

COLONIAL CARE OF THE POOR

by Rev. Richard W. Davies

Before the Revolutionary War, today's Pittsburgh was in the district of West Augusta County, Virginia. The Church of England was the Established Church for this colony. Colonial law imposed on the clergy and lay members of the church vestry certain civil duties, such as "processioning" or marking the boundaries of tracts of land; looking after illegitimately born children, caring for the needs of the poor, aged, sick and destitute, and for matters pertaining to religion and public morals. Heavy fines were imposed by the government if vestrymen were remiss in their legal duties as civil servants. The clergy had the civil obligation to record all vital statistics, subject to censure by the governor and council. The enforced tax (tith) on the colonists paid for this work imposed upon the church. The concept of separation of church and state was not yet proposed.

When a church family took a sick or abandoned person into their home, a request could be made to the church vestry for reimbursement of expenses. When the sick person died, a request for payment might include the making of a coffin, to provide linen or a bear skin to lay the body on, digging the grave, and, strange to report, to purchase liquor to serve at the funeral. The record of Trinity Church, Staunton, Virginia, shows the request that at the funeral of a certain poor woman, allowance was made for two quarts of rum, a gallon of whiskey, and five quarts of beer.

A widow submitted this request, November 18, 1773: *"Whereas, took William to my house in very low condition, destitute of any help for himself either in body or goods, therefore provided a bed for him and attended him for nine days and he died. I therefore provided a coffin and sheet and a gallon and half liquor and had him buried in a decent manner according to his station, which I hope you will take into consideration as I am not of great ability to be at so much expense and trouble, which is from your humble servant. Widow Allison."*

We have Virginia Court Records which show that Maj. William Lea and David Steel (both buried in our Burial Ground) and Gen. John Neville, et. al., were directed to do these same civil tasks in the Chartiers Valley.

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