

Erie County Poorhouse Records, 1829-1952

Administration Information

Creator

Erie County Poor House (Buffalo, N.Y.).

Erie County Alms House (Buffalo, N.Y.).

Erie County Hospital (Buffalo, N.Y.).

Erie County Home and Infirmary (Alden, N.Y.).

Call Number

HV63.U6 E75

Buffalo Stacks Folio

Extent

15 ledger books, 35-50 cm, in 14 oversize boxes.

Abstract

The Erie County Poorhouse of Buffalo, NY and succeeding institutions known as the Erie County Alms House, Erie County Hospital, and Erie County Home & Infirmary (Alden, NY), operated as a social safety net for the region's poor and infirm. The collection consists of ledgers recording children "bound out"/adopted (1863-1868), intake registers (children 1829-1841-1852, adults/families 1829-1845, 1861-1864, 1871-1889, 1908-1923), and hospital and death registers (1854-1867,1897-1952).

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Preferred Citation

[Description and dates], Box/folder number, *Erie County Poorhouse Records, 1829-1952*, Central Library: Grosvenor Room, Buffalo and Erie County Public Library.

Acquisition

Volumes [2,4,5,6,7,8,10,14,15] were transferred to the Grosvenor Room of the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library from the Erie County Medical Center in June 2016. Volumes [1,3, 9, 11, 12, 13] were transferred in December 2019.

Processing Information

Collection processed by Sue Cutrona, Special Collections Librarian, June 2016 and January 2020.

Historical Note

The Erie County Poorhouse was established in 1829 in Black Rock, NY (at that time a separate village from Buffalo) on Porter and Fargo Avenues. The institution relocated in 1850 to the rural “Buffalo Plains” on the outskirts of Buffalo along Main Street. This location is now the South Campus of the University at Buffalo.

The Poorhouse remained on Main Street from 1851 to 1926, and in that time provided assistance to over 180,000 men, women, and children. The institution came to include an insane asylum, a hospital with maternity and consumptive wards, a working farm, and a cemetery. The Poorhouse was not a workhouse or jail. It provided relief and/or medical care to those that had no other options. The majority of the inmates were male, often seasonal manual laborers, farmers, and artisans who only needed help for just part of the year. According to Dr. Roseanne Higgins, local anthropologist and poorhouse researcher, the duration of stay averaged 6 weeks.

Inmate ethnicity is noted in the intake registers. Jennifer Liber Raines, local researcher, found that the Poorhouse inhabitants’ nation of origin coincided with the influx of immigrants that would soon make up much of the population of Buffalo, i.e., German and Irish. From 1851 to 1913, fifty-nine percent of the inmates were foreign born immigrants.

First appointed and then elected, the Keeper of the Poorhouse [later referred to as the Superintendent] was responsible for all administrative functions of the institution. The Keeper reported to the County Superintendent(s) of the Poor [later referred to as the Commissioner of Charities and Corrections], who was legislatively required to provide an annual report to the Erie County Board of Supervisors.

Men and women resided in separate wards. At first, children were admitted to the Poorhouse along with their families. Critics of this practice believed that this caused the cycle of poverty to continue with each generation. The Buffalo Orphan Asylum opened in 1836, and some children were moved here from the Poorhouse in the following years. After New York State passed “The Children’s Law” in 1875, those between the ages of 3 and 16 were placed in orphan asylums or similar charities. In 1878 this began to include children 2 years of age. The law was not always enforced, and some children did remain in poorhouses unofficially. Children who did go into orphanages could be retrieved later by a parent or relative, or eventually adopted. Some were temporarily or permanently “bound out,” to other families in a type of indentured arrangement like an apprenticeship, or an unofficial adoption.

By 1907, the rapidly growing University at Buffalo (UB) was seeking a new campus. At the same time, Erie County planned to relocate the institution now known as the Almshouse. In 1909 the University bought the land from the County. The new campus was dedicated in 1920 and at first the University existed in buildings formerly utilized by the Almshouse. In 1926, residents of the Almshouse were eventually moved to the new Erie County Home and Infirmary located in Alden, NY. For the few years prior, the Almshouse and the University, although

separate institutions, actively shared the same parcel of land. Hayes Hall originally housed the insane asylum of the Almshouse, and later became the University's administrative offices.

