Slide 1:

Hello, welcome, and thanks for coming! My name is Katie Bonk, and I am the History Research Assistant for Genesee County. Today I will be presenting information on the Genesee County Home and Insane Asylum. You might also hear me refer to it as the "Poor House."

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Before we begin, I wanted to address that the topics discussed in this presentation may be upsetting to some folks. The language used to label those with mental illness has been kept intact to stay true to the language used in the time periods we are focusing on.

Slide 3:

Here is an aerial shot of the County Home from 1967. However, my presentation only goes until about 1887, with a few examples outside of that date.

Slide 4:

Here are two maps from an 1866 atlas we have in the History Department. You can see the location of the Poorhouse on both maps represented by a red circle.

Slide 5:

The County Home opened its doors in early 1827 after the passage of the New York State "County Almshouse Law" in 1824, which called for the construction of county

poorhouses all across New York. The building selected was originally an old stage coach tavern. The Bethany location was chosen because it was the geographical center of Genesee County at the time, as Wyoming County would not split off from Genesee County until 1841. The Insane Asylum was constructed in 1828 and was made of stone. Before the Poorhouse, “outdoor relief” placed individuals in need with “contractors.” This meant that people would be “bound out” to local townspeople or farmers and auctioned off at the lowest price to these “contractors.” The community was responsible for paying the contractors for the care of these individuals. Conversely, indoor relief was money given directly to individuals or families in need. If there were options for the poor, why a County Poorhouse? It consolidated the needy into one place - towns and people were spread thin in the late 1820s, and so having a place for those without one in Genesee County was needed. Also, again, legislation passed by New York State allowed for the construction of county poor houses. Jumping ahead a little, the County Home closed its doors on Feb. 18, 1974. At that time, it housed about 110 residents, who were transferred to the new site on Bank Street in Batavia. Today you may know it as Premier Genesee, formerly the Genesee County Nursing Home.

Slide 6:

Here we see the newspaper announcement for the establishment of a County Poor House. “The Board of Supervisors of the County of Genesee; having resolved to comply with the “Act to establish County Poor Houses,”Notice is hereby given, that written propositions will be received by each of the said Superintendants for the purchase and sale of farms or lots of Land, containing not less than one, nor more than two hundred acres, - November 16, 1825.”

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So what got you sent to the Poor House? I have a few basic definitions here: First we have Paupers, who were people of little to no income who could not support themselves financially and who relied on public assistance for help. Who else? We had Alcoholics, called “drunkards”, people with mental and physical disabilities who were in that time period called “idiots” or “lunatics,” the sick, the elderly, and sometimes criminals and children. Essentially, the County Poor House was a catch-all for those without a place in Genesee County.

Slide 8:

Here we see an 1848 admission record for the County Home. We see quite a few insanity admissions, as well as “idiotcy” and “intemperance” along with some sicknesses like paralysis, consumption, and the designation of “Rheumatic” to name a few. I had to look up what this is: Rheumatism is a condition that affects the joints and connective tissues in the body and causes pain and swelling.

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So we have a location, and we have some reasons why you might be sent to the Poor House. But, who paid for all this? Certainly it wasn’t the pauper! We have a few categories of pauper: town, county, temporary, and permanent. A town pauper was someone from a specific town of origin and thus that town provided payment, and a county pauper was someone whose town of origin could not be determined, thus the county paid for their time at the Home. However, Genesee County was VERY

determined to find a town of origin. A temporary pauper might be an alcoholic or someone down on their luck who would only be at the home for a designated period of time, such as 30 days at labor, as we will see one inmate be assigned to (Catharine Gallivan, Slide 29 as of 9/22/26). A permanent pauper would be a person with a mental or physical disability, for example, who could not provide for themselves or who needed consistent care. Transportation to the Poor House was paid for either by the town of origin or the County, and this was done by any means possible, it seems. It was very informal, as newspaper articles of the time period stated that various people in various positions “conveyed” future inmates to the home.

Slide 10:

Here is an example of a county pauper designation.

Slide 11:

Again, people could also apply for relief in the form of payments to support the individual’s household, called “Indoor Relief.” They applied to the Overseers of the Poor. In the case of “lunacy,” families of the “lunatic” were charged with paying for their family member’s care in the Poor House, and if the families could not pay, costs were deferred to the town of origin.

