane."²⁷ Although an agreement was not made regarding the county's poor, decisions were made to establish an institution to care for the county's mentally challenged residents. Through this City-County cooperation, the groundwork was laid for the "La Crosse County Asylum," or what is now known as Lakeview Health Care Center, which opened in 1888.

County officials believed that "poor relief could be more adequately and economically taken care of by the maintenance and proper management of the county poor house."²⁸ The poor were scattered all over the county and that "aid was apparently considered careless, negligent, shiftless and expensive." In 1894, the County took action and established three separate districts and three superintendents of the poor: the City of La Crosse (first district), towns of Farmington, Campbell, Onalaska, Holland and the city of Onalaska (second district), towns of Barre, Bangor, Burns, Hamilton, Shelby, Greenfield and Washington (third district). This system was put into place the following year, 1895, and was consolidated under one superintendent in 1917.

In summary, the nineteenth-century was an early time in La Crosse's history. The City was chartered in 1856, and grew quickly and tremendously with the influx of American, German, Bohemian, and Norwegian immigrants. City services, such as service to the poor and destitute, experienced growing pains as the population swelled in late in the century. Public education regarding contagious disease and the fight against filth and garbage in the streets, barns and

²⁶ Annual message of Hon. Frederick A. Copeland, mayor city of La Crosse, Wisconsin... (Republican & Leader : La Crosse [WI], 1892): 88.

²⁷ "Inmates, Superintendents Proud of Operation of County Home," La Crosse Tribune 12 Oct. 1947:28.

²⁸ "Inmates, Superintendents Proud of Operation of County Home," La Crosse Tribune 12 Oct. 1947:28.

alleys was continual. The establishment of the city Pest House and Poor House and Poor Farm were results of city leaders trying to address these social problems without alienating taxpayers.