

A History of the Mountain Branch of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers



“The City within a City”

The early efforts to reward this country’s war veterans were based on England’s policy of giving **land grants** to the victors. During the first part of the Civil War, it was the concern of women in northern states that led to the first civilian sponsored “homes” for disabled veterans. Men were being discharged by the hundreds to the streets with physical problems that kept them from finding employment. Some were so severe; they later died from complications of their wounds. Such “homes” were created in Boston, Philadelphia, Cleveland and Chicago. These ladies raised funds to operate the “homes” and raised community interest in the plight of the disabled veteran.

“With malice toward none; with charity toward all; with the firmness in the right, as God gives us the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; **to care for him who shall have borne the battle**, and for his widow and his orphan – to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.” With these few words in the Second Inaugural Address, Abraham Lincoln established a benchmark and pointed this country in a new direction related to the federal government’s responsibility toward our veterans. His legislative agenda for this second term (1865) included a National Soldiers Home with several branches spread across the United States.

President Lincoln was assassinated before he could put this idea into law but a grateful nation did not forget. The National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers was established by Congress in 1865 with the **first Branch built by 1867**. Eleven board members, appointed by Congress governed the “Home” and eight original Branches were built (Togus, Maine; Hampton, Virginia; Dayton, Ohio; Marion, Illinois; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Leavenworth, Kansas; West Los Angeles, California; and Danville, Illinois). After these Branches were built, Congress decided that individual states could finance their own Soldier’s Homes if they wished **but there would be no more Federal funding** for new Branches.

Congressman Walter P. Brownlow represented the people of the First District of Tennessee (an early version of Jimmy Quillen). He had already secured federal funds to build bridges and roads in this area as well as the National Fish Hatchery in Erwin and the Andrew Johnson National Cemetery in Greeneville. He was determined to have a Branch of the National Soldiers Home built in this District. The Board of Governors mentioned earlier refused to give him an audience reminding Brownlow of the national policy (NO NEW BRANCHES!). He requested five minutes of their time and actually took only three. In those three minutes he reminded the Board of three things: (1) East Tennessee furnished the Union 30,000 volunteers, more than any other state in the South. There were currently 18,250 Union pensioners living in the First District. (2) The Board had already built a Branch in Hampton, Virginia, a state where there were no Union Volunteer soldiers of record and (3) The Congress had recently approved the construction of a million dollar federal prison in Atlanta. Weren't our volunteer Union soldiers deserving of as much as these convicts? The Board took an immediate vote and recommended to Congress that a Branch be built in the First District.

Brownlow along with the Johnson City Board of Trade (similar to today's Chamber of Commerce) distributed 10,000 copies of the Board's report to Congress and Brownlow's comments, to members of the Grand Army of the Republic (early version of the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans and Veterans of Foreign Wars). Brownlow was able to secure 7,000-signed petitions from members of the GAR, which were forwarded to Congress. **In 1900, Brownlow's bill passed Congress unanimously.**

Initially Brownlow asked Greeneville which they would prefer: a federal courthouse or the recently approved Branch of the Soldiers Home. Greeneville, home of former President Andrew Johnson, was a larger more populated town than Johnson City and the Congressman felt their voters deserved first choice. They selected the courthouse because of its status and importance at the time.

In 1901, Johnson City was a village of 5,000 inhabitants. The total assessed value of all property in the village was \$750,000. Mr. Brownlow's project was being estimated to cost over 2.1 million dollars. In the three years it took to build the facility, Johnson City's property value **and** population doubled. 475 acres of farmland was purchased from four families (Lyle, Miller, Hale, Martin) at a price of \$50 per acre. The Board of Governors chose the site for its view of the mountains and its access to fresh water. The property spanned an area from Tennessee Street, along the railroad line all the way to the National Guard Armory, a distance in excess of one mile. The site was just over one mile from the Johnson City Limits. Over 1,000 workers were employed for the three-year initial construction period and a total of 3 million dollars in construction costs were spent in Johnson City during that time.

After the facility was occupied in 1903, it was estimated that visitors to the Branch alone spent \$30,000 annually in the village while the soldiers spent \$40,000 in pensions. The grounds of all the original Branches quickly became tourist attractions and the Mountain Branch was no exception. A hotel was built near the present post office to accommodate visitors. It had a barbershop and restaurant to serve veterans and visitors alike. This

Branch sported a zoo housing bear, elk, deer, and peacock. There were two large lakes, swans, a tennis court, and cultivated rose garden. A full time horticulturist was employed to constantly refresh the grounds. Veterans of the Home and traveling semi-professional baseball teams utilized the newly built baseball field complete with grandstands. The gazebo was the site for weekly concerts by the Branch Band, which were very popular with Johnson City citizens on Sunday afternoon.

