

Draft Nomination of Jefferson County “Potters Field” Cemeteries as a Jefferson County Landmark

The Jefferson County Historic Preservation Commission seeks approval by the Jefferson County Board to designate as a Jefferson County Landmark three associated cemetery areas created during the operation of the Jefferson County Poor Farm and Asylum that operated between 1854 and the 1950s. The cemeteries are located on land owned and maintained by Jefferson County. There are no threats to the sites and cemeteries are already protected under Wisconsin state law but designation as a landmark will commemorate and call public attention to an important period in Jefferson County history when the county housed and assisted the poor, indigent, and mentally ill in the days before modern federal, state, and county social services and programs.

Historical Background

The Jefferson County Poor Farm, originally 80 acres in size, was established in 1856 just west of CTH W and southwest of the city of Jefferson, and was part of a nation-wide effort to care for the needy and mentally ill at a county level at a time when such care had been mainly provided by families and relatives. With establishment of the poor farm system, those who could not provide for themselves were required to go to a publicly-operated poor farm that would provide assistance at public expense. Able residents were required to do farm work and this also helped feed inmates as a whole. Sometimes indigent or mentally ill people were forced to go to poor farms.

After 1878, Jefferson County built a separate facility for the mentally ill, generally referred to as Insane Asylums. Another separate facility, the Forest Lawn Sanitarium, was built in the 1920s for tuberculosis victims. It closed in 1956 and, by that time, the Poor Farm and Asylum had ceased operations as state and federal programs increased. A historical study conducted by Philip Salkin of Archaeological Consulting and Services concluded that at least 741 people died at the Jefferson County facilities but not all were buried on the grounds. Many were interred elsewhere by families, and the bodies of some were even given to the University of Wisconsin for medical research and study. Burial records maintained by the Jefferson County Land and Water Conservation Department include the names and burial dates for 130 individuals interred in the “potter's field.”

Three cemeteries have been identified and formally cataloged as burial places by the Wisconsin Historical Society. Cemetery #1 is located on the side of a hill south of the UW-Extension building where there is an informational kiosk and a mowed path leading to the cemetery. As many as 52 people are believed to be buried here, and many graves are marked in neat rows with small cement markers with numbers or sometimes a name and date of burial. Some grave depressions are unmarked. At least 32 obvious graves are visible. The site is listed on the State Register of Historic Places maintained by the Wisconsin Historical Society.

Cemetery #2 is marked by grave depressions and identified on early maps on the side of a drumlin ridge along the east side of County W and is believed to contain individuals who died as inmates between 1856 and 1913. Cemetery #3 contains at least 17 grave depressions and one small head stone and is located east side of the same ridge along Annex Rd. and north of the county Human Services Building.

Other Graves

Many other graves are believed to be present on the former Poor Farm and Asylum grounds and especially in the fields around Cemetery #1. These can one day be located by remote sensing technology such as Ground Penetrating Radar.