

TEWKSBURY GAZETTE

Tewksbury Historical Society
P.O. Box 522
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NEWSLETTER
JULY 2025

TEWKSBURY'S FIRST NEWSPAPER

Children at Tewksbury Almshouse and Hospital

This month, the Tewksbury Historical Society found a CD in its archives with many images of Tewksbury Hospital over time, covering the 1890's to 1970's. Most of the photographs have been seen before, but there are several with children at the hospital worth sharing.



1942—Outside at Tewksbury—Children's Hospital Building

There are two notable books by David Wagner Ph.D., Professor of Sociology at the University of Southern Maine, 1988 to 2016. In the 2008, *Ordinary People, In and Out of Poverty In the Gilded Age*, he explores the lives of the poor in the three decades after the Civil War and Tewksbury's Almshouse is a large part of that discussion. In 2005, Wagner published, *The Poorhouse, America's Forgotten Institution*. There is also a third book by Wagner, 2012, *The "Miracle Worker" and the Transcendentalist: Annie Sullivan, Franklin Sanborn, and the Education of Helen Keller*, a look into the lives of Sullivan, Sanborn and Keller.

Below is a very brief look into the beginnings of Massachusetts almshouses and the children in these institutions from Wagner's, *Ordinary People*.

Background:

In Massachusetts, 1852, three state almshouses were approved, Monson, Bridgewater and Tewksbury. The almshouses represented the state's first venture into care of the poor, a role previously filled exclusively by the cities and towns. In 1866, the Monson site was redesignated as the State Primary School, formalizing its association with impoverished children.

As Monson was typically the site for placement of children and families in the State after 1866, the number of children at Tewksbury declined in the years following that designation.

Additionally, by the middle 1800s, another mindset was emerging, which was looking to remove the insane from the poorhouses. Dorothy Dix (1802-1887), advocate for the poor mentally ill, was a leader in this movement. She sought to also have blind and deaf, then orphans, delinquent children and mothers removed from poorhouses. The thinking was that the poorhouse populations were a bad influence on the future lives of the children.

Children Admissions to Tewksbury:

After the Civil War, the population at Tewksbury was the largest among the three State Almshouses due to the industrialization of Lowell and Boston drawing those looking for work as millhands as well as work on the expansion of the area's railroads.

In the 1865 Annual Report of Tewksbury Hospital it was stated, "...protect the younger inmates, the children, from the contaminating influences of the older in their sin and misery..." It was recognized that children placed in almshouses ended up in almshouses as adults. It was soon after that realization that children began to be placed in family settings in rural America, with hopes that their future lives would resemble the ideals found there.

In Massachusetts it was difficult to implement this theory. The staff at the almshouses had to see the crying children being separated from their upset parents. So, they began to let children up to 4 years of age stay with their parents at the almshouses. They also would not force 15 to 17 year olds away from their parents.

At Tewksbury Almshouse, in 1865, one in three of the population there were children and by 1895, this was down to one in fifteen, due to the Monson State Primary School and the new admissions policies.

Annie Sullivan:

In 1876, Annie Sullivan, born in Agawam 1866, came to Tewksbury Almshouse with her brother James- she was age 10, he was 5 with hip disease. Her mother had died and her father was a poor farmer who could not take care of his children. Their sister, 3 years of age, was given to an aunt. Annie was partially blind from an infection. Her brother Jimmy died 3 months after arriving at Tewksbury from tuberculosis. Annie's time at Tewksbury Almshouse is described as gruesome.

Over the next four years at Tewksbury, however, Annie heard of schools for the blind and the South Boston, Perkins School for the Blind. Her desire for education grew. One day, in 1880, the State Board of Charities and Corrections visited the Tewksbury Almshouse. Secretary of the Board, Franklin Sanborn was among them. Annie had heard of his work related to the Perkins School and she cried out upon seeing him that day, 'Mr. Sanborn, Mr. Sanborn...I want to go to school!' He arranged for her transfer to Perkins later that year as a charity case. This led to Annie becoming the teacher to Helen Keller.