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Who made decisions regarding the Poor House? First, we have the Board of Supervisors, who acted as the legislature for Genesee County and made broad decisions about the Poor House, such as choosing the location. The Board of Supervisors represented the different local towns,

and there was a supervisor from each town on the board (in 1832, there were 23 members as Genesee County was larger than it is today). There was a chairman and clerk for the board, elected each year. There was also a treasurer. Today they are known as the County Legislature. Once a year, they visited the Poor House to inspect the conditions and make necessary changes and decisions regarding the Home.

Under them, we have County-level Superintendents of the Poor. It was decided that there should be three Superintendents of the Poor in 1841. They were sometimes responsible for transporting people to the poor house, and they also placed children with nowhere to go in the homes of others who were able to support these children.

Then we have Local or Town Overseers of the Poor, who provided relief for the poor of Genesee County towns. Among other duties, they ordered doctors' visits to poor people at the expense of the town, and also helped transport people to the poor house.

Slide 13:

Here we have what I was able to construct based on resources in the History Department as well as through general histories of poor houses and insane asylums. At the top you can see we have the Superintendents of the Poor again, making those sweeping decisions about the home. Beneath them we have physicians and the Keeper of the Poor House, and finally there were nurses and attendants.

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Here we have more information about the Superintendents of the Poor. They were appointed by the Board of Supervisors for terms of 1 year, and as of 1841, there were to be no more than three Superintendents of the Poor at any given time. One of their duties was to set prices for food sales from the Poor House farm.

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Here are some of the duties of the Keeper of the Poor House. This person was in charge of the Poor House and farm, enforced the rules created by the Superintendents, kept inventory, assessed residents and assigned work to them accordingly, inspected the Poor House daily, and followed the direction of the Superintendents, among other things. They lived across the street from the Poor House in the residence shown here. When the Board of Supervisors made their annual trip to inspect the Home, usually the keeper's wife prepared a meal for them.

Slide 16:

Physicians had the same duties as they do today. They provided medicine to inmates, as well as performed amputations when necessary. Some had contracts for service, serving 1-3 year terms. Some physicians were paid either monthly or per visit. You can see here an example of a yearly contract as well as a monthly one.

Slide 17:

Doctors treated inmates consistently in order to best help their health. They also declared insanity cases, as I will elaborate on in more detail later. Physicians made house calls to poor families in this time period, providing that indoor relief I described earlier.

Slide 18:

Here I use information gleaned from various research papers and books to reconstruct what it might have been like to live at the Poor House. According to researchers, the attendants in poor houses across America were usually underpaid and understaffed. They received on-the-job training, thus causing the environment to be shaped by the residents themselves, as nurses and attendants had to focus on keeping order and control in the home rather than directing their

energy to actual treatment for those who needed it. Most poor houses also experienced harsh overcrowding, especially in the winter time, as the 1864 Willard Report on poor houses in New York states:

“It is apparent, therefore, that they (Superintendents of the Poor) did not witness the suffering incident to winter, when the sleeping rooms would be over-crowded, when the want of fuel, and bedding and clothing would be most felt. But the miseries in which they found the insane poor confined in the various county poor houses are appalling, and shocking to record.” Willard Report, 1864.

People also escaped fairly frequently, There was not much security at the County Home - later in the 1800s it was recommended that a night watchman be assigned, but people still were able to get away, as we can see with Horace’s escape, among many others, who simply left the county home on their own.

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Horace’s Escape: “I take this opportunity to inform you of the arrival of my brother Horace as he has escaped the asylum unbeknown to you he arrived here on Monday last. I do not know whether we will bring him back or not it will depend on his conduct but let that be as it may I wish you to take care of his clothes until it gets better going and I will come out and see you and pay his bill.”

Another example: “I was afraid she would slip away from you without your knowledge.”

Sometimes people were found and returned to the home, but some were not as fortunate - there are *Daily News* articles recounting the tales of those who escaped the home and met an untimely death, as they were exposed to the elements for too long, especially in the cold Winter months.

