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A Home for Volunteers: Togus and the National Soldiers' Homes

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A Home for Volunteers: Togus and the National Soldiers' Homes

Abstract

The current U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs traces its origins to the Civil War. Before the Civil War, there had been some attempts to provide services for veterans but these benefits were solely for career military veterans and not volunteers. Since Civil War veterans were mostly volunteers, this became a problem. The services provided before this had been mostly in the form of homes like the U.S. Naval Asylum in Philadelphia where veterans could receive long-term care. Many felt that homes were the best way to care for soldiers and so, in March of 1865, legislation passed to create a national asylum for disabled volunteers. On November 10, 1866, the first branch of three national homes was established. At first, the branches were open to all Union soldiers who could prove a connection between their service and their injury. They then later welcomed veterans of the War of 1812 and the Mexican War as long as they didn't fight against the Union in the Civil War. Confederate veterans were never allowed. Each home had a barracks, dining halls, hospital, cemetery, and recreational facilities.

Keywords

Maine, Medical History, Savannah Labbe, Veterans

Disciplines

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Comments

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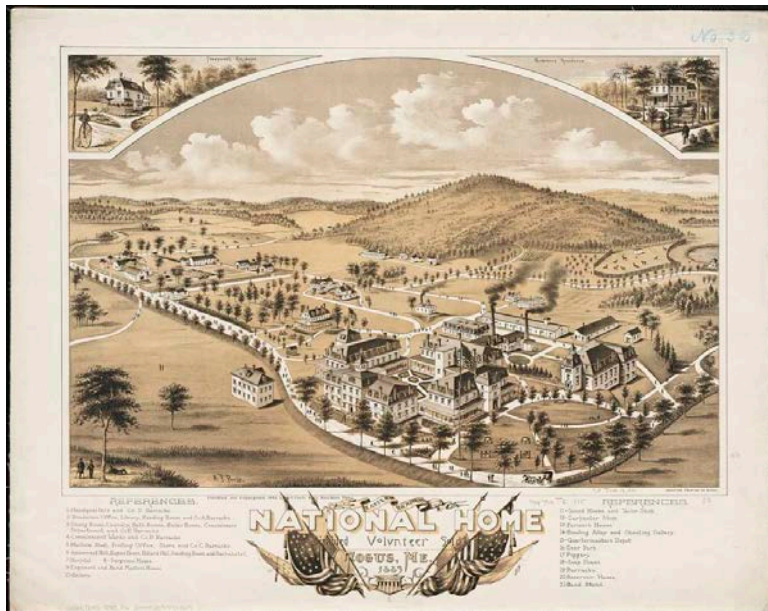
THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

A Home for Volunteers: Togus and the National Soldiers' Homes

By [Savannah Labbe '19](#)

The current U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs traces its origins to the Civil War. Before the Civil War, there had been some attempts to provide services for veterans but these benefits were solely for career military veterans and not volunteers. Since Civil War veterans were mostly volunteers, this became a problem. The services provided before this had been mostly in the form of homes like the U.S. Naval Asylum in Philadelphia where veterans could receive long-term care. Many felt that homes were the best way to care for soldiers and so, in March of 1865, legislation passed to create a national asylum for disabled volunteers. On November 10, 1866, the first branch of three national homes was established. At first, the branches were open to all Union soldiers who could prove a connection between their service and their injury. They then later welcomed veterans of the War of 1812 and the Mexican War as long as they didn't fight against the Union in the Civil War. Confederate veterans were never allowed. Each home had a barracks, dining halls, hospital, cemetery, and recreational facilities.



The eastern branch of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers in Togus, ME. Via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

The first branch was located in Togus, Maine. The other two were in Dayton Ohio and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Another branch would open soon after in Hampton, Virginia.

The Togus branch, being the first one, set the standard for all other branches to follow. This location was chosen because it had been a resort during the Civil War that had gone bankrupt, and so the buildings were already conducive for transformation into a soldiers' home. Togus comes from the Native American name Worromongtogus which means mineral water. This name was chosen for the mineral waters that were on the grounds. Horace Beals had been the original owner of Togus and spent \$200,000 in erecting hotel, stables, bowling alley, farmhouse, bathing house, and racetrack. Togus went bankrupt during the war and Beals died, causing his widow to sell it to the government for \$50,000. The government then transformed it into a veterans home, set up much like a military camp that welcomed its first veteran in 1866. It provided limited medical care out of a hospital that was completed in 1870. It was meant to provide the veterans with a sense of independence. It wasn't charity but an actual home.

In this home, the soldiers often worked. They could bring in extra money by working at the facility in places such as the library. Togus had a shoe factory whose purpose was to provide shoes for residents of all the homes. The factory ultimately failed but did provide the veterans with an opportunity to work for a little while. Togus continued to grow, reaching 200 residents in 1867. It suffered a tragedy in 1868, when, according to the *Daily Kennebec Journal*, a "fire broke out and turned out two hundred and seventy inmates, thirty-one of whom were on the sick list, into the open air of a severe winter's night." The sick were taken to private homes and the rest to Waverly Hall in Winthrop. This fire destroyed most of the buildings at Togus, making it so that three new, fireproof, buildings as well as an amusement hall were constructed. After this, Togus became not only a home for veterans but also a popular place for the public to come visit, have picnics, watch band and theater performances, and visit the zoo that was on the grounds. The *Daily Kennebec Journal* reported that "as many as two thousand," visited Togus yearly, the "most illustrious personage," being General Ulysses S. Grant in 1873.

The number of national home branches reached eleven by 1929 and provided vital services and care to many United States veterans. After World War I the number of wounded veterans coming home that needed care was more than the homes could provide. The homes eventually began transitioning into hospitals and medical facilities to treat wounded veterans. Eventually on July 21, 1930, President Herbert Hoover signed an executive order to create the Veterans Administration (VA), the forerunner to the Department of Veterans Affairs. This order made it so that the homes were taken over by the VA and repurposed. In the case of Togus, it was transformed from a home to a veterans' hospital that still operates today. Togus and other veterans' homes were predecessors of the social programs that exist today and were very important in laying the groundwork for these vital programs. Togus, "the great institution which the country has given to disabled defenders," was critical in establishing the programs that give back to those who sacrificed for their country.

Sources

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