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News > Science (/News/Science/)

What if the poor were sent to work on town-owned farms? They were, and it wasn't pretty



Steve Taylor, the former commissioner of the state's Department of Agriculture, speaks to a crowd at the Chichester Grange on Thursday. NICK REID/Monitor staff [Buy this Image](#)

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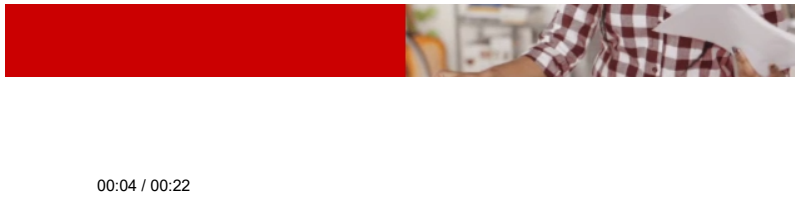
Struggling to find a good way to care for their poor, towns throughout New Hampshire adopted a novel approach about 1830, when they began to buy up vacant farms where they hoped the able-bodied could live, work and provide for themselves.

The idea spread within a matter of five years to roughly 60 percent of the towns in the state, said Steve Taylor, the revered former commissioner of the state's Department of Agriculture, in an hourlong talk in Chichester on Thursday.

Did it work? Not really. Many farms weren't self-sufficient and the inhabitants who were merely down on their luck didn't benefit from being lumped in with the insane, sick and "vicious vagrants," Taylor said. The practice was eventually compared to slavery, he said, because there was no opportunity to work your way to freedom.

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“It’s really a dark period of New Hampshire’s history and a very brief time, probably about 40 to 45 years. An experiment. It failed,” said Taylor, who was also the founding director of the N.H. Humanities Council, which offered the program.

But its history is an interesting reflection on the local beginnings of a debate that persists today, he said: Who’s responsible to help the impoverished, and how?

Before town farms, Taylor said, the selectmen held auctions in which the lowest bidder would care for their poor. Families received a few dollars from the town in return for boarding the helpless. On other hand, in cases when the subject was capable of work, the town might receive a few dollars for his or her effort, he said.

“Imagine being auctioned off at town meeting,” Taylor said.

Town farms were seen as a remedy that would reduce the cost to the town – and at their best, they were. Taylor said Claremont bought a farm for \$3,500 in 1833 and “bragged in the town report that they cut welfare costs from \$800 that year to \$48 the next year.”

The town farm in Chichester, which is now the subject of a new exhibit at the historical society, was another story, however. The Canterbury Road farm never quite turned a profit, said historical society member Lucille Noel, and frequently housed people who couldn’t keep up with farm work.

For instance, in 1859, according to historical town documents, there were five inhabitants: four women, aged 17, 49, 64 and 89, and one man, aged 57. Judging by the \$4 the town paid for a person’s coffin and grave digging, a potential sixth inhabitant didn’t make it through the year.

Taylor said the quantities of meat and fish that the town bought for its farm showed that it wasn’t self-sufficient.

For the people living at the farm, however, that was far from the worst aspect.

“You signed over all your possessions to the town when you went there, right down to your undergarments and your socks,” Taylor said, so unless you had a rich relative to bail you out, you were stuck.

And in many cases, there was no distinction made between poverty, which at the time was said to “result from misfortune, not faults,” and pauperism, which was said to be “a misery of human creation” resulting from “vicious habits.”

By the 1850s, it was becoming clear that the farms weren’t performing as expected, and the rising opposition to slavery in the South made people think about the practices at the farms.

“Some people began to say, you know, we’re enslaving people right in our own town on our town farm. We’re placing them there and they don’t have a chance to get out,” Taylor said.

By the end of the Civil War in 1866, he said many towns were shutting down their farms. But “in large measure, the thing was punted to the county,” where conditions at county farms became arguably worse.

Taylor said a 1922 report found that the Hillsboro county complex had the following: 91 prisoners in the jail; 280 inmates at the poor house; 11 inmates at the insane asylum; 92 patients at the hospital; and 38 orphans or deserted children ranging from infancy to nine years. The conditions were so bad at a similar facility in Brooklyn, Vt., that “clergy refused to go there to administer sacraments,” he said.

Various systems cropped up over time to ease certain aspects of the issue, such as Social Security to stave off elderly poverty and the New Hampshire Hospital to help mental health patients, but the problem of poverty won’t soon be solved, he said.

“We continue to have in our hearts deep conflict and ambivalence about how society should deal with the issue of poverty,” he said. “We haven’t solved it and probably our grandchildren’s children will probably be facing the same issues and concerns as time goes on.”

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