



NORTH GREENBUSH NOTES

Jim Greenfield Town Historian 283-6384

Rensselaer County Poor House and M.P. Defreest Part 2

In my last article, I talked about the poor house, or the Rensselaer County House of Industry as it was called. It was one of the first poor houses in the state and continued operating until 1926.

There were some ups and downs in the operation over the years, but a significant controversy occurred in 1875 during the stewardship of Acting Superintendent of the Poor, M.P. Defreest.

In December 1875 the county Board of Supervisors released a scathing report regarding the administration of the House of Industry. Books were not being kept as the law directed, contracts were being awarded at what seemed to be unreasonably high costs. Payments made to individuals lacked explanation as to what the receivable was or where the vendor was located. With the compliance of the treasurer, Mr. Defreest's salary jumped from \$291 to \$3,874 per year.

Another area of concern was the category listed as "the insane". The law stated that if the immediate family had the means, they should pay the county the expense for housing the insane person. The supervisors found two instances where this was not being done and one of the inmates was a (distant) Defreest relative.

M.P. Defreest's defense was that he thought he had been complying with the law and that the auditors never informed him otherwise.

I can't find if the Board of Supervisors ever took any direct action against Defreest. Perhaps because his term was up (he was not reappointed) and possible because he still had political allies on the Board, matters were dropped.

The 60 year old Defreest retired to his farm in North Greenbush. However, in 1888 tragedy struck. On August 31 his body was found in the Hudson River at a boat dock in Troy. He had attended races in Troy that day before the accident. His money and jewelry were intact and there was no evidence of foul play. However, in his pocket there was a written inscription he had composed which was to be placed on his wife's tombstone. She had died exactly two weeks earlier.