MAIN BUILDING

NATIONAL HOME FOR DISABLED VOLUNTEER SOLDIERS

(BUILDING No. 2 • CLEMENT J. ZABLOCKI VETERANS AFFAIRS MEDICAL CENTER)

VIEW OF THE MAIN BUILDING, LOOKING NORTHWEST (CIRCA 1885)

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The Milwaukee Ladies Association was established in 1861 by a group of prominent Milwaukee women to provide relief for Civil War soldiers. By 1865 the organization was furnishing meals, lodging, and medical care to veterans in need, and had raised $100,000 for the construction of a building to house the Association's activities. That same year Congress established the National Asylum (later Home) for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, and the Board of Directors of the National Home system began searching for locations across the country to construct facilities. Partly because of the Association's already-established program, a site in Wood (then just outside the Milwaukee city limits) was selected for the first of the purpose-built Homes, and the Association's services and funding were subsequently subsumed by the government initiative.

Edward Townsend Mix, Milwaukee's most prominent architect, was selected to design the new facility. Construction began in 1868, and the Main Building was dedicated on 28 September 1869. The Main Building was designed by Mix in a popular Victorian Gothic style, with tall mansard roofs characteristic of the French Second Empire style. Decorative wood balconies, cast iron ornament, polychromatic roof slates, and metal roof cresting all contributed to the building's eclectic and picturesque design vocabulary. The Main Building was built of load-bearing masonry construction, with walls of Milwaukee "Cream City" brick resting on fieldstone foundations. Wood framing was used to support the floors and roofs. Cast iron columns were used in the dining hall to facilitate the large open space. Interior walls were plastered, typically above a wood wainscot.

As the National Home's principal building, the Main Building originally contained all of the institution's functions, including office, residential, medical, recreational, and religious facilities. In plan, the Main Building consisted of a prominent four-story (later five) central pavilion, generally housing administrative functions. Three-story symmetrical wings extending to the north and south consisted of central corridor on each floor, flanked by residential wards. A two-story wing to the west contained the dining hall. Laundry and other support services occupied the basement. The building's most prominent feature was its 113'-tall, eight-story tower at the main entrance, at the time the tallest structure in the state.

Despite its monumental size, almost from the beginning the Main Building was too small for the demands of caring for the region's veterans. In 1875-76 four corner towers, part of Mix's original design but omitted for financial reasons, were constructed, along with an addition to the dining hall. The dining hall was further expanded in 1889, and a new kitchen wing constructed, under the direction of the architect Henry C. Koch. During this time period, as well, a number of functions were moved out of the Main Building and into new purpose-built structures, including a hospital, a chapel, and a library (all designed by Koch), thus freeing up additional domiciliary space. The last major addition to the Main Building occurred in 1937, when the earlier kitchen wing was demolished and a new, larger kitchen wing constructed in the same location. The Main Building continued in use as a residential and treatment facility for veterans until the mid-1980s, when it was closed. The National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers in Milwaukee was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2010.

The documentation of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) of the Heritage Documentation Programs division of the National Park Service, Richard O'Connor, Chief. The project was sponsored by the Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Construction and Facilities Management, Kathleen Schamel, Federal Preservation Officer. Project planning was coordinated by Catherine Lavoie, Chief, HABS; and by John F. Brecheisen, Executive Assistant to the Director, Clement J. Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center (ZVAMC). The field work was undertaken and the measured drawings were produced by Project Supervisor Mark Schara AIA, HABS Architect; by HABS Architects Paul Davidson, Anne E. Kidd, and Jason McNatt; and by Architects Daniel De Sousa (Connecticut College) and Alexander Matsov (Kent State University). The historical report was written by HABS Historian Lisa P. Davidson. The large format photography was undertaken by HABS Photographer James W. Rosenthal. Assistance was provided by Robert H. Beller, Director, ZVAMC; and by the ZVAMC facilities maintenance staff.

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NHDVS DOCUMENTATION PROJECT, 2008-10
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