

A “Hand-out” for Your Poor Ancestors

Diane L. Richard looks at how North Carolina parishes and counties stepped up to offer relief

Providing relief to those in need is not a modern concept. All through history, the records reflect the providing of assistance or relief to those in need. Whether one receives food, dispensation to not pay taxes, is apprenticed and/or orphaned, receives support money for a bastard child, is hospitalized in a sanitarium, etc., they have been the recipient of some form of relief for the poor.

Beginning in the late 1700s,

the United States saw the creation of county poorhouses and poor farms; though, not all counties built them. They provided assistance to the impoverished and the infirm.

Relief to the poor was provided via many different resources and programs through time. This article focuses on elements of the North Carolina system of poor relief to give you a glimpse into how this was handled in one state. Similar records probably exist for your state.

Whether the provider of such services is through a Poor Relief committee, Wardens of the Poor, a local church, a benevolent society, a state supported and run service or whichever entity, there were records created since money was involved. Whether funding was provided to an entity to then provide goods and services or whether actual money was distributed to those in need, it all had to be accounted for!

RECORDS & LAW

As with most types of records, you may not find those for poor relief all in one place. For example, in North Carolina, many, though not all, of the records can be found by searching/looking for “Wardens of the Poor” in the catalog for the North Carolina Archives, <http://mars.archives.ncdcr.gov/BasicSearch.aspx>. Recognize that this doesn’t mean that the records were all neatly collected for us in one place – you may have to look in several places with regards to your target records.

We are fortunate that nowadays we don’t necessarily have to leave home to learn about the

law regarding relief for the poor. By understanding the law of the time and some historical context, we know where to look for records and also about what types of records might be extant. Here are some resources that help us better understand the NC system of poor relief through time.

- Public Poor Relief in Colonial North Carolina, www.ncpublications.com/colonial/Nchr/Subjects/watson1.htm
- Poverty (NCPedia), <http://ncpedia.org/poverty> – includes Part 1 - Introduction, Part 2 - Public Charity in the Colonial Era and Through the Nineteenth Century, and Part 3 - Statewide Public Welfare Initiatives and the Modern Division of Social Services
- Change in Law - Overseers of the poor become wardens of the poor (1777), <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr24-0013#p24-498>
- North Carolina Parishes, www.ncgenweb.us/nash/parishes/north-carolina-parishes
- Ante-Bellum North Carolina: A Social History (Chapter XXIII The Care of Unfortunates), <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/johnson/chapter23.html>

- Poor Relief – North Carolina, North Carolina State Board of Charities and Public Welfare (1925), <http://archive.org/details/poorreliefinnort00brow>
- County Poor Farms: A Different Sort of Social Security in North Carolina, <http://digginforclues.blogspot.com/2014/01/county-poor-farms-different-sort-of.html>
- Handbook of Mothers' Aid, North Carolina State Board of Charities and Public Welfare (1926), <http://archive.org/details/handbookonmother00nort>
- (NC) State Agency Finding Aid: Emergency Relief Administration, 1934-1940, <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm/singleitem/collection/p16062coll15/id/1405/rec/2>
- (NC) State Agency Finding Aid: Social Services, 1889-1976, <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm/singleitem/collection/p16062coll15/id/1436/rec/1>

So, you suspect that your ancestors weren't well off since you don't find them paying taxes, owning land, having estate records, etc. Though it may be that these records don't exist for your ancestors, you may alternately find a clue such as a dispensation in the court minutes stating that your ancestor doesn't need to pay taxes, etc.

What kinds of records might you find?

EXAMPLES OF POOR LAW RECORDS

Remember that though a law may apply across a state, such as North Carolina, this does not mean that the paperwork created by each county was the "same" or that it even survives. Additionally, it's not like all of a sudden, poor houses (or their equivalent) were created across the state. As need arose, poor houses were legislated and subsequently constructed.

We also find that the colonial government or subsequent state legislature may create an "opportunity" for poor relief and it is then up to each parish and subsequently county to implement such or choose not to. Each responsible entity then created its own system of addressing the mandated or legislated needs. Because of this, you may find different kinds of extant documentation and records. Again, you may also find no records because they have been lost through time or because that parish or county did not yet provide or chose never to provide some of the possible, at the time, poor relief.

