The Alexandria Almshouse was a publicly funded poorhouse and workhouse, in which the needy could find refuge and the courts often sentenced people for vagrancy or indebtedness. Tenants worked hard for their sustenance. The Almshouse was built about 1801, and included almost twenty acres of land, which the residents farmed for food. In 1850, among the forty-one occupants were two elderly African-American women, Eve Dorsey, age 102, and Rachel Hodges, age 100. This building remained in use as a poorhouse until a larger, modern facility was built outside of Manassas in 1926, for the joint use of Alexandria and four nearby counties of Northern Virginia.

The Civil War had little effect on the crowded Almshouse, and in January 1862, the keeper recorded thirty-eight residents (plus 8 members of his own family), along with 3 horses, 2 cows, 1 bull, 19 sheep, 26 hens, 4 roosters and 5 ducks. After the war, the land was also used by the City for other purposes, such as a dog kennel.

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An Object Lesson. A young woman, clumsy in appearance, although laboring the hard life of a factory girl, was taken ill last night at a factory in this city. She persuaded her employer to leave the factory early, and was permitted to go to her lodgings. She had to carry on her back a large bundle of goods. She walked to the streetcar, and was about to enter a car, when an elderly man, upon discovering her plight, took the bundle from her back and carried it for her. She was so startled that she fell down the steps, and was found unconscious. When she awoke, she was surrounded by a crowd of factory workers, who encouraged her to keep up her struggle for a better life. The Almshouse served many purposes: shelter for the needy, a work facility for petty criminals, and even a holding place for undesirable.

Alexandra Gazette, September 22, 1904

Alexandria purchased a large tract of land outside the city in 1800, and built the Almshouse over the next two years. The building served the needy for almost 125 years and provided temporary shelter during a tornado in 1927. The house was sold to Robert C. Frame in August 1928, and he re-opened it as a six-room tourist hotel. When Frame defaulted on the mortgage, the City purchased the property back in March 1935. Eugene Simpson Stadium was built on the land, and the Recreation Department used the building for storage. The original Almshouse building was torn down in 1952.

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The Almshouse was originally situated in a vacant portion of the county outside the city limits. The Town of Potomac (today’s Del Ray) and the Potomac Yard railroad facility built up around it at the beginning of the 20th Century. This view looks north in 1923, with the Almshouse in the foreground, near the intersection of Monroe Avenue and Jefferson Davis Highway (U.S. Route 1).

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