



NORTH GREENBUSH NOTES

Jim Greenfield Town Historian 283-6384

Rensselaer County Poor House and M.P. Defreest

Ever since the early 1800's, towns and counties have been responsible for caring for the poor among its residents. Rensselaer County established a poor house called "The House of Industry" in 1821. It was located near the borders of Troy and North Greenbush.

The residents didn't easily fit into one single category. Most were homeless and orphans, others were immigrants to the country and some were "lunatics" as the insane were called in those days. At its peak, the poor house held about 200 people.

By 1880 the approximately 152 acre farm consisted of a keeper's residence, dormitories for men and women inmates, dining halls, kitchens and laundry along with farm and other service buildings.

As the name "house of industry suggests" inmates were expected if physically able, to work the farm or labor in a nearby quarry, or tend to food preparation and cleaning duties. The income from farm products covered only a part of the expenses. Most of the costs came from taxes levied on the towns where the people had lived.

Although the conditions weren't as bad as those told in a Charles Dickens novel, they could be pretty grim. A 1857 State Legislative investigation cited poor food, lack of proper clothing and inadequate heating during the winter.

Conditions improved in the next few years but another crisis occurred in 1875 and this is where Martin P. Defreest comes in.

M.P. came from a long line of distinguished members of his family who lived in Greenbush. His grandfather and father had both been Town Supervisors and he had just completed several terms in that office. In 1870 the County Legislature appointed him Superintendent of the Poor. This was probably a political appointment and did cause some controversy at the time. They didn't have political blogs then, but Philip Bray, a newspaper editor in the City of Rensselaer published several "circulars" attacking M.P. Defreest. He characterized Defreest and his ancestors as political hacks who were nominally Democrats but worked behind the scenes to thwart "true Democrats" (of which Bray contended he was).

These attacks set the stage for a nasty confrontation between M.P. Defreest and the county legislature who had appointed him Acting Superintendent of the Poor. I'll explain this in the next story.