And, once a poor house was in operation, since they were somewhat autonomous, the

records kept and the detail of such varies dramatically. Some clerks were quite "wordy" in their entries whereas others were quite minimalist. Remember, they knew what was going on and mostly were just concerned with making sure that the books balanced for when audited!

Now let's look at a few examples of types of poor relief records found for NC. These examples only cover select types of relief provided to the poor.

Early Colonial

We find payments for accommodating impotent and indigent individuals for a period of

time up through their death. Early records can be a challenge to find and they do confirm that even very early on, ecclesiastical or similar entities seemed to bear the burden on assisting the poor.

Here are two examples from 1708:

- William Walston accommodated Elenor Kirkham "eighteen days, being sick and impotent and there died and was buried at the petitioners charge."
- Madam Mary Blount accommodated "poor, indigent man Thomas Wright at her house, in his sickness one week, whereof he died and was buried at her charge."

Ordered that Phillis Dicks, widow of John Dicks, be paid by the publick the sum of two pounds besides what he hath been allowed and paid by the publick for his work on the Chapel.

On the petition of William Walston shewing that Elenor Kirkham was accommodated at the petitioner's Eighteen days, being sick and impotent and there died and was buried at the petitioners charge having no Estate prays allowance, &c.

And he presenting no account

Ordered that he appear at the next Vestry and present his account.

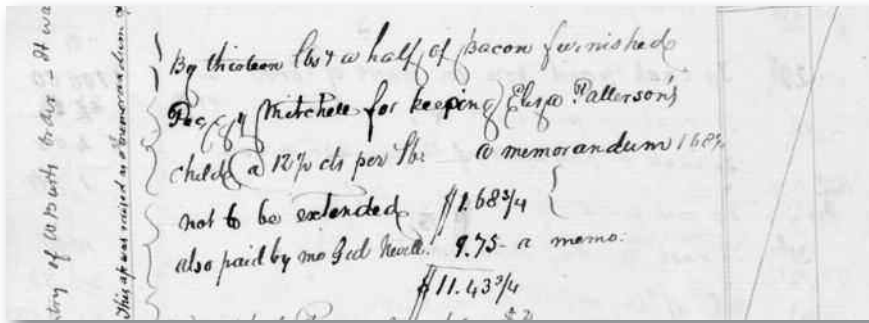
On petition of Madam Mary Blount for accommodating a poor, indigent man named Thomas Wright at her house, in his sickness one Week, whereof he died and was buried at her charge, prays allowance.

Ordered that she be paid by the public forty shillings

Ordered that the Hon^{ble} Col. Thomas Pollock and John Ardern Esq^r shall be Church-Wardens for the Year ensuing.

Ordered that Mr. Nicholas Crisp agree with to officiate as a Reader in the Chapel for Nine pound pr. Annum to execute in that Office and also as Clerk of the Vestry, and Mr. Nich^l Crisp doth promise to give notice to the Inhabitants of the time when he shall begin upon that Employment.

Two examples of early colonial payments from 1708 for William Watson and Mary Blount. (Minutes of the Vestry of St. Paul's Parish, Chowan Precinct, April 18, 1708. (<http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr01-0354>)



Payment to Peggy Mitchell for food stuffs relating to the care of Eliza Patterson's child. (UNC-CH, The Southern Historical Collection, Collection Number: 00389-z, Collection Title: Robert A. Jones Account Book, 1817-1828. Folder 1: Account Book, Scan 290, Page 361)

Early 19th Century

We continue to find payments for accommodating indigent individuals and we also find types of relief where basic food stuffs, such as bacon, are provided to support those in need. For example (above), "thirteen lbs & a half of bacon furnished Peggy Mitchell for keeping Eliza Patterson's child."

Civil War

During the civil war, as confederate soldiers went off to fight, they often left behind wives and young children unable to adequately provide for themselves. In some counties in North Carolina, provisions were furnished to these "families of volunteers" in the form of bacon, beef, flour and other staples.