From 1851 to 1926, 11,000 people died at the Poorhouse/Almshouse, 6% of the residents. The cemetery on site was only for inmates, not a general pauper's cemetery. Some bodies from the original location at Black Rock were moved to Main St. in 1852, soon after it opened. Burials continued until 1913. The majority of the people that died in the institution were claimed by family or friends and buried elsewhere. According to Higgins, between 1880 and 1913, 3198 people were buried in the Almshouse cemetery. No gravestones or permanent maps of the cemetery have been identified. Temporary markers were placed on burial sites to identify the deceased in the event that family came to retrieve the body.

The death ledgers may state the disposition of the body, including cemetery location. According to Higgins, 469 bodies were donated to the medical schools of either UB or Niagara University between 1897 and 1913. It is not believed that these bodies were not brought back to the Poorhouse for burial.

In 2012, UB began a construction project that necessitated the excavation and removal of a portion of the cemetery. The presence of the remains was known, due to previous excavations in the 1930s, 1960s, and 2009. Staff and students of the UB Department of Anthropology recovered the remains of 372 bodies; it is estimated that another 1,500 -3,000 more may still be buried there. In October of 2017, the exhumed bodies were reinterred in Assumption Cemetery on Grand Island, NY.

Scope and Content

The records consist of 15 ledgers and detailing personal information on Poorhouse residents and hospital patients either during intake, or at the time of death. Information was recorded in chronological order. No index by name is included, except for Vol. 2 [Erie County Poor House] Children's Record. Most of the people listed in the registers are adults, but children may have gone in with a parent/relative temporarily and will be listed by name. Infants born in the poorhouse are also noted, with the date of birth and name of mother.

[Vol]	Institution	Date range	Ledger type
1	Erie County Poor House	Jan 1829 - Aug 1845	Intake Register
2	[Erie County Poor House] Children's Record	1863-1868	Intake Register
3	[Erie County Poor House] Children's Names	November 1841 - September of 1852	Intake Register
4	Erie County Poor House	1861-1864	Intake Register

5	Erie County Alms House	1871-1873	Intake Register
6	Erie County Alms House (“Book B”)	1872-1873	Intake Register
7	Erie County Alms House	1873-1889	Intake Register
8	Erie County Alms House	1908-1923	Intake Register
9	Hospital of the Erie County Alms House	October 1854 – October 1867, undated	Hospital register, Medical record
10	Erie County Hospital	1894,1897-1928	Deaths, Medical record
11	[Erie County Hospital]Consent of Autopsy	June 1898 – June 1919, incomplete	Deaths
12	Erie County Hospital Morgue Record	July 1907 – April 1918	Deaths
13	Erie County Hospital Morgue Record	April 1918 – 1925	Deaths
14	Erie County Home & Infirmary	1926-1941	Deaths
15	Erie County Home & Infirmary	1942-1952	Deaths

Container List

Box 1 [Vol. 1] **Register of Persons received at the Erie County Poor House from January 8, 1829 to August 5, 1844.** Includes children and adults. Name, age, place of nativity, town/county pauper or vagrant, date of commitment, by whom committed (can be a city sexton, justice of the peace, or doctor), town sent from, date committed, and date discharged. Discharge notes include “carried forward” (continued to reside at the Poor House in the next recorded year) and “At Mrs. Heely’s” [sic] (sent to Buffalo Orphan Asylum, managed by Orissa Healy). Some years include notes in the nativity column indicating intemperance. Some years include a count of the information recorded (i.e. number of citizens, foreigners, males, females, town sent from). In chronological order, no index.

Box 2 [Vol. 2] **[Children’s Record] Children Bound Out by Erie County Superintendents of the Poor, October 1863-1868.** Name, date of commitment, date of discharge, who took them out and where they were taken. In rough chronological order, includes alphabetical index.

