

# Finding the Poor

By Carolyn H. Brown

Many of us have a poor relative or two. We may know of entire families which are poor or physically disabled and never worked a day in their lives. Today they may not end up in the poorhouse as they would have years ago, however, it doesn't make them any easier to locate in the records we usually think of when we are doing our research. These are people who generally didn't own land, lived with other relatives, rented a home or apartment and maybe even lived on the street. They could be someone who did own land, had been productive in society, and just fell on hard times to the point of almost disappearing from records.

How do we find these individuals? Years ago the government had facilities where they cared for people who couldn't take care of themselves such as an almshouse, county home, insane asylum, orphanage, poor farm, workhouse, and soldiers' and sailors' home.

In the past, local officials sometimes handed out food or fuel, hired local residents to shelter the homeless, or paid for indigent burials. Some places even ran the poor out of town or forcibly indentured their children. This method was very prevalent in Europe.

Fortunately, all of the places which were run or sanctioned by the government kept records. If the care for the poor was handled by the church, they also kept records of payments to the poor or to parishioners who helped care for them.

To get started, it helps when you can determine if the relative may have been on a first-name basis with the overseer of the poor. This will direct you to the right records to study.

By today's standards, most people in the past were poor. The poorest lived their entire lives in slavery or as indentured servants. The working-class families worked just to eat, stay warm, raise their children who survived past infancy, and be buried respectfully. Many were able to work their way out of poverty to where they could own a home, get an education and earn a comfortable living. Others remained in severe poverty for generations.

If you find your family fell on hard times, then it's time to look at the "poor records" which may have existed at the time.

## OVERSEER OF THE POOR RECORDS

From Colonial times to the early decades of the United States, officials were directly responsible for the poor. Some of that responsibility may have fallen on the state-supported churches in the area. Trustees, Overseers, or Superintendents of the poor were eventually elected or appointed by county, city, township, or town governments. A few common strategies—none of which were very kind—were used by the keepers of the poor.

- **Auctioning**—The care for the poor might have been sold to the lowest bidder. The care of the aged, vulnerable sick, and disabled was put into the hands of the town's stingiest scrooge.
- **Binding out**—The children of families deemed too poor to care for them might be forced into indentured labor until they were of majority age. The contracts provide the name of the child being indentured, the person who claimed their care, and perhaps more.
- **Contracting out**—A person who was unable to care for himself might have been placed in the care of relatives, friends, or strangers for an agreed-upon sum. These records provide who accepted aid to care for their own and may be mentioned by name and relationship.
- **Warning off**—Anyone who had lived in a place for less than a year and had not established residency (or a "settlement") might be told to leave. They were escorted by the superintendents back to their prior residence or to the state line. In Europe, it was not uncommon to find the situation where two poor people from different towns married. When they tried to live in the town of one of them the other would be warned-off. These records provide the name of the individual, and sometimes where they were taken.

In some times and places the overseers provided some relief such as—distributing food, fuel, medicine, and funds, especially to the widowed, elderly and disabled. They might have been buried in paupers graves, as charity plots were called. These graves didn't have tombstones. There may be a list of those buried in the common grave area of a cemetery or church yard. Many poor records list the name of head of household and sometimes they were noted "with children".

Use the minutes and accounts book of the overseer of the poor to determine if your relative received aid. These lists may contain information about the indigent individuals, as well as lists of residents who were delinquent in paying poor taxes.

The records of the overseers, most commonly for the 1700s and 1800s, may still be in town halls or county courthouses in a standalone collection, or along with county commissioners' records. They may also be in the county or state archives or the local or state historical society. Some of these records have been microfilmed and can be found at the Family History Library or online at <[www.FamilySearch.org](http://www.FamilySearch.org)>. Search by county or city/town, however they are not likely to be indexed, so expect to read them.

To find potter's fields search online or ask at the local historical or genealogical society, or the local library where the records might be.

### **POORHOUSE RECORDS**

Social reformers in the early 1800s began to look for more humane ways to care for the poor—and governments looked for cheaper ones. Thus, enters the age of the poorhouse.

In big-cities, homeless shelters—known as almshouses—were established. Later most states, including some counties and cities, built poorhouses or poor farms. These facilities provided the ability to keep all of the poor in one place, and required them to work for their own care when possible.

