

# Mansfield Town Farm created as place for poor, sick, elderly, “tramps” and other unfortunates

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*This is the first of a two-part series on Mansfield’s Town Farm.*

From the earliest days, local government had the obligation to care for its less fortunate citizens. The town of Mansfield once auctioned off their care to the lowest bidder. Somewhat similar to current-day foster care, the town compensated local families to board and care for the poor, sick and elderly each year.

Change arrived in 1837 when Mansfield began to operate its own “town farm.” In that year the town purchased a large tract of land from the descendants of a family named Copeland. Part of the land was used for the new town farm. It included a farmhouse that still stands on the corner of Ware and East streets, as well as the land where the Robinson and Jordan/Jackson elementary schools and the Mansfield Green recycling park now stand.

The town farm was known by many names over the years: the poor farm, the poor house, the almshouse and the infirmary among them. The idea was that able-bodied “inmates” (as they were often called) would work the farm to produce vegetables, milk, firewood and other goods to sustain the residents and reduce the cost of their upkeep.

Over the years the function of the farm evolved. In addition to being a working farm, it became an infirmary for the sick, a home for the elderly, an overnight stay for “tramps” as they passed through the area, and a “lockup” for criminals or the mentally ill until they could be handed over to the county or commonwealth.

In 1884, the 47th year of the farm’s operation, a column penned by “Observer” in the Mansfield News assessed its history this way: “The anticipated improvement in the condition of the pauper has been, we believe, more or less realized.”



They said most town farm residents were simply unfortunate, “single and alone, fatherless, motherless, or childless.” Therefore, “in such a condition it is easy to see how the gentle whisper of a friend, a soft voice from the heart that cares for them, will make them glad and happy, and cost little to one who is pleased to remember them.”

There were times when sentiment was not as rosy. Later that decade long-time farm superintendent Albert Leonard had taken over. It seems Leonard and his wife ran the farm so well that it became a popular overnight stay for “tramps” passing through the area. In a 14-month period beginning in January 1888, a total of 1,122 “tramps” spent the night at the Mansfield town farm. Residents began to grow weary of their presence.

This was especially true on Park Street, a road used regularly by “tramps” en route from the train station to the farm. “A Park Street Resident” wrote a letter to the editor in November 1889: “We begin to think the name of Park Street should be changed to Tramp Street, as the park is not here and the tramps are.”

Residents were responding to frequent knocks at the door asking “How far to the town farm?” There were often requests for food or hot tea.

“If no better way can be found to relieve us of the pest, I would suggest a lamp post in front of each house with a guide board there on, and a lunch to last to the farm, not for a moment overlooking the hot tea.”

Town Meeting adopted a policy, which required an hour of work for a night’s stay, and an hour more for every meal provided. Leonard implemented the policy and for a time the population of overnight guests declined. But at the dawn of the 20th century the town farm was about to change.