It has been questioned why Annie and her brother, Jimmy were admitted to the Tewksbury Almshouse in 1876, while most children were brought to Monson's State Primary School established there in 1866 or placed with rural families per the new admissions policies. There has only been speculation in answer to this.

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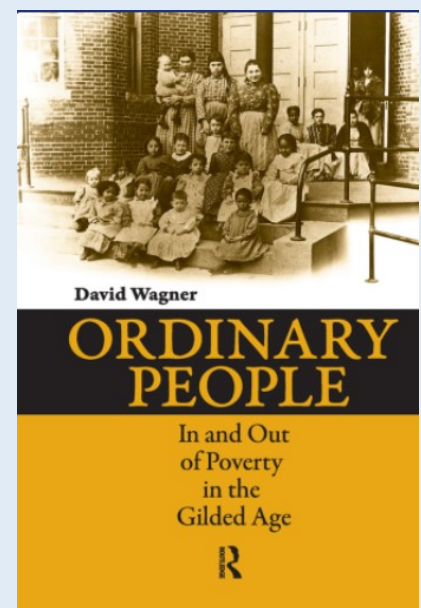
Images:

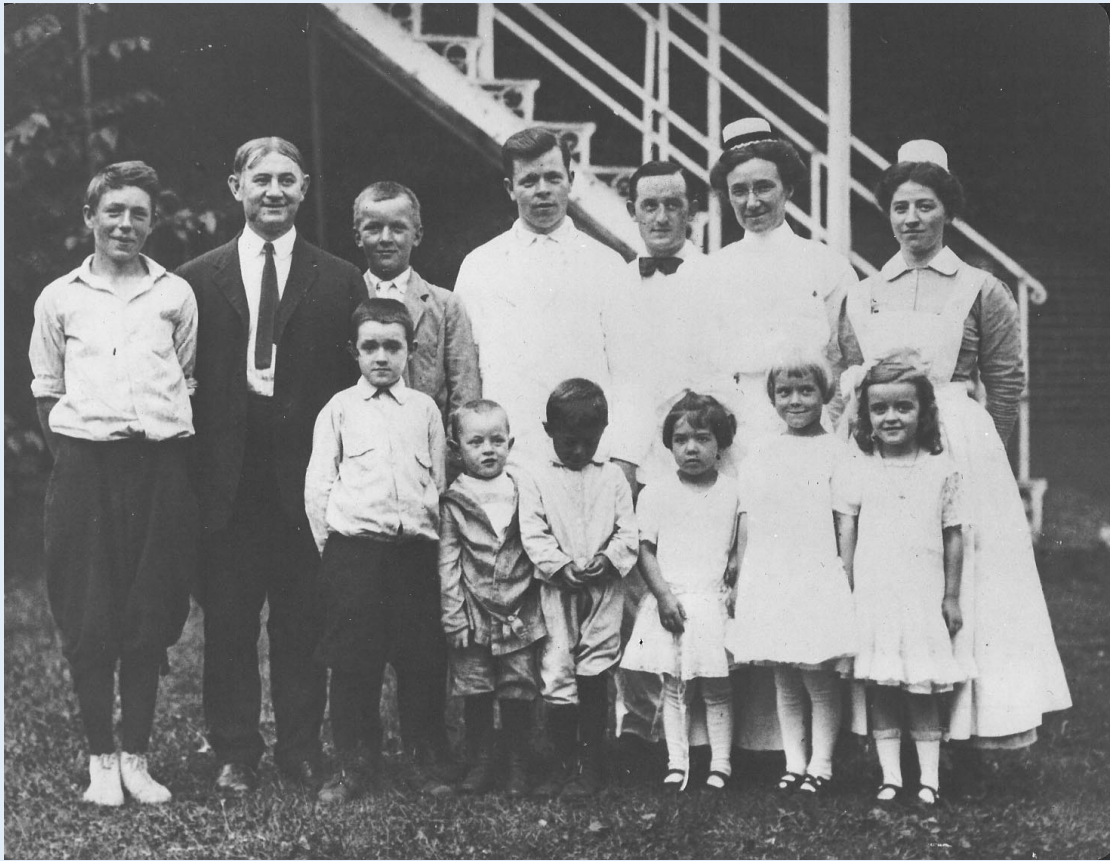
The following images are from the years 1890 to 1966 from our recently found CD of images from Tewksbury. The captions are as found, with some notations.