In this example (right), Mrs. Samuel Jordan received regular rations over a period of a few years as her husband Samuel served in the Confederate Army. I have my suspicions that Samuel's involvement in the war was not necessarily of his choice, as was his marriage just as he was entering service, and he still volunteered and his wife and young children were eligible for provisions. Here is a small listing of what she received in 1863:

10 Sept	33lbs bacon
2 Oct	10lbs bacon
29 Oct	18lbs bacon
14 Nov	16lbs beef
1 Dec	20lbs beef
25 Sept	25lbs flour
13 Nov	72lbs flour
5 Dec	15lbs flour

Immediate Post Civil War

The Freedmen's Bureau, as a Federally run program, also provided poor relief in the form of rations, typically corn and pork in NC. From 1865-1868, in NC,

once declared poor, destitute, landless, infirm or in some form of need, rations were provided to families – soldiers' widows, children and parents, and freedmen and their families were all eligible.

These records come in the form of applications, lists, affidavits, and more. On 15 June 1867, Elizabeth Gardener and Polena Franklyn, two women with seven children, of Burke, "are in absolute need of food, to prevent starvation and extreme want, rendered so by ..." husbands died in the army leaving us destitute. As a result, they received 44 lbs of pork and 308 lbs of corn (see next page top left).

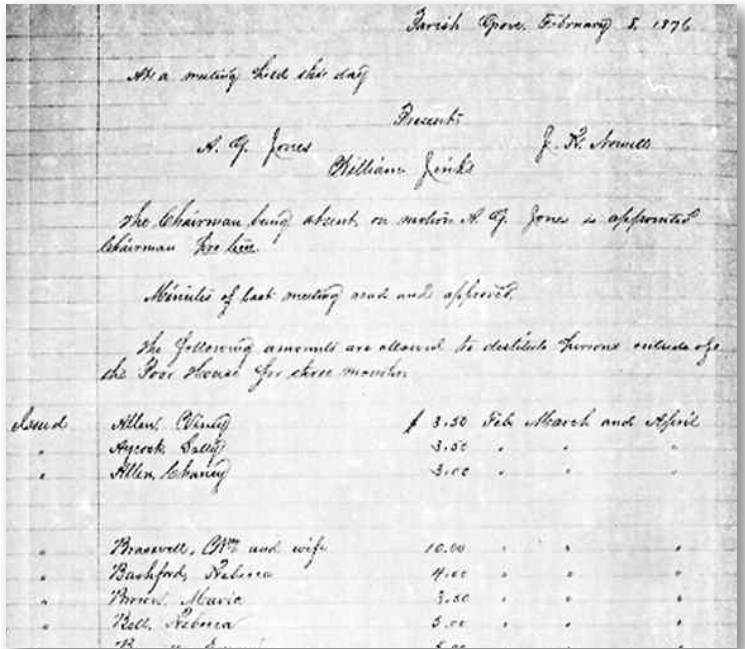
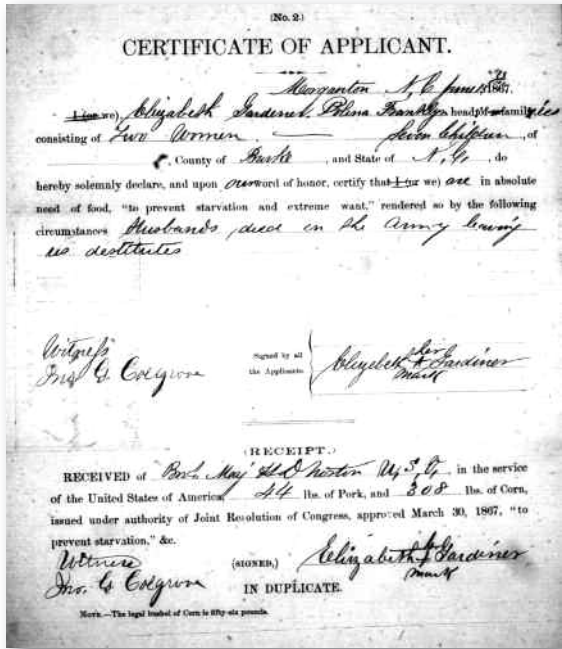
Late 18th Century

And, with other records, it often seems that the more modern the record (at least in the 1800s), the more minimalist they became. See the example on the next page (top right) of an 1876 poor house record for Wake County and it's just columns of names

Provisions furnished the indigent families of volunteers in a part of District No 2 By 15 miles from Dept to (Dur Court)

