

Saint John Almshouse Records

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About the records

The records of a number of institutions provide insight to the challenges faced by New Brunswick, particularly port communities during the waves of immigration New Brunswick experienced in the 19th century. There is a connectivity among these records which paints a striking picture of immigrant circumstances. This connection is due in no small part to the movement of people among the institutions and the changing responsibilities of the St. John City¹ and County Almshouse, as other institutions were established or closed to deal with specific aspects of the immigration challenge.

Such records include the admission records of the St. John City and County Almshouse and Work House, together with the admission records of the Emigrant Infirmary and the St. John Emigrant Orphan Asylum—both established to accommodate the overflow at the Almshouse occasioned by the massive influx of poor during the Great Hunger of the 1840s. While the records of each of these institutions constitute an invaluable source for genealogical and biographical research, it was not the intention of the original record keepers to perpetuate historical information but rather to manage the process of assisting immigrants and substantiate the swelling expenditures to a citizenry and a local government, which were increasingly outraged by the burden which fell to them. The overarching concern of the Almshouse record keeper was to establish the eligibility of each individual admitted and to establish who exactly was liable for that individual's upkeep.² The earliest of the Almshouse records are somewhat idiosyncratic in terms of content but by the early 1850s—at which point both the Emigrant Infirmary and the Orphan Asylum had ceased to operate—a standardized record keeping system had been adopted. The names of individuals granted admission to the Almshouse were recorded chronologically in one of three sections—one for adult males, another for adult females and a third for children—in an annual record of inmates. On 1 January of each year, the names of those residing in the House on 31 December of the previous year were simply transferred into a new account. If, for instance, an individual admitted on 2 March 1866 remained in the House until 23 June 1868, the admission records would contain three separate records for that individual: one each for 1866, 1867 and 1868. For virtually every individual admitted after January 1, 1851—and for the majority admitted prior to that date—particulars were commonly noted under the following categories: Date of Admission, Name, Age, Religion, Place of Birth, Condition (or Reason for Admittance), Parish of Residence (at the time of admission), Date of Discharge (and reason for discharge) and Comments

¹ The spelling of Saint John, St. John has changed over time. The longest recognized standard is St. John for the County and Saint John for the city.

² The level of government or jurisdiction responsible for costs associated with anyone admitted to the Alms House was based on their last previous residence.

(including exact duration of stay). For more information on these and other fields which were included in the database, and the transcription methods used, see “General Procedures” and “Field specific information.”

Transcription of the records:

The data has been compiled into 33908 entries comprised of 25 fields. Every effort has been made to include all of the information provided in the originals and to transcribe it as it appears in the originals. However, in order to improve user access to the extremely variant and extensive information contained in these records some content was standardized in format. For example, multiple spellings denoting one ship’s name have all been changed to the correct spelling so that searches provide users with the most accurate and complete results.

Users can verify the transcribed results with the provided scan of the original page. The steps taken to transcribe the data and enhance the utility of the search functions are outlined below.

General procedures:

Field headings

Column headings, appearing horizontally along the top of the original volumes, often varied in name, depending on the record year/book, but the column continued to record the same information. For the purposes of the database one consistent field name had to be selected for each column, regardless of year. Therefore, the field names chosen for use in the database were selected to best reflect the content recorded, taking into consideration the multiple headings used for each field in the originals.

Some fields have also been adapted from the original format. For example, the fields of *Died* and *Discharged* appear as separate columns in the original but in the database have been entered in one column entitled *Died/Discharged*. For further information on adaptations of fields refer to the “Field specific procedures,” section below.

Place names

Differences caused by careless, illegible and phonetic writing have been maintained. Spellings, variation in location names, and inaccurate entries have been maintained, with one exception, *Where Landed* (see “Field specific information”).