Originally the able-bodied were housed together with the aged, mentally and physically infirm, families with children, and sometimes low-level criminals. They may have had to swear a pauper's oath—stating they were without money or property—before the county commissioner to be admitted to a poorhouse. Residents, often called "inmates", couldn't leave without permission.

It became clear that children, criminals, and the elderly should not be housed together. States started building soldiers' and sailors' homes, children's homes, hospitals and asylums. They built separate "workhouses" for criminals. Many of these facilities endured until the early to mid-1900s.

Records kept by these facilities are among the best resources for the poor. They kept a range of records such as: inmate registers; certificates of indigence; visitors' logs; medical records; transfers; discharges; deaths; and burials. They had to submit annual reports which will help you understand how many people lived there at a time, how long they generally stayed, living conditions, work required and daily activities.

Don't forget to look for facilities which were privately operated as well. You can find the surviving admission registers and other records from orphanages, poorhouses and workhouses using an online tool such as ArchiveGrid at <[beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid](http://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid)>.

### **ORPHAN RECORDS**

When children of the past lost even one parent they were considered orphans. Fatherless children with inheritances and "prospects" were assigned male legal guardians by the orphans' and probate courts. These guardians did not necessarily care for the children, just for their futures. Many times the child may have a guardian while the mother was still living. The guardianship may have changed more than once before the child came of age.

The poorer children left less of a paper trail than those better off. For them there was probably no probate process. Legal adoptions were rare, more an exception rather than the rule. Therefore, the child's name may not have been changed. A brother or sister may have taken in one or more of the children when a sibling died. Neighbors and family friends also took in the orphans of a friend. Legal adoptions were not common until the mid-to-late 1800s.

During the 1800s start looking for private orphanages run by churches and other organizations. Children's homes kept good records of their wards' personal data and family situations. Some orphanage records still survive and may be found in with poorhouse records.

### **ORPHAN TRAINS**

Between 1854 and 1929 approximately 200,000 homeless children—not all of them orphaned—were shipped by train to the Midwest and West by the Children's Aid Society of New York. When selecting the children to be sent on the Orphan Trains, the Society coordinated efforts among several institutions to identify the adoptable children. They were sent in chaperoned groups who were met by receiving committees in 45 states, Canada and Mexico. There was a vetting process for prospective parents and children were paired with qualified care givers. Many boys over 10 were apprenticed; most others were adopted. Some were cared for by more than one family before they came of age. There were cases of abuse of which many required legal action taken by the court. Case files

and related paperwork were maintained. On the receiving end, county courthouses recorded adoptions and apprenticeships.

### RECONSTRUCTION-ERA RECORDS

After the Civil War four million African-Americans were liberated from slavery. This created a displaced and largely undocumented workforce. Freed slaves generally didn't have surnames, weren't legally married, couldn't read or write, and had lost contact with close relatives. They needed support in the form of food, homes, unification with relatives, legal aid, medical aid, work, transportation, and job training.

Many Southern white families were also affected. When Confederate soldiers returned home many were in poor health, and found a very poor economy. Plantations lacked workers, and land and goods had been destroyed.

- **Freedmen's Bureau**—The federal government answered the chaos by creating the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands—known as the Freeman's Bureau. They distributed food, medical care and clothing directly to the poor. The Bureau agents helped African-Americans document marriages and labor contracts. They processed military benefits claims and persecuted hate crimes. The Bureau records are rich in information on both Southern whites and blacks. They established schools and redistributed seized Confederate lands—some back to the original owner who signed loyalty oaths. The original records have been microfilmed and are available at <[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)>. Some of the Bureau's documents have been transcribed and can be accessed at <[www.freedmensbureau.com](http://www.freedmensbureau.com)>.

### NEW DEAL RECORDS

Seventy years after the Civil War the United States found itself in economic chaos during Great Depression. One in four people across the nation was out of work. President Franklin D. Roosevelt led the creation of organizations to put people to work. The following organization may have information on your relatives:

- **Civilian Conservation Corp** (CCC, 1922-1942) – Employed 2.5 million young men and veterans to work on conservation projects in six-to 24-month stints. Work, housing, food, medical care and social life were provided in camps. About 75% of their wages went to a parent or other designated beneficiary back home.
- **Works Projects Administration** (WPA, 1935-1943) – Previously called the *Works Process Administration*, the WPA provided nearly eight million jobs building roads and dams, inventorying historical records, conducting oral history interviews and more. The jobs often matched the skill set of the individual and were close to home.
- **National Youth Administration** (NYA, 1935-1943) – Provided part-time work to those aged 16 to 24 while going to school or receiving job training.

