

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Vanguard

November/December 2006

Veterans Day 2006

Telehealth Programs

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Native American Veteran Outreach



140 Years of Service to Veterans

Three of VA's oldest facilities trace their history to one of the last acts signed into law by President Lincoln.

Three of VA's oldest facilities—Togus, Milwaukee and Dayton—will celebrate a proud heritage this year: 140 years of providing service to veterans. They began after the Civil War as the nation's first soldiers' homes, each opening between October 1866 and December 1867. Some of the nation's richest history lies within the walls of these iconic spaces and they are all currently under consideration for National Historic Landmark status.

Originally called the National Asylum for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, the establishing law was written during the last winter of the Civil War, when no clear winner of the war was yet evident. Signed on March 3, 1865, it was among the last acts signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln before his untimely death. The word "asylum" was changed to "home" by law on Jan. 23, 1873.

The National Asylum was established for officers and men of the volunteer forces of the United States (not Confederates) who had been totally disabled by wounds received or sickness contracted while in the line of duty during the war. Many came out of the war addicted to opium and pain-killing drugs, including alcohol, due to their wounds—both physical and psychological.

The soldiers' home was a civilian extension of the services offered to soldiers during the war by the Army, U.S. Sanitary Commission, and U.S. Christian Commission. Chairmen of both commissions were on a list of 100 prominent citizens, including military leaders like Gen. William T. Sherman and Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, aboli-

tionists, clergymen and politicians, called by Congress to form the corporate body of the home. That number soon proved unwieldy, so on March 21, 1866, Congress passed an amendment establishing a 12-member board of managers to administer the home.

In their early days, the soldiers' homes operated in a military manner and adhered to Army rules of conduct. Home residents were called "inmates" or "beneficiaries" until 1883; thereafter they were referred to as "members." Their uniforms and medical supplies came from the Army's quartermaster and medical departments and "inmates" were assigned to "companies" within the home. Punishment was rendered to those who went AWOL.

Despite its military administrative structure, the homes offered holistic care for disabled veterans who were residents. This was a new concept in the 19th century. The homes were not mere shelter, but were microcosms with amenities that rivaled urban communities.

Besides military components such as offices, barracks, mess halls and commissaries, most homes had a chapel that offered both Catholic and Protestant services, a theater or amusement hall, pool hall, library, bandstand, pond or lake, a depot with rail service on site or nearby, hospital, post office, cemetery, and even a jail. Some had zoos, conservatories, ornate landscaping and greenhouses. Care of veterans went beyond providing the basics of food and shelter: occupational training, rehabilitation, religious services, on-site medical care, cultural and social activities treated the whole man.

Togus

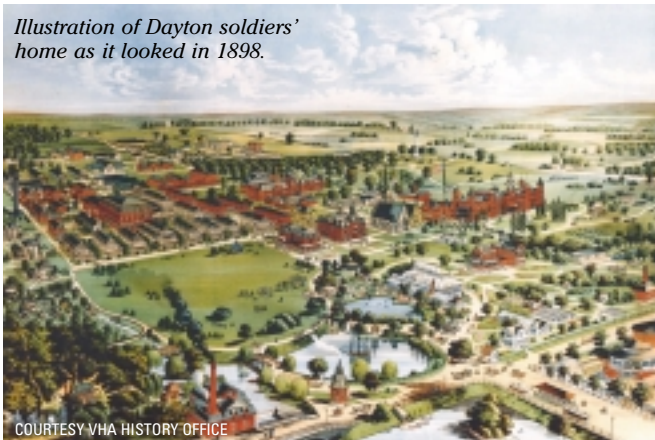
The first national soldiers' home for Civil War veterans was almost established at Point Lookout, Md., but the site was rejected, resulting in Augusta, Maine, being the first home to open in the fall of 1866. Known as the Eastern Branch, the home occupied a former resort hotel known as Togus Springs. The first "inmates" arrived in October 1866, but official dedication didn't occur until November.

During the 19th century, a shoe manufactory operated at this site and produced shoes for all of the homes. In official records, the site was first referred to as "Togus," instead of Augusta, during the summer of 1879. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, president of the board of managers, known as "Beast Butler" from his occupation of New Orleans during the Civil War, was heavily involved in the development of this site.

Milwaukee

After inducements by the Lady Managers of the Wisconsin Soldiers' Home and the city of Milwaukee, the second home—known as the Northwestern Branch—opened in Milwaukee in May 1867. In October 1868, the board of managers established a ward for insane men at the home.

Illustration of Dayton soldiers' home as it looked in 1898.



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Barracks and quad at Togus soldiers' home.



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In 1869, Mr. L.B. Schwabe of Boston offered approximately 2,000 books to establish a library on site, and the board accepted his offer.

Dayton

The third home—known as the Central Branch—was almost established at White Sulphur Springs, Ohio, but railroad accommodations for veterans could not be assured, so a donation by the citizens of Dayton and transfer of the Ohio Soldiers' Home resulted in Dayton being selected. Buildings and lumber from nearby Camp Chase, which served as a prisoner of war camp during the war, were used as temporary structures for the Dayton home as early as September 1867. The home officially opened in late 1867.

Lewis B. Gunckel, an attorney and politician who served as secretary of the board of managers, was heavily involved in the selection and development of this home as well as the Milwaukee home. Rev. William Earnshaw, who earlier worked with the Army and laid out the Memphis and Stone's River national cemeteries, was elected as chaplain at the Dayton home in September 1867 and spent the remainder of his career there. Dayton was the busiest home and housed more veterans than any other from 1865 to 1930.

In all, 11 national soldiers' homes were opened and integrated into the newly established Veterans Administration in 1930. These old homes reflect how the forefathers chose to care for and honor the soldiers who fought to keep the country united as one nation. Their creation changed the nation's attitude toward the care of soldiers after the battle—a legacy that continues at VA today. **VA**

By Darlene Richardson

Illustration of Main Building at Milwaukee soldiers' home.



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