Individual’s names

Many of those admitted to the facility in the early decades of its existence were illiterate or semiliterate, and the literacy levels of those recording the information only slightly better. Many were Irish speakers

with only a passing knowledge of English or spoke with a thick brogue, more or less unintelligible to the Almshouse record keeper. These factors explain, in part, the inconsistencies in spelling which appear very frequently in the Almshouse records. Even in cases where a particular inmate is clearly identified, one often encounters inconsistencies in the way individuals appear in the records over the course of an extended period. For example an inmate recorded on first admission as “Mary Ann Murphy” might appear in subsequent references as “Mary Murphy”, “May Murphy”, “Mamie Murphy” or even “Ann” or “Annie Murphy”. In a great many cases, children born in the Almshouse to unmarried mothers were recorded with a surname different from that of their mother. In such instances, the identity of the father had been disclosed or acknowledged—sometimes by force of law with a charge of “bastardy”—and, in some instances, by the mother – to assign liability for the upkeep of the child to the father. A thorough examination of the Almshouse financial records will often reveal the forenames of such fathers together with the exact amounts paid for upkeep.

Repetitions exist due to re-admission of individuals, individuals who were “transferred” in the record book at the end of a year (they remained in the Almshouse), or individuals who were recorded in more than one of the institutions encompassed by the database.

Within the original records the surname and given name were recorded in one field, in the following format: “Firstname Lastname.” This field has been divided into two fields, *Surname* and *Given Names* to improve the functionality of the database for users.

Titles and descriptors - Mr, Mrs, Jr, Widow, etc, have been entered within the *Given Names* field within brackets. Example: McDevitt, Martha (Mrs). In cases where a title is provided but a *Given Name* is not the title takes its place. (Example: McDevitt, Mrs.)

Recapitulations

The Almshouse registers record male, female and child residents of the house separately by year. At the close of the male, female and child records for each year Almshouse record keepers tallied up statistical information regarding inmates of the house. Today these aggregates provide useful insight into the makeup of the Almshouse over time. Information recorded often included the number of adult male and female residents and the number of child residents who remained in the

house from the previous year and were newly admitted to the house each year. The records denote births and consider these children emigrants. The number of residents within each sub-group affected by cholera and other diseases was recorded as was where in New Brunswick they originated. Scans and transcripts of the originals are available for independent viewing under the “Aggregates” link. These recapitulations were not recorded in standardized form and have been transcribed as they appear in the original.

“Entry crossed out” This denotes that the record was entirely or partially crossed out of the original. Such records were entered in the database anyway, but if one of these entries pertains to your search you may want to consult the scan of the original to identify what portions of said entry are crossed out.

“Entry Reads...” This statement appears in the *Note* field of entries containing aberrations from the usual column in which information was recorded. In these cases we moved data into the proper/more appropriate fields to improve search results and accessibility of information. Such entries are followed by the entry as it appears in the original. Again users can consult the scans of the originals for comparison purposes.

Square brackets [] The use of square brackets denotes illegible text, the transcribers interpretation of text or the transcribers additional notes. It is usually self evident, but as always, refer to the original.

Ditto marks “ The use of short hand and ditto marks or “Do” in reference to a repetitious term, was common place in the original records. As a result entries wherein fields contained ditto marks or “Do” have been filled in with the appropriate information in place of the ditto marks.

Field specific information:

Date of Admission Signifies the date on which an individual was admitted to the Almshouse. Entered as YYYY.MM.DD

The names of those granted admission to the Almshouse were recorded in chronological order by date of admission. As already indicated, names recorded on 1 January of any given year were those of individuals remaining in the house on 31 December of the previous year. The first name entered in each of the three sections—for adult males, adult females and children—on 1 January of each year, was that of the

individual in that category who had been in the Almshouse longest. The names of children born in the House were recorded in the children's section of the annual account for the year of their birth and on the exact date of their birth.

Admitted by Signifies the individual responsible for admitting each person to the Almshouse, usually a Commissioner. The majority of these entries are transcribed in the abbreviated form of the responsible person's name, the same way it appears in the original.