Box 3 [Vol. 3] **Register of Children’s Names in the Pauper Asylum, November 1841-September 1852.** Date received, name, age, names of parents, nativity (place of birth/ethnicity), how discharged & to whom. Each October 1st, the children currently residing in the Alms House were listed as “carried forward” into the new record-keeping year. Parents’ names are

rarely recorded. Some children are discharged to family members; others are bound out to local families. Deaths by illness are noted, recording outbreaks of cholera in 1845 and 1849-1850, and measles in 1849-1850. In chronological order, no index. Water damage at the top of the book make some entries difficult to read. **Note:** The first section of this volume lists children in the Alms House who were sent to the **Orphan Asylum**. The first page of 1841 has the heading of “Register of Orphaned Children with Mrs. Orissa Healy.” Healy was the director of the Buffalo Orphan Asylum. Some later years indicate “To Buffalo Orphan Asylum” in the column indicating how a child was discharged. One of the last pages has a short listed titled “A list of names of children taken from Erie Co. Poor House to Buffalo City Orphan Asylum, Dec 19, 1849.”

Box 4 [Vol. 4] Register of Persons Received at the Erie County Poor House, October 1, 1861 – October 1, 1864: Includes name, age, nativity, gender, date of commitment and by whom, cause of commitment, death, date of discharge, and number of days in the institution. Identifies individual as pauper, vagrant, insane, idiot, and orphan. In chronological order, no index.

Box 5 [Vol. 5] Register of Persons Received at the Erie County Alms House, October 1, 1871 – October 1, 1873: Note: Overlaps in date range with “Book B” below, and within this book there is also duplication of the lists of October 1, 1871 – Jan 13, 1872 (this time period is recorded twice and renumbered, most of the people are the same. Includes name, age, nativity, gender, occupation, date of commitment and by whom, cause of commitment, death, date of discharge, notes about disposition, and number of days in the institution. Identifies individual as pauper, vagrant, insane, idiot, and orphan. In chronological order, no index.

Box 6 [Vol. 6] (Book B) Register of Persons Received at the Erie County Alms House, 1872-1873 [1874]: Overlaps chronologically with Vol.3, although Vol 3. is more comprehensive with a date range of October 1, 1872 – December 31, 1872; October 1, 1873 – December 1873; January 1-17, 1874. Includes name, age, nativity, occupation, gender, date of commitment, by whom of what town, direct cause of commitment, death, date of discharge, number of days in the institution. Identifies individual as pauper, vagrant, insane, idiot, and orphan. In chronological order, no index.

Box 7 [Vol. 7] Register of State Paupers in the Erie County State Alms House at Buffalo, NY, December 1873 – September 24, 1889. Note: Sometimes ledger heading refers to location as Buffalo Plains. Includes name, date of admission, sex, age, birth place, cause of pauperism, location committed from, committing officer*, complaining officer*, discharge date, bound out date, provided for—by adoption or otherwise, absconded, transferred, removed from the State, death, and remarks on where the person was sent. In chronological order, no index. Includes a few loose death certificates & hospital registers. Note on officers: The complaining officer would be a person of authority, i.e. a Justice of the Peace who decides the person should be considered

for the Almshouse. As inmates could be from anywhere in NY, and the committing officer was the person in authority at the State level.

Box 8 [Vol. 8] **Register of Persons received at the Erie County Alms House, January 1, 1908 – December 31, 1923.** Includes name, age, nativity, occupation, gender, pauper, vagrant, by whom committed, date of commitment and of what town, direct cause of commitment, transferred to and returned from hospital, died, date of discharge [or death], remarks (where person went after this institution). In chronological order, no index.

Box 9 [Vol 9] **Hospital Register of the Erie County Alms House, October 1, 1854 – Oct 1867.** Name, age, nativity, habits (temperate, intemperate), occupation, disease, time under treatment in days, stage of disease when admitted, date discharged, date cured, date died, remarks (notes on condition, cause of death, sent to Sisters of Charity Hospital, etc.). Common conditions included fevers, frost bite, syphilis, and pregnancy. Outbreaks of cholera and typhoid fever are recorded in 1854.

Box 10 [Vol. 10] **Records of Deaths at the Erie County Hospital, January 1, 1897 – April 7, 1928.** May include name, age, gender, nativity, occupation, date of death, date of burial, number of grave, cause of death, case number, remarks on death and disposition, i.e. taken by relatives, body given to Medical College (UB) or undertaker, or buried in Mount Saint Joseph Cemetery or in a County Plot. In chronological order, no index.