Sept 10	Mrs Samuel Jordan	33 Bacon	9/-	\$ 49 50
Oct 2	"	" 10 "	" "	15 00
29 "	"	" 18 "	" 12/-	36 00
Nov 14	"	" 16 Beef	62 1/2	10 00
Dec 1	"	" 20 "	" "	12 50
Jan 35	"	" 52 lbs flour	17 1/2	9 29
Feb 13	"	" 72 "	" "	12 87
Mar 5	"	" 15 "	" "	2 67
				\$147 83

Rations received by Mrs. Samuel Jordan in 1863. (Northampton County, Provisions Furnished Indigent Families, ND, 1861-1865, C.R.071.928.9, Folder: 1863, NC Archives, Raleigh, NC)



LEFT: Poor relief application from Elizabeth Gardener and Polena Franklyn. (M1909 Records of Field Offices for the State of North Carolina, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1872, Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 2004, Roll 32, Target 1, Applications for Rations, June-July 1867, Burke County — all labeled Morganton, June 15, 1867.)
 RIGHT: Example of a poor house record for Wake County. (Wake County Poor House Records, 1876, page 166 — NC Archives, Raleigh, NC [accessed via microfilm at Olivia Raney Local History Library, ORL – C.099.90063])

and payments. Though, you can still see if your ancestor is listed!

Allen, Viney	\$3.50	Feb March and April
Aycok, Sally	\$3.50	" "
Allen, Chaney	\$3.50	" "
Braswell, Wm & Wife	\$10.00	" "
Bashford, Rebecca	\$4.00	" "
Brown, Maria	\$3.50	" "
Bell, Rebecca	\$4.00	" "
etc.		

Mothers' Aid (1923+)

Though we know that in 1923, aid commenced to be provided to certain in need mothers in NC, as it had already been provided around the world and in all except 6 US states, no records have been found regarding this program in NC beyond those found enumerated in newspapers.

Some of the NC counties did publish in the newspaper information about mothers who were receiving aid.

Rockingham Post-Dispatch, 7 Feb 1924, pg 14

- Mrs. Ettie McCot,
November allowance for
mothers' aid 20.00
- Mrs. Clydie Watson,
November allowance for
mothers' aid fund 15.00
- Mrs. Katherine Jones,
November allowance for
mothers' aid fund 10.00

This was just a small sampling of the types of records that might be found documenting relief to the poor. Hopefully these have given you some ideas of the types of records that might survive regarding your own ancestors!

Let's look at one family who for a few years was only documented in poor relief records.

The Merritt Family + Poor Relief

In researching the Merritt family in Sampson County NC, it became very clear that you had the "haves" and "have nots". Of course, I was researching the latter.

After looking at a lot of records and not finding my target person except in Court Minutes for 1813 when he was bound as an apprentice, I decided to look through the surviving Wardens of the Poor records. Though I did not find a mention of my target person, Gibson Merritt, I did find mentioned, in the same year, two other Merritts (Drewry and Haywood) receiving aid. Though I could never find any documentation to "connect" these individuals as siblings, the "timing" of their entries in the Wardens of the Poor is very suggestive that they were related. Additionally, census and other subsequent research partially substantiates this, in that

Drewry had a grandson and great grandson both named Gibson [a not common forename at the time].

This table snippet (right) summarizes some of the Wardens of the Poor records found for this family – Drewry and Haywood are mentioned for several years, under different individuals. By the 1820s, Gibson is off to TN, Drewry remained in the Sampson area and Haywood continued to be a bit of a mystery.

If I had not researched these records, I wouldn't have made any connection to Drewry and Haywood and followed their families to help flesh out how they might be connected and forced me to be even more "exhaustive" in my hunt for extant records!

Hopefully you now have a better appreciation for what you might learn from these types of records. As today, not everyone is in a position to provide food and shelter to themselves nor their families, whether temporarily or for a more extended period of time. Look into these records for your ancestors, especially during an economic downturn, after a disaster or when you just can't seem to find any other record for them. ☞☞☞



DIANE L. RICHARD has been doing genealogy research since 1987. She is currently editor of *Upfront with NGS, North Carolina*

Genealogical Society Journal and Wake Treasures (Journal of the Wake County Genealogical Society) and a professional genealogy and family historian researcher, speaker, and writer. She can be found online at www.mosaicrpm.com. (Or scan the QR code with your mobile phone or tablet device.)



