

# Abbreviated History Page

## Narrative Overview

Naval Medical Center, Portsmouth, Is the Oldest Continuously Running Hospital in the Navy. 4,300 Officers, Sailors and Civilians Work in Locations from Yorktown to Chesapeake to Deliver Health Care to the 420,000 Active Duty Members, Family Members and Retirees Living in Hampton Roads. These Men and Women Carry on a Tradition of Caring and Service to Their Country That Dates Back to Revolutionary Times.

The Site of this Ceremony Is the Approximate Site of the Circa-1776 Fort Nelson. Built in the Mid-1770's as a Colonial Defense, the Fort Was Captured on May 9, 1779 by British Naval Commander Sir George Collier, Who Describes the Battle for Us:

*"It Was Agreed Between the Commodore and the General, That a Joint Attack upon the Fort, by Sea and Land, Should Be Made Early in the Morning; . . . To Batter it from the River, and the Troops to Storm it at the Same Time. The Troops Soon Took Possession of the Rebels' Works, Which Were Found of Astonishing Strength Towards the River; The Parapet Was Fourteen Feet High and Fifteen Feet Thick, Surrounded with Strong Timber . . . The Town of Portsmouth, Within Half a Mile of the Fort, Was Taken Possession of at the Same Time."*

Fort Nelson Was Later Abandoned by the British after the Construction of Fortress Monroe Was Completed. The Fort Nelson Site Lay Unused until 1827, When the Commissioners of the Naval Hospital Fund Were Granted Their Request to Build the First Naval Hospital on the Site. To Save Money, the Bricks of the Old Fort Were Used in the Construction of the Hospital. To Pay for the Construction, Every Sailor and Marine, Officer and Enlisted, Were Taxed Twenty Cents. The Cornerstone for the Country's First Naval Hospital Was Laid on April Second, 1827. John Haviland, a Philadelphia Architect, Designed and Oversaw the Construction of the Hospital. The Hospital Admitted its First Patients in 1830, Although Only One Wing Was Ready for Occupation. The First Hospital Building, Which Stands at the Opposite End of Hospital Point, Was Finally Completed in 1833. Surgeon Thomas Williamson Was the Hospital's First Medical Officer, and Lieutenant J. J. Young Was the First Superintendent. The Early Hospital Superintendents Were Officers of the Line. In 1842, Shortly after the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery Was Established, Command Responsibilities Were Given to the Medical Corps. Naval Hospital, Portsmouth Saw Relatively Few Patients During its First Decade. In 1847, the Hospital Treated its First War Casualties as Patients Were Brought in During the Mexican-American War. In 1855, Naval Hospital Portsmouth Operated its First Humanitarian Mission as the Secretary of

the Navy Authorized the Hospital to Treat Civilian Victims of the Yellow Fever Epidemic That Was Sweeping Hampton Roads. The Hospital Saw Nearly 600 Patients from July to November of 1855. The Secretary of the Navy Commended the Hospital's Efforts in His Letter to Surgeon Lewis Willis Minor:

*"Now That the Terrible Pestilence with Which the Cities of Portsmouth and Norfolk Have Been Visited Has Greatly Subsided, and Is I Trust Wholly Subdued, it Is Due to You and Those Associated Professionally with You, Not Only to Impart the Praise Which the Commandant of the Norfolk Naval Station Deems to Be Due You and Them, but to Express the Appreciation in Which the Department Holds the Self-Sacrificing and Unflinching Spirit, in Acts of Humanity, Which Have Been Devoted to the Suffering Sick by the Medical Officers of the Navy Attached to the Naval Hospital near Norfolk. The Commandant of the Station Has Very Properly Remarked That 'It Is Proper to Bestow a Tribute of Praise upon the Medical Officers of That Institution. They Have Performed Their Duties Assiduously and Faithfully During Those Laborious and Trying Times,' In Which Sentiments the Department Fully Concur. Be Pleased to Make Known to Your Assistants How Highly Their Good Conduct During the Ravages of the Destroyer Is Appreciated.*

*I Am, Very Respectfully, Your Obedient Servant, J.C. Dobbin."*

On April 17, 1861, Virginia Voted to Secede from the Union. On the Twentieth, the Third Virginia Regiment Took Possession of Naval Hospital Portsmouth and Reinforced the Area by Erecting a Battery at Hospital Point. The Battery, Once Again Named Fort Nelson, Consisted of Two Eight-Inch Guns and 16 Thirty-Two Pounders. Surgeon George Blacknell, Who Had Been Surgeon in Charge from 1839-1842, Joined the Confederate Forces and Was Named Surgeon in Charge. The Hospital Remained in Confederate Hands until May 10, 1862, When McClellan's Army Began the Union Occupation of Norfolk. The Navy Regained Control in October 1864, and from That Time to the End of the War, Naval Hospital Portsmouth Was One the Busiest Navy Hospitals, Seeing its Patient Load Exceed 1,000 Patients Yearly for the Years 1864 and 1865. The Years Immediately Following the Civil War Are Marked by the Most Extensive Postwar Drawdown Our Military Has Ever Seen. On Several Occasions Unable to Meet Officers' Payroll, Navy Medical Care Also Suffered. In 1876, the Surgeon General of the Navy Described the State of Navy Medicine:

*"To Eke out Deficiencies in the Way of Nurses and Their Immediate Attendants on the Sick, the Most Undesirable Makeshifts Have Been Occasionally Resorted to. From the Necessity of the Case, Convalescent Patients, or the Least Infirm, Have Been Compelled to Take Care of*

*and Wait upon Their More Disabled or Helpless Comrades."*

The Navy Withstood the Drawdown, and in the 1880's Began to Grow Again. Navy Medicine Grew with the Developing Navy, Utilizing the Newest Technology to Support the Great White Fleet. In 1897, Naval Hospital Portsmouth Underwent its First Major Renovation, Which Included the Installation of its First X-Ray Machine. The Outbreak of the Spanish-American War Marked a New Era for Navy Medicine. War Was Declared on April 21st, and Five Days Later, the First Hospital Ship, Solace, Was Fitted out at Newport News Shipbuilding. By June, Solace Was Ready to Sail for Guantanamo. After the Destruction of the Spanish Fleet at Santiago, Solace Sorted American and Spanish Wounded to Naval Hospitals up and down the East Coast. Fifty-Five Wounded, Including Six Spanish Officers, Were Disembarked at Portsmouth. Captain Concas, Commander of the Spanish Vessel Infanta Maria Teresa, Describes His Stay at the Hospital:

*"Upon Our Arrival at Norfolk on July 16, We Were Taken to the Naval Hospital. The Reception Accorded Us at the Hospital by the Medical Director, Dr. Cleborne, and His Assistant, Dr. Kite, Will Always Constitute One of the Pleasantest Remembrances of My Life. These Gentlemen Did All in Their Power to Alleviate Our Physical and Mental Suffering. They Treated Us with the Greatest Kindness, Showing Us Every Attention and Consideration... All These Attentions Were Not for Me Alone, Whose Rank May Have Justified Some Exception, Nor for the Officers, but for All; Every Sailor as Well as the Captain, Found Kind Brothers in These Gentlemen from the First Day to the Last."*

Three of the Spanish Prisoners Died from Their Wounds in the Hospital, and Are Buried in the Cemetery Here. Naval Hospital Portsmouth Enjoyed a Steady Period of Growth and Development Through the First World War. In 1909, Just under a Year after the Establishment of the Navy Nurse Corps, the First Nursing Program Was Established at Portsmouth. When War Was Declared on April 6, 1917, the Navy's Manpower Level Exploded from 70,000 in 1917 to 530,000 by the War's End. The Task of the Medical Department to Screen Members for Combat, Train Medical Staff for Field Duty and Treat the Injured Was Immense. Up until the Outbreak of War, Naval Hospital Portsmouth Averaged Just over Two Hundred Patients a Day. By March 1917, That Number Exceeded Fourteen Hundred Patients, and the Patient Load Reached an All-Time High in July of 1918 with Two Thousand, Two Hundred and Fifty. In 1917, Work Was Begun to Enlarge the Hospital. Thirty-Eight New Patient Care Buildings Were Hastily Erected as Well as Four Additional Barracks for Corpsmen. The Greatest Threat to the Health of Our Navy During World War One Came Not from the German Fleet but from the Influenza Virus. Fifty Three Hundred Sailors and Marines Died

from Influenza, in 1918, Nearly Double the Amount of Total Navy and Marine Corps Casualties During the Entire War. The Post War Period Brought with it Another General Military Drawdown. But During That Period, Navy Medicine Took on a New Mission---Graduate Medical Education. In 1937, the First Internship Programs Were Established at Naval Hospital Portsmouth. With the Onset of World War II, Naval Hospital Portsmouth Again Mobilized a Rapid Expansion Effort to Meet the Demand of the War Effort. Two Four Story Wings Were Added to Building One, and Chapel, Bachelor Officer Quarters, Occupational Health, and Library Facilities Were Constructed. After World War II, Naval Hospital Portsmouth for the First Time Escaped a Postwar Scale-Down. The Continued Development of Military Facilities in Hampton Roads During this Period Called for Newer and Larger Medical Facilities. Construction for Building 215, the High-Rise Most People Associate with Portsmouth, Began in 1957 and Was Completed in 1960. The next Significant Milestone in the History Came with the Close of the Vietnam War. As Prisoners of War Finally Made the Trip Home, Twelve of Them Came to Portsmouth to Convalesce. Pictures of These Heroes Still Hang in the Ward Where They Were Treated, with the Following Inscription:

*"Here These Officers Were United with Their Families and Returned to Full Health."*

Through the Last Two Decades, the Hospital Has Continued to Grow and Advance. In 1990, Construction Was Begun on the New Acute Care Facility, with an Expected Completion Date of 1998. In 1993, During a Reorganization of Navy Medicine, Commanding Officer, Naval Hospital Portsmouth, Became, Commander, Naval Medical Center, Portsmouth. Naval Medical Center, Portsmouth Stands on the Brink of a New Century. The Challenges Are Manifold, the Opportunities Limitless. We Are Especially Fortunate to Have Such a Rich History to Fall Back on for Guidance as We Prepare for the Future.