The original construction included 37 buildings. There were 8 barracks for 2500 men, a mess hall (the Clock Tower), a 4 ward infirmary, officers/surgeons quarters (homes), administrative building, power house, laundry, ice house, hotel, chapel, theatre, band stand (gazebo), jail, and morgue. Other buildings were added until the project was completed in 1910.

Mr. Brownlow wrote Andrew Carnegie and asked for a contribution to assist in building a library, something not included in the original proposal. Mr. Carnegie responded with a note that said, "I'm pleased to comply with your request" and sent a check for \$25,000, which covered the cost of the complete building. Mr. Brownlow wrote the major publishers of the day and asked them to donate books. They complied with 16,000 volumes. He also wrote the leading music companies and secured all band instruments for the Home band. As an added bonus, Congressman Brownlow petitioned the Johnson City Commission to extend the trolley lines out to the Home. This was approved in November 1901. The trolley ran 10 hours per day and cost five cents each way.

The Branches were designed as domiciles rather than hospitals. Each had an infirmary to care for the members who became acutely ill, as the concept of veteran's hospitals had not been fully developed.

Most of the labor to run the Branch was furnished by the veterans living there. This was common among all Branches including the Mountain Branch. The veterans admitted to all Soldiers Homes were expected to work, within the confines of their physical abilities. The Branch had a 250-acre farm with dairy cattle, a coal fired power plant, a dining hall feeding 2500 people per day and an infirmary watching over the sick. The residents grew produce in the garden, produced flowers in the greenhouse for the infirmary and cemetery, ran the fire department, laundry, steam plant, and security force. Those refusing to work were expelled from the Home. There was a "member-guard" force to enforce the rules and regulations as well as a jail for confinement. There was no shortage of work assignments for the residents of the Home.

In the beginning veterans were supplied surplus Civil War uniforms when they entered the Home. They drew two pairs of blue pants, two pairs of black shoes, four pairs of socks, three pairs of drawers, three shirts, a military dress blue coat, a pair of gloves, hat, cap, and suspenders. The barracks were organized essentially military in nature with "companies" of men supervised by Captains and Sergeants. The full time staff had military officer rank and also wore uniforms. The organizational style persisted until World War II.

During the period 1919-1921, veterans were coming home from Europe and World War I with lung scarring from gas attacks, tuberculosis outbreaks, and a worldwide epidemic of influenza. Space had to be made to accommodate their medical needs. At the Mountain Branch Civil War veterans were encouraged to move into the community so the space could be utilized for these new veterans. Large porches were built onto the barracks because of the belief that fresh mountain air would have a healing effect on these young men. This began the change from the original residential concept to a medically focused facility. At this same time the Branches underwent an official name change, now being called "National Sanitariums". As wars came and went, changes took place in the social fabric of this country and the need for domiciliary care changed too. Today we have community resources available that were not possible 100 years ago. We have assisted living facilities, community nursing homes, Social Security benefits, VA pensions and compensation, personal retirement programs, all of which were not available to our veterans when President Lincoln conceived the National Homes. The lessening demand and need for such facilities has greatly reduced the number of beds taxpayers are asked to support.

As health care has changed, so has the domiciliary. We have come from the concept of a "Home" where veterans lived because there were no other community options, to a short-term residential facility supporting our hospital with its mission of providing health services. Veterans come to Johnson City predominantly from Tennessee, Virginia, Kentucky, and North Carolina to reside while receiving treatment for cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and other diseases. Many come to the "Mountain Home Branch" because they live too far from medical care in their own communities and have nowhere to live while seeking treatment. Veterans then return to their communities as soon as clinically approved by medical staff.

Today the James H. Quillen Veterans Affairs Medical Center is a full service hospital with 111 beds, nursing home with 120 beds and a domiciliary with 348 beds. An annual operating budget of \$137 million includes \$81 million in salaries. Over 1255 employees work 24 hours a day giving excellent care to veterans. New construction has been going on at the Medical Center since 1990 with a new domiciliary, clinical services building, and emergency room. In the fall of 2003, the Mountain Branch of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers will celebrate its 100th year of service to America's veterans. We hope you will visit our campus during the Centennial to experience history with us.

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