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There was a working farm as well as a dedicated wooded area used for timber and supplies. The farm raised animals, like pigs, cows, and sheep, and grew crops in order to both feed the residents and sell at market, the profits being used to offset the cost of the Home to the county. Some of the crops grown on the farm include wheat, oats, corn, potatoes, onions, cabbage, hay, and apples (1896). If you were an able-bodied pauper or insane inmate, you were subjected to work on the farm. In the case of the insane, this work was thought to help cure them of their mental anguish by providing structure and discipline. I will elaborate more on the insane later in the presentation.

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More life at the poor house: There were usually separate wards for men and women in the Home. The inmates were not allowed to gamble, or more obviously drink alcohol unless it was prescribed by a doctor - could you imagine a modern day doctor prescribing you liquor? Men were provided tobacco, but this privilege was taken away in the 1840s. Family members could come visit, as well as bring clothes or anything else the residents might have needed. Inmates could also bring personal items to the Poor House, and as you can see this woman, Julia Ann, brought her entire life with her.

Slide 22:

Here is an image of the 1862 County Home inventory. You can see lots of farm equipment as well as “fat hogs” and sheep.

Slide 23:

Going to live at the Poor House wasn’t easy for people. In a poem by Will Carleton from 1872,

we see an elderly narrator who is not welcome anywhere and feels like an afterthought to those around her shipping off to the Poor House. This poem reveals lots about attitudes towards the poor in the nineteenth century. She establishes how “horrid queer” it is to have to go to the Poor House, being “a woman of seventy, and only a trifle gray” who is willing to “pay her honest way” if “Anybody is only willin’ to have [her] around.” She chronicles her industrious life as a young married woman, raising children and making it clear that they were everything to her, but laments that “when we’re old and gray, I’ve noticed it sometimes, somehow, fails to work the other way.” We see this rejection of older folks by their adult children in *Daily News* articles from this period as well. Continuing on with our narrator, after being “shifted…about” by her adult children, she bids them farewell on her way to the Poor House, with the final closing statement: “And God’ll judge between us; but I will al’ays pray/That you shall never suffer the half that I do to-day!” So we see here the idea that older people, and those who needed care, became a burden once they were no longer able to provide for themselves. We also see a loss of autonomy in going to the Poor House, which is hard for anyone to go through.

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What about the insane inmates held in the asylum? As you can see by these statistics, there were not too many insane inmates by today’s standards. But you have to remember, the population was much lower in the 1800s than it is today, so this number may have been a real concern for Victorian Americans, as it represented a bigger part of their society that was “going crazy.” But what was the cause of this insanity? Historian David Rothman asserts that there was a kind of panic regarding the insane in America due to the rapidly changing society. Scholars of the day blamed the social fluidity of Jacksonian society, or the 1820s-30s - in this new America, anyone could rise upward beyond what they were born into class-wise, and this was causing stress to the mind of those who evidently could not handle it. Thus, “The charge of the asylum was to bring discipline to the victims of a disorganized society,” needing “A well-ordered

institution” to help cure them. Working on the farm not only provided free labor for the Poor House, it could cure the “insane” by providing structure to “disordered lives.” Scholars believed that insanity was curable through insane asylums

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So what did Americans, and those in Genesee County, think when they thought “that person is crazy!?” Well, we begin with a few terms used by scholars of the day. Looking at dictionary definitions from the late 1800s, we see the broad term insanity as “Unsoundness of mind, disorder of the intellect;” there being two forms of insanity: acute, which meant their troubles were seen as “curable,” and chronic, which meant they would need long-term mental health care. Melancholia was a **“**disorder of the intellect often preceding mania, characterized by depression and melancholy, and often a suicidal tendency...” (switch to slide 26).

Slide 26:

And focusing more on women in particular, we have hysteria: “a nervous disorder of females,” especially in the unmarried or during their menstrual cycle. This was caused by “a real defect of will and mental power,” with symptoms like “shrieking, laughing, sobbing,” and pale urine.Trying to find the origins of what determined mental health, doctors used a pseudo science called “Phrenology.” This involved examining the bumps and crevasses on someone’s skull, which then corresponded to personality traits. || A funny story about Phrenology involving Mark Twain goes like this: Twain went to a famous phrenologist in England to have his head inspected - however, he hid his identity and the humor department of his head was found to be non-existent. When he went back three months later to the same doctor, this time as the famous Mark Twain, his humor location was fully developed.