Box 11 [Vol. 11] **[Consent of Autopsy, Erie County Hospital, January 9, 1898 - Dec 1903; September 2, 1910 - June 15, 1919].** Statements signed by the nearest living relative or friend of the deceased giving consent to perform an autopsy. Includes date, name of consenter, name of deceased, relationship to deceased, and signature of witness(es).

Box 12 [Vol. 12] **Erie County Hospital Morgue Record, June 25, 1907 – [April 1918], undated.** Name of deceased, sex, age, weight, date of death, date of exam, clinical history, and description of body, organs, and diagnosis, and signature of doctor.

Box 13 [Vol. 13] **Erie County Hospital Morgue Record, April 28, 1918 – [December, 1925], undated.** Name of deceased, sex, age, weight, date of death, date of exam, clinical history, and description of body, organs, and diagnosis, and signature of doctor.

Box 14 [Vol. 14] **Register of Deaths, Erie County Home & Infirmary, August 16, 1926 – December 30, 1941.** May include name, age, gender, nativity, occupation, date of death, date of burial, disposition (place of burial or other), cause of death, state number, remarks on death, and undertaker. In chronological order, no index.

Box 14 [Vol. 15] **Register of Deaths, Erie County Home & Infirmary, January 2, 1942 – August 13, 1952.** May include name, age, gender, nativity, occupation, date of death, date of burial, disposition (place of burial or other), cause of death, state number, remarks on death, and undertaker. In chronological order, no index.

Related Materials

Historic information on the institutions:

1. Buffalo Scrapbook *RA982.B84 B839
Hospitals in and around Buffalo [1936-1960?] Vol. 2, pages 80-100, 315-372. Newspaper articles and images of the Poorhouse, et.al, 1895-1930s. Good source for images.
2. Buffalo Collection F127.E6 S82
Erie County (N.Y.). Board of Supervisors. *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of Erie Count.* Includes the Report of the Keeper of the Erie County Almshouse, the “Keeper of the Poor (1852-1926), and the reports of the Medical Department of the Erie County Hospital (1880-1910).
3. Buffalo Collection HV63.U6 H55 1998
Higgins, Rosanne L. *The biology of poverty: epidemiological transition in Western New York.* [Buffalo, NY]: [State University of New York at Buffalo], 1998.
4. Katz, Michael B. "From Family Refuge to Old Age Home: The Demographics History of the Erie County, New York, Poorhouse from 1829 to 1886." *Poverty and Policy in American History.* New York: Academic Press, 1983, pp. 57-89. Copy in Grosvenor Room Vertical File – *Erie County Home and Infirmary.*
5. Grosvenor Room Vertical File – *Erie County Home and Infirmary.* These folders generally contain newspaper articles and brief publications.
6. Grosvenor Room Local History File: Citations for further sources, generally newspaper articles and some book references. Look under “Almshouse, Erie County” and “Erie County Home and Infirmary.”

Studies based on the 2012 excavation at the University at Buffalo:

7. Buffalo Collection CC79.5 .H85 B56 2017
Byrnes, Jennifer F. and Jennifer Lynn Muller, eds. *Bioarchaeology of impairment and disability: theoretical, ethnohistorical, and methodological perspectives.* Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017.

Includes two chapters on the EC Poorhouse: Chapter 7. *Rendered Unfit: "Defective" Children in the Erie County Poorhouse*; Chapter 11. *Injuries, Impairments, and Intersecting Identities: The Poor in Buffalo, NY 1851-1913*.

8. Buffalo Collection HV63.U6 B97 2015
Byrnes, Jennifer Frances. Ph. D. *'A pauper's shame': A biocultural investigation of trauma, impairment, and disability in the Erie County Poorhouse Cemetery, 1851-1913* Buffalo, N.Y.: State University of New York at Buffalo, 2015.
9. Nystrom, Ken, Joyce Sirianni, Roseanne Higgins, Douglas Perrelli, and Jennifer L. Liber Raines. "Structural Inequality and Postmortem Examination at the Erie County Poorhouse." *The bioarchaeology of dissection and autopsy in the United States*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017. Copy in Grosvenor Room Vertical File – *Erie County Poorhouse*.