Surname Typically records individual's last name. However, "unknown" may appear. No attempt has been made to correct discrepancies in the original caused by human error or illegible and phonetic spelling.

Given names Typically records individual's first name. However, "unknown" may appear. No attempt has been made to correct discrepancies in the original caused by human error or illegible and phonetic spelling.

Age Provides age of individual admitted. The age recorded at first admission for any particular inmate is that *claimed* by the individual. It is highly unlikely that individuals were required to prove their age and, in many instances, the exact age would have been unknown even to the party concerned. Since old age—and concomitant infirmities—were accepted as criteria for admission to the Almshouse, it is likely that, at least in some cases, individuals intentionally overstated their age in order to increase their eligibility for admission. Researchers will not necessarily find individuals aging in the records at the rate of one year per year of residency.

The original records consisted of one field in which various forms of ages were entered, including years, months, days, and weeks, often being represented in fraction form, for example 6/12, meaning 6 months old. Therefore, this field was broken down into *Age in Years*, *Age in Months* and *Age in Days* to better reflect the manner in which information was entered in the original and to improve search results.

Any ages provided in weeks were converted to *Age in Days*, or if large enough, *Age in Months*. Also, if large enough, days and fractions were converted to *Age in Months* and *Age in Days* respectively.

Condition

Contains remarks concerning the condition, state, or circumstances of individuals upon arrival. Entries span from medical conditions such as “fever,” “smallpox,” and “dysentery” to socio-economic labeling of individuals as “destitute.” While some of these are common entries others occur less frequently and vary greatly.

Among adult males admitted to the Almshouse, the most common “conditions” or reasons for admission recorded include various types of illness and physical disability. Among women and children, poverty—occasioned in most instances by the loss, due to death, injury or abandonment, of the primary male breadwinner—was most often cited. Only those deemed to be among the “deserving poor” were granted admission to the Almshouse. This categorically excluded all able-bodied males.

Often information contained in the original under this field was not reflective of condition per se, but consisted of notes entered by the record keeper. Such information has been moved to the comments field. This includes information regarding confinements and births.

Many entries under condition were repetitive, using the same terms again and again, often in a different order, or with different spellings or abbreviations. Therefore, the spelling and formatting of such entries has been standardized so as to improve search results.

Many of these entries contain sensitive information and at times use terms of the period which would now be considered prejudiced and biased, such as “idiot,” “lazy,” “drunk,” etc. The attitude and perceptions of the era should be taken into account when considering this data as well as the socio-economic status of both the individuals being recorded and the person and institute keeping the records.

Date Landed

Records the date on which the individual arrived at the location referred to in *Where Landed*. Entered as YYYY.MM.DD

Where Landed

Records the arrival point for the vessel on which the individual took passage. Variations in spelling were not maintained; rather the correct spelling was used for entry into the database, so that users could easily find all results for one location.

Religion

Identifies the religious affiliation of the admitted individual. The most obvious and benign motive for noting the religious affiliation of those admitted was in order to determine the pastoral needs of the House. During much of the nineteenth Century, many New Brunswick born Protestant Saint Johners regarded poor Irish Catholic immigrants and their dependants as interlopers and bitterly resented the burden that their maintenance in facilities like the County Almshouse represented to the local tax system. The prevalence of this attitude, together with the growing concern on the part of Catholic leaders that publicly funded charitable institutions such as the St. John County Almshouse and Work House represented a threat to the religious faith of Catholics, eventually led to the establishment in Saint John of St. Vincent's Catholic Orphan Asylum—and later of St. Patrick's Industrial School—and, in 1888, of the Mater Misericordiae Hospital and Home (for the aged).

Abbreviated forms appear in the originals but are entered in unabridged form in the database.

"Catholic" and "C" appear in the originals and have been entered in the database as "Catholic".

"Mohammedan" and other similarly spelled entries exist. These denote individuals belonging or relating to Islam.