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Now that we have looked at those definitions, how did mental health play out in the everyday lives of those who lived before us? What kind of actions led to committal to the Insane Asylum? Well, “Individuals who eventually ended up in asylums usually manifested some form of extreme behavior, including violent, suicidal, and occasionally homicidal acts, hallucinations, excitement, agitation, delusions, and deep depression.” We see this with the 1864 Albert Plass letter - it reads “Albert Plass has again become deranged & last Sunday night stabbed his father with the butcher knife, so badly that he expired on Monday morning,” stating that his mother is asking if the Poor House can accommodate him once again. Another example of extreme behavior is those who were driven to suicide and made attempts at their own lives. These attempts were sometimes publicized in local newspapers, which reveal a lot about perceptions of mental illness in Genesee County. First, we see a lack of empathy towards those who were struggling - in 1897, the Daily News called Henry Holladay’s suicide letter “pathetic,” and in 1887 the Daily News published Sarah Nettleson’s entire suicide note. The Daily News was also very descriptive in its depictions of suicide methods, almost disrespectfully so. For those who made suicide attempts and did not die, they were sent to the Asylum for being “melancholy” or “despondent.” In 1887, the decision was made to send those with mental illness to the Willard State Hospital or the Utica State Asylum, for reasons I will explain later.

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What was the process for committing someone to the insane asylum? Sometimes it began in people’s homes, as concerned family members would reach out to the Asylum to see if there was space for their relative. It was not an easy decision, as families were “Confronted with behavior that threatened the integrity of the family or situations with which they could not cope,” and so “relatives began the process of institutionalization as a last resort and with a vague understanding that it was the lesser of the two evils.” With committal, we see a range of emotions - sometimes families were reluctant to send folks to the asylum, as a letter from 1860

shows: mother Alza Benham wrote to keeper Luman Stevens about her son George, acknowledging that she “could not keep [George] any longer as Mr. Benham was afraid of him and was not willing for him to remain with me any longer for fear he would injure some of the family… I have a good home and he ought to be home with me… but I have not the liberty to do as I would like therefore I must be content with my lot.” In other cases, we see households more than willing to send someone to the Asylum. An 1859 letter about an unnamed woman from W. V. McLean reads: “I was afraid she would slip away… and were she here she would do the same, and [annoy] the neighbors as well as myself I could get nothing done, for watching her, as I have had a miserable winter with her, she artfull and cunning.” McLean expressed his relief at having somewhere to send this woman, as she was seen as an annoyance - he has no more patience for this woman’s behavior, viewing her as a problem to get rid of. So we have social aspects of commitment - People had mixed feelings about sending their relatives away.

Slide 29:

There were also economic factors - if you could not contribute to American society, you were seen as a strain of resources. We see this in two examples, one being the well-documented “obituary” of Phebe White, which reads as follows:

> Fifty-eight years in the Poor House - Miss Phebe White was found dead in her room in the County House on Sunday morning last. She was 67 years of age. For 58 years she had been an inmate, never having spent a single night away from that institution. The County House was completed in 1827 and Miss White entered it at 9 years of age in 1828, thus becoming one of the first recipients of its care and protection. She was always idiotic, and for the past ten years she has been totally blind. She had some musical talent and could whistle or hum a tune after hearing it once or twice. Her personal habits were filthy beyond all description, which made her a great care and burden. Miss White is a distant relative of the Ben White who was hung in

Batavia in 1843. Superintendent Hay, in looking over the books of the poor house, estimates her cost to the county during the 58 years at $7,000, and this amount would not begin to pay for the trouble she has made if an attendant had been hired to care for her. Why such persons are permitted to be a burden for so many years, while scores of beautiful lives come to an early end, is one of the mysteries that will never be solved in this life. (January 29, 1886; Progressive Batavian) $7,000 = $251,000 in 2026 currency

Completely disrespectful of her entire existence, this article demonstrates several points, the first one being that those living in the poor house were seen as a literal burden, especially in Phebe's case as she may not have been able to contribute to the poor house due to her "idiotcy" and eventually going blind - the author demonstrated the feelings of the populace at large towards those who could not care for themselves. In the 1855 case of Catharine Gallivan, she was tried as "being an idle person, not having any visible means of support & to maintain herself, lives without employment, and is a drunkard, and is a vagrant," and thus was sentenced to "thirty days at hard labor" in the County Poor House. As she was not contributing anything financially to the county, she was sent to be productive.

