

IMAGES

... then and now



Buckingham Lodge
1861

Camp Dennison General Hospital 1862-1865

Camp Dennison came into being at the beginning of the Civil war in April 1861. Volunteers for the Union Army answered President Lincoln's call to suppress the rebellion of the Southern states, and many enrolled for 90-day enlistments. Thousands of Ohioans reported to Camp Dennison, named for the state governor. A spacious site with drill and parade grounds, it could house 12,000 to 15,000 men, had an ample supply of water, and had good railroad access to Cincinnati and Columbus. Additionally, its proximity to the Ohio River placed troops close to the Mason Dixon Line; and as Kentucky had not yet declared whether she would be a Confederate State, these troops could readily defend the port of Cincinnati if necessary.

Within several weeks, more than 15,000 men were in training at Camp Dennison. With overcrowding, exposure to the elements, and a coarse diet, many volunteers got sick. Each regiment had a surgeon, but there was no infirmary until the number of ill troops grew alarmingly large. Early on, the most common disease was measles, as many country boys had never been exposed; but typhoid fever, dysentery, malaria, rheumatism, and diarrhea affected many soldiers, who were treated in rudimentary shacks or a convenient barn nearby. So many of the 8th Ohio contracted typhoid fever, nicknamed "the disease of Camp Maggoty Hollow," that in August 1861 another regiment was sent to Virginia in their stead.

Recruits were rapidly trained and sent to campaigns in various theatres of war. In April 1862 in the Battle of Shiloh – the largest clash that ever took place in North America until then – 13,000 Northern soldiers were casualties, 8408 of them wounded. Boats went down the Ohio and Tennessee Rivers to retrieve the wounded. Cincinnati's hospitals were swamped, so a new 2300 bed hospital complex was established at Camp Dennison, using converted training barracks.

Even though each state generally took care of its own wounded, many from other states were sent to the hospital at Camp Dennison. The Governor of Indiana, accompanied by his wife, visited ailing Hoosier soldiers in person and provided each with a railroad pass to return home free of charge when well enough to do so.

The 56 hospital barracks were west of and parallel to the railroad line. Surgeon's quarters were located just west of each block of 5 barracks. Patients were treated and convalesced at the hospital, and then were dismissed or returned to the front when treatment was finished. Patients (along with the new recruits in training) needed medical care, food, clothing, and sanitation. It is likely that the Sanitary Commission (established June 1861), which had been instrumental in getting boats to transport the wounded from the Battle of Shiloh, provided supplies (e.g. cots, bed ticks, quilts, sheets, clothing, towels) to make the men more comfortable.

Dennison General Hospital was far superior to typical field hospitals. These were generally walled tents transported by wagons during campaigns. As the war progressed, the injured were taken from field hospitals by ambulance to divisional field hospitals beyond artillery range. Often overwhelmed by the wounded, field army doctors learned by first hand experience how to administer battlefield medicine. Those who were stabilized were moved back to better facilities on hospital trains. Back in Ohio, the barracks were more substantial, prolonged care was available, and doctors had ready access to medicines and supplies not always available at the battle scene.

In the Civil War surgery was still primitive and there was no knowledge of germ theory. However, advances were made in medicine by doctors who improvised to save lives and relieve agony. Public perception that anesthesia was not used for operations was incorrect; field physicians used chloroform, and general hospitals had access to ether. Novel approaches were developed in abdominal, chest, eye, plastic and orthopedic surgery. *(continued next month)*