If you have family stories of a relative taking part in any of these New Deal programs, it is time to see what you can find. The government kept personnel records on its relief workers. You can order personnel files from the National Archives; National Personnel Records Center at <<http://archives.gov/st-louis>>. To learn more about the work assignments a relative may have been involved in visit the WPA today <[www.wpatoday.org](http://www.wpatoday.org)> and CCC Legacy at <[www.ccclegacy.org](http://www.ccclegacy.org)>.

The following records provide clues to the state of your ancestor's wealth—or lack there of.

### US FEDERAL CENSUS RECORDS

Though the censuses didn't directly ask "Are you poor?" there are hints in the censuses. In 1850, they started asking about real estate owned. A column for personal property was added to the 1860-1870 censuses. In 1850 and 1880 censuses there were questions about occupation and employment respectively. Beginning in 1900 there were questions about owning or renting the dwelling where they lived. Later there were questions about rent/mortgage, number of weeks out of work, and other questions which may help you identify the poor. By studying the place where they lived, you may discover a relative residing in an institution.

When using these censuses compare the property value of those around your person of interest to see how their wealth compares to others in the area.

### SPECIAL CENSUSES

Various special censuses ask other questions concerning agriculture, industrial or manufacturing businesses which may hold financial clues. The 1880 schedules of "defective, dependent and delinquent" individuals (called DDD schedules) may provide more information about the person you are researching. Other state censuses are available as well.

## **REAL ESTATE AND PERSONAL PROPERTY TAX RECORDS**

Look for city, county and state tax records. They often itemize the taxable goods of residents. They may be available for your area of interest on microfilm at the Family History Library or online at <[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)>. These are not easy records to research, however you may find when a person died based on his estate being taxed or when the property shows up under the name of another individual. Tax lists for the United States start as far back as 1782.

## **PROPERTY RECORDS**

Deeds are important records to research to help find your family. Do the censuses or tax records indicate your relative many have owned land? If so, deeds may provide considerable information about the person of interest. Deeds can go so far as identifying two or three generations in a family. Unfortunately, deeds weren't always recorded if the land was transferred to a relative in a will, or when the widow or other relative remained on the land. If you find any sign of a sheriff's sale as part of a foreclosure, look for related court records.

## **MILITARY PENSION APPLICATIONS**

Military pensions were given to veterans who served from 1775 to 1916. They may also have been given to the veterans widow or other heirs. There is an extreme amount of genealogical related information in military pensions records. Some of these pension records are available on <[www.fold3.com](http://www.fold3.com)>.

## **PROBATE RECORDS**

When researching probate records, make sure you look at the entire estate inventory in the probate packet. Lists of creditors may be available in the probate records. All sorts of unexpected documents can show up in the packets none of which should be overlooked. If the deceased's property doesn't show up in probate court, it may mean that the property was not worth probate. However, that assumption may be wrong. They may have been filed in an adjoining county, or assets may have been disposed of before death to avoid probate.

## **HISTORIES**

Local and regional histories often describe the wealth and living conditions of workers. They may describe the amount of land, or identify the business, a person may have owned. They may also provide the married name of a daughter you haven't been able to locate. There may be a short history of the family you are researching, providing as much as three or even four generations of a family.

## **CITY DIRECTORIES**

Often we don't know where someone lived. Even if they weren't wealthy, they may be found in a city directory and their place of employment may be identified. A woman may show up as widowed, when you didn't know her husband had died. Once you have an address for the individual, use the cross index by address to see who the individual was living with one year before the year of the directory publication date.

## **CONCLUSION**

Poor people aren't the easiest people to locate, but they may have appeared in a record you never thought to look in.

## **REFERENCE:**

Morton, Sunny Jane. "Their Loss, Our Gain." *Family Tree Magazine*, May/June 2014, 48-53.

Carolyn H. Brown  
PO Box 16  
Bouse, AZ 85325  
[geniecarol@gmail.com](mailto:geniecarol@gmail.com)