There was a legal element to committal. To be properly committed for insanity, one or two justices of the peace along with a medical examination by two practicing physicians were needed to declare someone legally insane. The language used in these committal letters generally appeared as such, using an 1848 letter: "[he] is a lunatic so far disordered in his senses as to endanger his own person and property and the property of others and that it is unsafe to permit him to go at large." Once proclaimed a "lunatic," one was then admitted into the County Home for insanity.

Slide 30:

Broadening back out, we see both paupers and the insane getting a lack of care from the general population. In 1861, the Board of Supervisors put forth a resolution that read: “The Grand Jury, having had their attention called to the insecure condition of the public records in the offices of the County Clerk and Surrogate of the county… and in view of the immense importance to all classes of citizens in the county - more particularly the PROPERTY OWNERS AND TAX PAYERS - that the evidence of title to real estate in this county should be placed in as secure a condition as possible… ” While this resolution did not pass, it demonstrates who was important to the Board of Supervisors - the property owners and tax payers, and NOT the poor in the Poor House. This is also evidenced in reports on the state of the poor house and insane asylum from the supervisor’s visits

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As time went on, local newspapers chronicled the disintegration of the quality of the buildings on the County Home property. In 1868, the State Board of Charities stated:
“The principal building is of brick, two stories high. At the rear is a wooden structure of the same height, nearly new. The aged and infirm have separate apartments, and the sexes are separated, but no further classification is practicable. Among the inmates were thirteen children and twenty-one insane. The insane occupy a separate building, the women being under the charge of a matron, and the men of the keeper. The building possesses few conveniences for its purposes, but was clean and in good order. Two of the insane were in restraint. The farm is cultivated largely by the paupers.”
In 1871, the Insane Asylum was deemed “a dilapidated concern, uncomfortable, insufficient and a discredit to the county” by the Board of Supervisors, and in 1878 it was reported that:
“Some slight improvements have been made in this poorhouse, and a small sum has recently been expended upon the building for the insane. The latter is, however, totally unsuited for its

purposes. The rooms are poorly ventilated, and cheerless and uninviting. The insane are periodically visited by the attending physician, but there is a lack of competent paid attendants. Moreover, violent, filthy and excited cases are retained, and not infrequently acute insane are committed for treatment. Such of the children as can not readily be secured situations in family homes are placed temporarily in asylums."

However, there was opposition to rebuilding the asylum for the following reasons: The location was "bad," as it was no longer the geographic center of Genesee County - the *Le Roy Times* in 1885 asked "why should not our county-house be located at a central point, easily accessible, like Stafford? Certainly one side of the county is not the place for a public institution of this kind". The number of insane inmates was too low to justify a new asylum - in 1875, the number of insane inmates was only about 20. The amount of money needed was too high - we're talking $20,000-$30,000 in the 1870s. And finally, since there were other, more specialized spaces for these people, why not send them to these facilities?

In 1885, the *Daily News* asserted "Everybody who has visited the [Poor House] knows what a wretched hovel the alms house of Genesee county is and wonders why the Supervisors permit it to stand and be occupied, a growing disgrace to the county's thrift and wealth." The article cites the *Le Roy Times*' scathing review as well, further driving home the fact that the poor and insane were cared about, but only to a point.

Slide 32:

In 1887, the Genesee County Board of Supervisors came to the decision to send the acute insane to the Buffalo State Hospital and the chronically insane to Willard. Fast forward to May of 1974, we see the headline "Auction to Dispose of Former County Home, Legislature Decides," with a line from the chairman: "'We feel the best thing is to get rid of it as soon as possible.'"

With this decision, some historic wooden buildings dating back to the 1800s were demolished, and we still see a lack of concern for the poor and insane in destroying a part of their history.