Parish

Typically records the civil Parish an individual lived in prior to being admitted to the Almshouse. Information in this field is not strictly limited to parishes. Entries also include "Portland Almhouse," "Portland Alms," "St. John County Almshouse," "St. John Co. Almshouse," "City Infirmary," "Yorke," "Yorke Point," etc. Almost certainly the single most accurate piece of information recorded for each inmate was his or her parish of residence at the time of admission. This was the case because each parish was liable for the support of its own poor and, from time to time, Almshouse officials were required to substantiate charges levelled against a parish by demonstrating the number of "parish poor" resident in the house and the number of days each had been in the facility (see "Time in house").

Time in house

Typically records the number of days an individual spent in the Almshouse.

Vessel Records the name of the vessel on which the individual arrived. This field does not exist in all originals. Often the vessels name was entered in the *Notes* field, and was moved by transcribers to the *Vessel* field so as to improve access to the information in the entries.

Vessel names have been standardized in order to create a list of vessels which were recorded. Therefore, spelling errors/inconsistencies were not maintained in this field.

Vessel Type This field does not exist in the original records. Rather, the data was gleaned from either the *Vessel* or *Remarks* fields where such information was sometimes recorded. It was compiled in order to draw the data out of the original in a more accessible fashion.

Master This field does not exist in the original records. Yet this data was often found in other fields in the original, such as the *Vessel* or *Remarks* field. This compiled data records the name of the Captain of the ship on which the individual arrived.

Died or Discharged Typically indicates whether the individual was discharged from the Almshouse or died. The original consisted of two fields, "Died" and "Discharged," which were combined because individuals would have information in only one of these columns. Other entries found here include "in house," "left off E list," "emigration list," "off emgt list," "off list," "transfer," "transferred," "transferred to record book," etc.

Date of Death or Discharged Records the date on which individual died, was discharged, etc., entered as YYYY.MM.DD

In the case of the numerous individuals who died in the Almshouse, the date of death, and, in many instances, the place of burial was duly noted. Otherwise, except for the fairly detailed information recorded regarding the "placing out" of children as servants, little additional comment regarding the particular circumstances beyond the date of departure from the Almshouse was noted.

Remarks Typically records personal information, details of incidents, employment, status, where individuals went after discharge, etc. The content in this field is extremely diverse in nature.

It should be noted that for the purposes of this online database this field also contains information that appeared in other columns in the original. This information has been moved because it was not consistent with the purpose of the original column and moving it would assist searching by users. Example: Within the *Condition* field information regarding confinements and births was often recorded. This information has been moved to the *Notes* field

Occasionally, a researcher will be shocked to find written in the comment column for their ancestor's name the word "idiot"—or "useless"—or related to discover a comment regarding a degree of kinship between this and another inmate.

Place of origin

Records the broader place of birth. This field does not exist in the original as the original field entitled "Place of Nativity" was divided for our purposes into two fields, *Place of origin* and *Nativity* in order to deal with circumstance where two locations were provided, one being a larger locale such as a county or country and the other being a more specific location within it. In circumstances where both a broad and specific location are provided this field records the broader of the two.

Nativity

The intent of this field was to record place of birth or origin. In circumstances where only one locale is provided it appears in this field. In circumstances where both a broad and specific location are provided the more specific locale given is provided here.

Ordinarily, for each individual admitted to the Almshouse, the county of birth—whether in New Brunswick, England, Ireland or elsewhere—was noted. That such details were recorded at all reflects the overarching concern of Almshouse officials to determine financial liability for the upkeep of the poor. In instances where legal residency was in question, place of birth might be invoked as a determinant (particularly if the individual was born in New Brunswick).

Reference

This contains the archival reference for each record within the holdings of the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick.

Page

Refers to the upper left hand corner numbering of the original. In some record books each facing page was individually numbered while in others facing pages were assigned the same page number. Therefore for the

sake of consistency the upper left hand corner page number of said facing pages has been used as a reference in all circumstances.