

A History of the Valley Forge General Hospital

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The story of the Valley Forge Army Hospital begins on April 1, 1942, when a directive from the Office of the Chief of Engineers in Washington, DC authorized construction of this general hospital on its present site. On May 26, 1942, actual work was begun. Colonel Henry Beeuwkes, Medical Corps, reported as the first Commanding Officer in June 1942. He established his headquarters in the farmhouse located on the post property. This farm house was ultimately to become building #100, and the residence of the Hospital Commanding Officer.

On George Washington's birthday, the 22nd of February 1943, and with ceremonial simplicity, the Valley Forge General Hospital was opened. Nearly a year later, on September 26th the Army post was formally dedicated. In contrast to its quiet beginnings, this later occasion was marked by distinguished guests and a full military dress parade, fitting symbols of the transition in this medical base from infancy to full maturity. Listed among the guests were Major General George F. Lull, Deputy Surgeon General, U.S. Army, Justice Owen J. Roberts, Associate Justice, US Supreme Court, and Brigadier General Milton G. Baker, Commander Pennsylvania State Guard, and former Commandant of Valley Forge Military Academy.

Endowed with the clear heritage of the Valley Forge of 1777-1778, Valley Forge General Hospital was admirably equipped to carry forward its fine historical tradition. Situated on 182 acres of farm land in Chester County, it was composed of 98 brick buildings connected by a labyrinth of corridors; and contained almost 2,000 beds. In addition there were 26 other structures that housed the necessary service functions of a small city. Built at a cost of \$10 million dollars, its replacement value today would be in excess of \$60 million.

Every modern facility was here for the care and rehabilitation of wounded men. There were eight operating rooms, mobile x-ray units for bedfast patients, five complete dental offices, and complete chemical and bacteriological laboratories.

The staff consisted of 265 officers and nurses and a large detachment of enlisted men and WACS. The officer personnel, many of whom had temporary homes in this area, came from most of the 48 states. The enlisted men lived on the post in clean, well-heated brick barracks.

During World War II, the Hospital gained international recognition of its work in the fields of plastic surgery and eye surgery, and in the rehabilitation of the war blinded. It became a research center in the development of the acrylic (artificial) eye and for investigation into causes and treatment of infectious hepatitis. After 1952, its specialties

were the treatment of patients with diseases of the chest and those with neuropsychiatric disorders. In addition to these specialties, patients with virtually every medical and surgical complaint were seen and treated.

In 1968 the orthopedic center was established to care for patients returning from Southeast Asia. The patient census was made up of active and retired military personnel and their authorized dependents, with a day-to-day occupancy of about 1100.

Before the hospital closed in 1974, it provided logistical support to locally based activities and to satellite units in the Philadelphia area. Approximately 1800 personnel, both military and civilian were required to provide the necessary services of its basic mission. Besides its professional staff, the hospital had a wide variety of occupations found in any small community.

This article can imply only a small part of the significant history of the Valley Forge General Hospital. Men from every battle theater of the world were represented in the wards and private rooms of this hospital and were the recipients of the best care that a grateful Nation could offer.

Operating slightly over 31 years, the hospital cared for nearly 200,000 patients spanning three major conflicts with peacetime intervals. It was one of seven installations of its kind operated by the Surgeon General and was the only Army general hospital, in addition to Walter Reed General Hospital in Washington, D.C. that lay east of the Mississippi River.

It is significant that Valley Forge General Hospital was the only one of 65 general hospitals named for a place rather than a military or medical-military personality. This demonstrated the Valley Forge heritage and its meaning to our nation's development. In the winter of 1777-1778 an ill-equipped and barely functioning militia was turned into a fully functional army at Valley Forge.

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