1890 Photo of Children's Ward in Women's House, at Tewksbury.

This image is used by author David Wagner, on the cover of his 2008 book, *Ordinary People, In and Out of Poverty In the Gilded Age*. Wagner explores the lives of the poor in the three decades after the Civil War and Tewksbury's almshouse is a large part of that discussion.





Nurse Nichols on right with children of the hospital. (Circa 1900)



Undated image of mothers with their babies at the hospital.



Young mother feeds her newborn, undated, circa 1940.



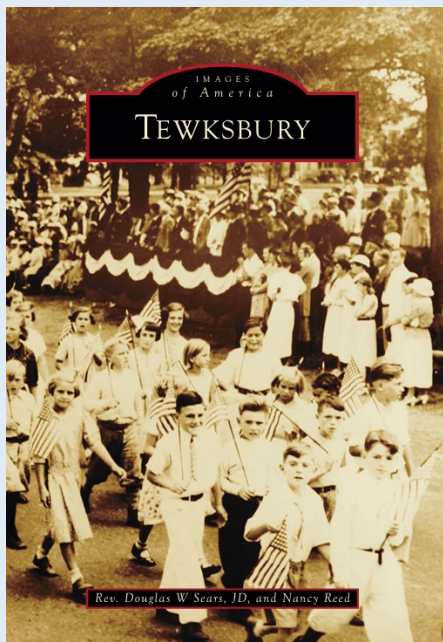
1942 –Children playing outside the Children's Hospital at Tewksbury



1960— Young children of the hospital



Undated image of nurses with children at the hospital, noted 1966.



Images of America: Tewksbury

By Rev. Douglas W. Sears, J.D. and Nancy Reed

Arcadia Publishing brings together the best history books for a close-up look at American history, and provides a unique take on local history and culture.

Book Price: \$24.99 (Cash or Check to the Society)

Our new book includes Tewksbury images from our collection from the late 1800s to the 1970s.

Beginning as an agricultural community, along with fishing in the Merrimack, Shawsheen, and Concord Rivers, industries such as dairies, tanneries, furniture making, sawmills, blacksmith shops, and even a soap factory prospered during the 1800s. Greenhouses began to spring up in the late 1800s. In the 1970s, Tewksbury was deemed the Carnation Capital of the World for its production and cultivation talents. In 1934, at the town's 200th Anniversary Celebration, citizens celebrated its beginnings and growth with pride and patriotism. Today, public art includes figures from Tewksbury's past by renowned resident sculptor Mico Kaufman.

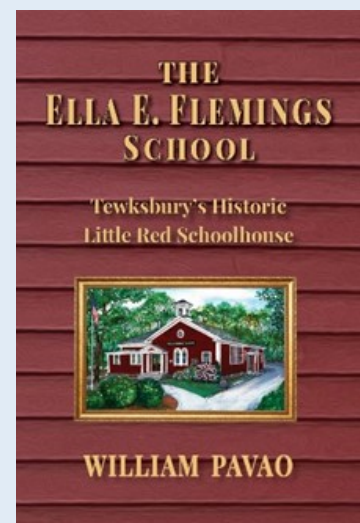
The Ella E. Flemings School Book:

by Bill Pavao

The history of Tewksbury's 1859 one room schoolhouse is explored in detail with images and interviews by teacher, historian and author Bill Pavao.

*Thanks to the author,
the Tewksbury Historical Society
will receive profits on books that we sell.*

Book Price: \$20.00 (Cash or check to the Society)



Please Contact: vpres@tewksburyhistoricalsociety.org to order these books !

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