

The “County Home”

January 22, 2009 by macwhatley



From The Courier, Asheboro, North Carolina, June 8, 1922:

“The new county home which has been under construction for the past few months has been completed. The home is built on the land which the county commissioners purchased of Mr. R.J. Hopkins, a mile outside the corporate limits of Asheboro on the highway leading from Washington to Atlanta. The cost of the buildings are \$28,000, heating \$4,100, plumbing and water \$3,000. The farm cost \$8,500. The total cost of the new county home is \$43,600.

Superintendent N.H. Ferguson and his family together with the old inmates of the county home moved about the middle of May. There are fifteen white and five colored inmates. The entire equipment, bedding, and everything used is new. The cost of the furniture, etc., has not yet been estimated. Randolph County can boast of having one of the best county homes in North Carolina. It is modern and up-to-date in every respect. This is the second county home that Randolph County has ever had. The old location was purchased between 1860 and 1870. The old location was purchased by Governor Jonathan Worth.

Governor Jonathan Worth, who as a representative in the legislature from Randolph County in 1854 and '56, introduced a bill providing for the erection of a penitentiary in North Carolina and for every county to have a county home. There was a great deal of dissatisfaction over this but it soon became so popular that Dr. [sic- "Dr." John Milton Worth was the Governor's brother] Worth's fight in the legislature resulted in his election as the governor of North Carolina.

Randolph County within a few years after that arranged for the purchase of the old location and the erection of the first county home. The influence which probably prompted Gov. Worth to use his influence in the legislature was a visit of Dorothy Dixon [sic- Dorothea Dix] to North Carolina, who went about in the interest of humanity recommending the caring for criminals and unfortunate people. Up until that time there had never been any fires in the jails of North Carolina, and Judge Tourgee, who was presiding in this district, ordered that fires be built in the jails for the comfort of the prisoners.

Randolph has needed the new county home for many years."



This article is priceless for its contemporary description of the County Home, a building which has only been progressively less respected as time has passed.

My 1978 survey and 1985 book did not include the County Home because it was then barely 60 years old, even though it had (and still has) great architectural interest.

To speak to a few of the writer's historical non sequiturs: Judge Albion W. Tourgee was one of North Carolina's most famous (back in the day, they would have said 'notorious') Reconstruction Era carpetbaggers. A New York native who served with the Union army in the South and later settled in Greensboro, he served as a Superior Court Judge for the Piedmont district and actually wrote North Carolina's first Code of Civil Procedure. It may well be true that Judge Tourgee first ordered that the cells of the Randolph County jail be heated. Why this historical tidbit merited inclusion in this article is unclear, unless the writer somehow conflated the county jail and the county home, even though they had always been separate.

The claims about Gov. Jonathan Worth's central role in reforming the system of poor relief seems more suspect. I have not found in published contemporary legal books any revisions of the poor laws from the 1854-56 session of the legislature. Worth's "influence," as a member of the House of Commons at that time, would have been minimal compared to his service as wartime Treasurer and as Governor from 1865-68. Worth was removed as Governor by the military supervisor of the Carolinas, and his political enemy W.W. Holden was installed as governor. The Constitution of 1868, written by men such as A.W. Tourgee, was passed almost immediately upon Worth's removal from office, and it did make some substantial changes to the "poor law."

Worth would have been very supportive of the relief of indigent people, as this had been for hundreds of years a central concern of all Quakers. As Governor, in fact, Worth faced unprecedented numbers of needy constituents who had been beggared by the war, and had to deal with distributing donations sent to the state for their support. "Finding it impossible to attend to the proper dispensation of the donations committed to my charge for the use of the indigent of this State," Worth wrote to A.U. Tomlinson on May 15, 1867, "I obtained the consent of...the ministers of the four principal churches in this city, to take the labor off my hands. All that has been committed to my charge, they have control over." [*Correspondence of Gov. Jonathan Worth, 1909, quoted in Randolph County, 1779-1979, p. 92*] Tomlinson, of Bush Hill, had complained that Worth had "overlooked" the needy of Randolph County; the harassed Governor responded that "There has been neither carelessness nor improper discrimination in the distribution of this bounty—but for want of proper information... If Randolph has been overlooked it must be attributed to the failure of the authorities to report its needs..."

Indigent relief had in fact been considered a function of local county government since the constitution of 1777, when "An Act Providing for the Support of the Poor" was passed by the General Assembly. The Act was later codified as Chapter 89 in the Revised Statutes of North Carolina (1837), and as Chapter 86 of the Revised Code (1855). The revisions of 1868 were codified as Chapter 88 of Battle's Revisal (1873).

From 1777 to 1846 seven "Wardens of the Poor" were elected by "the freemen... of every county" meeting together at the courthouse on Easter Monday. The Court of Wardens were charged with the "maintenance of the poor," and from 1817 could support them through the imposition of a Poor Tax, which the County Justices could levy. In 1831 the Justices in each county were authorized "when they deem necessary" to buy

land and to “cause to be erected poor houses and other out buildings for the... support of the poor.” The Wardens were responsible for the oversight of the Poor House, but its actual daily operation was “annually let out to the lowest bidder;” that Overseer of the Poor was employed to “superintend the business... and to do all such matters and things as they may deem expedient, for the promotion of the said Poor House and the comfort of the poor” (*sections 12 & 13, Revised Statutes, p. 471*).

In 1798, the Wardens were first charged with the care of aged and infirm slaves whose owners had failed to provide “food, raiment and lodging” for them. Any citizen could report that “a slave is in a suffering condition,” and the Wardens would investigate, provide for the indigent slave, and charge the owner (*section 19, ibid*).

After 1846 the county Justices appointed the Wardens of the Poor, and were authorized to pay them for their services. The Constitution of 1868 transferred all these powers to the newly-created County Commissioners, but their responsibility to provide for the “maintenance...comfort and well-ordering” of the poor remained substantially the same (*Battle’s Revisal, Ch. 27, section 24, p. 275*).



From an architectural standpoint, the 1922 county home is an interesting example of a transition from the boxy turn-of-the-century Craftsman or “American Foursquare” style of residential design, to the Bungalow style. The plan of the complex of buildings is the familiar service wing-and-hyphen “plantation house” design that goes all the way back to English Baroque examples, and was first seen in America in the Governor’s Palace in Williamsburg.

Originally situated on a hilltop and oriented toward South Fayetteville Street, the complex presented a familiar, comfortable and even upscale façade that ran counter to the traditional parental admonition, “you’ll send me to the Poor House.” The main block has a residential face and a two-story porch that makes it look like a more modern version of the Coffin-Makepeace House in Franklinville. The whole composition is reminiscent of that house, in fact, as the Makepeace House also originally had service wings connected to the main block by porch hyphens.