Date	Place	Gibson	Drew/Drewry/Drury	Haywood	Other Merritts	Other Players	Notes
1806 (Feb Ct 1810)	Sampson				Robert Merritt allowance [1]		
1807	Sampson				Ordered that Jacob Merritt be allowed \$9 for keeping a child of Lally/Sally Merritt, three months in the year 1807 [2] [3] court minutes for any "Merritt" estate before 1813 [7]		
1813 (Feb)	Sampson (NC)	Bound as an apprentice [4] [5] [6]					
1813 (Sept Term)	Sampson		Nothial Merritt receive \$ for keeping Haywood and Drewry Merritt from this term until Nov Term [8]				
1813 (Oct Term)	Sampson		Ordered that Drew and Haywood Merritt be entered as Parishioners – set up for 6 months until May Court 1814 and Nothial Merritt to be keeping them the above time [9]				

[1] Sampson County, Vestry Minutes, Wardens of the Poor, 1785-1824; 1 volume
 [2] Sampson County, Vestry Minutes, Wardens of the Poor, 1785-1824; 1 volume
 [3] For Sampson County, only bastardy bonds/records for 1835-1924 survive ... too late to be helpful
 [4] Sampson Court, Feb 1813 "Merritt bound: Ordered that Gibson Merritt, about 15, be bound unto John Boyette till he becomes 21 and that he be given 12 months of schooling." (It appears that John Boyette died within 2 years of this date – according to the NC archives staff, if Gibson was not going to become a burden to the county, they may not have re-faced him in another apprenticeship.) (This Gibson was born c. 1798 ... a few years off the birth year suggested by the 1850-1860 census, though the idea of being apprenticed is consistent with the letter he came to TN with and that he was a woodworker/carpenter.)
 [5] No apprentice records for Sampson County survive
 No estate file survives for John Boyette, to whom a Gibson Merritt was apprenticed
 [6] No Sampson County apprentice records survive – only court minute references
 [7] only 2 found.
 + Absolon -- 1809 -- a division of land -- unlikely that he would be the father of someone apprenticed
 + Frederick -- survived by wife Beilana, a bond of 2000 pounds was posted -- not a poor family, appears to have a brother Daniel.
 [8] Sampson County, Vestry Minutes, Wardens of the Poor, 1785-1824; 1 volume
 [9] Sampson County, Vestry Minutes, Wardens of the Poor, 1785-1824; 1 volume

Snippet from a timeline created by Diane L. Richard to illustrate found information on the Merritt family.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Since the terminology for how or what entity provided "relief" to our ancestors in need was not the same, spend some time learning about the history of poor relief laws and service provisions for the community you are researching. Understanding the law, and who provided such services, will guide you to those record groups and repositories where you need to commence your search. Here are some non-NC specific resources regarding poor relief that might help you get started researching the locale relevant to your research.

Ancestry.com, Poorhouse Records (article),

www.ancestry.com/cs/learning/20111120PoorhouseMP

Cyndi's List: Poorhouses & Poverty, www.cyndislist.com/poor

The Poorhouse Story, www.poorhousestory.com

Almshouse & Poorhouse Records, www.olivetreegenealogy.com/almshouse

Poor Relief and Almshouse, Dr. David Wagner (via Disability History Museum), www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/edu/essay.html?id=60

Poor Laws of the Post-Revolutionary South, 1776-1800, James W. Ely Jr, Tulsa Law Review (Volume 21, Issue 1), <http://digitalcommons.law.utulsa.edu/cjg/viewcontent.cgi?article=1716&context=tlr>

The Freedmen's Bureau Records – Research Your Southern Ancestors, www.archives.com/experts/richard-l-diane/the-freedmens-bureau-records.html – providing rations was one of the forms of relief handled by this Bureau in the immediate post-Civil War time period

Introduction to the Study of the Dependent, Defective, and Delinquent Classes: And of Their Social Treatment (1901), <http://books.google.com/books?id=N7Qhs2N4Zz4C>

Southern Charities Project (Warwick University, UK), <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/southerncharitiesproject> – the database encompasses select southern states

Laws relating to "Mothers' pensions" in the United States, Denmark and New Zealand, by United States. Children's Bureau; Laura Amelia Thompson (1914), <http://archive.org/details/lawsrelatingtomo00unit>