

County provided a home for poorest residents

By Rebekah Davis

Limestone County Archivist

In 1850, James W. Martin was listed in the Limestone County census in the household of John C. Isham, Keeper of the Poorhouse. The 16-year-old Martin was one of 11 people living in the poor house that year, ranging from 75-year-old Elizabeth Thacker to 8-year-old Alonzo Perkins.

Some of the residents were noted as being “idiotic,” the 1850s term for mental disability, in a column that allowed for the noting of “whether deaf and dumb, blind, insane, idiotic, pauper, or convict,” but Martin was simply listed as a Farmer.

Martin was one of many people over the years in Limestone County who fell upon the mercy of county officials to provide a home for them when they were going through hard times.

Limestone County’s plan for the poor began with commissioners appointing overseers of the poor who could bring cases of dire need to the attention of the court. By 1842, the county paid Henry French \$110 a year to oversee the county’s poor house, and they also allowed him the use of the plantation attached to the home. Isham was overseeing the house by the time Martin lived there in 1850.

In 1882, the county contracted with local doctor Theo Westmoreland to provide medical services to both the county poor house and the jail. At that time the poor house was located on Nick Davis Road, and in 1896, the Alabama Courier reported that living conditions in the six log cabins that a dozen inmates called home were a disgrace, unfit for man or beast. They called on county officials to buy a farm nearer to town, saying, “The inmates of the county poor house are usually without relatives and friends, and the county is the only legal guardian and protector they have and it behooves the county then to see to it that her wards are properly cared for.”

Within a year, though, Billy Lambert was on the job, and in February of 1898 he and his wife welcomed the press and the county leaders to a turkey dinner and tour of the farm. The Courier editor raved about the improved cabins, the 250-tree orchard and crops that had been planted, and the new spring house that covered the spring that before had been, as they said, “nothing better than a hog-wallow.”

This farm served the county until 1918, when the county built a new Mercy Home for the poor on Elkton Road north of Athens. The old iron fence from the courthouse surrounded this home, which included an orchard, a vineyard, and separate living quarters for whites and negroes.

By then, many of the people who lived at the almshouse, as it was known in county records, were elderly, disabled, and had no known living relatives, like “Aunt Josie,” an 85-year-old woman who lived on L.S. Southard’s place until she was admitted in 1935.

Aunt Josie was one of the last residents of the county poor home. In 1940, James Chapman paid the county \$3,050 for a 120-acre portion of the farm. And in 1942, the home, buildings, and remaining farm were subdivided and sold at public auction.

As for James W. Martin, his hard times were only temporary. In 1854 he began working as a blacksmith and gin maker, and four years later he married Nancy Fogg. By 1880, he was a very successful wagon maker, and he and Nancy had two sons. His descendants are still living in Limestone County today.

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