Inmate Records and Personal Information. No actual case files on inmates exist, but the following sources can provide further information on individuals.

Note: Records more recent than those held in our collection are maintained by the Erie County Medical Center and the Erie County Home, but are medical in nature and not open to researchers.

For adoptions and orphanage information see our separate research guide:
[Adoption & Orphanage Resources for Genealogists and Historians](#).

10. **Buffalo History Museum** has these records:
M2015-01. *Registers of inmates, 1829-1877* [3 reels of microfilm]. Buffalo, N.Y.: Erie County Home & Infirmary, 1829-1877. Gap from 1845 to 1848—records for this era are unknown.

C82-1. *Records of the Buffalo Orphan Asylum (1836-1954)*. Includes Registers of admissions and departures, 1836-1939; lists of all children admitted; family records; visitors' book, 1861-1866.
11. **New York, Census of Inmates in Almshouses and Poorhouses, 1830-1920.** Ancestry Library Edition database has this collection from the New York State Archives. Source: Series A1978. Microfilm, 225 rolls.

Note: The Erie County records are from 1875 to 1920. Not every inmate will be found in this collection, as not all records appear to have survived. You can search by name or browse by year. The record number on these cards does not correspond to the local ledger numbers held at the BECPL.

In 1875 NYS required institutions to record details about the individuals in their care on a standard form sent to the State Board of Charities. These forms can be a rich source of detail on residents, their circumstances, and their families. Forms are filled out to varying degrees; depending on the year they may include: name, age, date of admission and discharge, sex,

color, marital status, birthplace, last residence, length of time in the U.S. and in the state, port of entry, naturalization details, education/literacy, “habits” (“temperate” or “intemperate”), occupation, religion, labor the resident can perform, whether resident has received relief, names and addresses of relatives or friends, father’s name, birthplace, occupation, habits, mother’s name (maiden), birthplace, habits, questions on extended family’s tendency toward self-sufficiency or dependence.”

12. **Census records, 1855-1925:** Inmates of the institutions are listed in the Federal Census and separate NY State Census records. Depending on the year, the records may provide birth information, citizenship, and occupation.

1855 NYS: Buffalo Ward 12, E.D.1, dwelling number 216 (no page numbers, 7 total pages)

1860: Buffalo Ward 12, pages 95-110 (written), dwelling 737

1865 NYS: Buffalo Ward 12, E.D. 2, pages 41-55 (written)

1870: Buffalo Ward 12, pages 81-93 (written), dwelling 525-526

1875 NYS: Buffalo Ward 12, E.D. 3, pages 33-47 (written)

1880: “Defectives” Schedule - Buffalo Ward 11, E.D. 173, pages 1407-1408 (stamped)

1880: Buffalo Ward 11, E.D. 173, pages 35-47 (written), dwelling 423

1890: “Veterans” Schedule - Buffalo Ward 11, E.D. 237, pages 1-3 (written)

1892 NYS: Buffalo Ward 25, E.D. 5, page 29 and Buffalo, “Inmates” page 1-20 (written)

1900: Buffalo Ward 25, E.D. 222, pages 1A-7B (written), dwelling number 3399

1905 NYS: Buffalo Ward 25, E.D. 5, “Erie County Hospital” pages 1-9 (written) and “Erie County Almshouse” pages 1-8 (written)

1910: Buffalo Ward 17, E.D. 168, “Erie County Almshouse” pages 1A-4A (written) and Buffalo Ward 17, E.D. 310, “Erie County Hospital” pages 1A-6B (written)

1915 NYS: Buffalo Ward 20, A.D. 8, E.D. 2, “Erie County Home” and “Erie County Hospital” pages 19-36 (written)

1920: Buffalo Ward 20, E.D. 172, pages 19A-24B (written), dwelling number 3399

1925 NYS: Buffalo Ward 20, A.D. 7, E.D. 8, “Erie County Hospital” pages 30-37, “Erie County Home” on pages 38-45.