

Lovell General Hospital: A Civil War-era Hospital in Portsmouth

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During the Civil War, US Army Surgeon General William A. Hammond authorized RI Gov. William Sprague to open a facility in the state to treat both the Union and Confederate wounded. It was one of 204 military Civil War-era hospitals that were initially commissioned. They decided on a site in Portsmouth Grove, an amusement park, hotel and event venue, with visitors arriving by horse and carriage or steamboat.

The Portsmouth Grove Hospital opened in the Portsmouth Grove House in 1862 (Figures 1,2). The wooden edifice,



Figure 2. Smaller buildings behind main building of hospital with soldiers in yard, some sweeping and one holding a dog; a young girl stands nearby. [WILLIAMS, JOSHUA A., PHOTOGRAPHER. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS]

which became the medical administrative building, was situated along the waterfront in what is now the Melville Marina district. Shortly thereafter, the hospital's name changed to the Lovell General Hospital, after Joseph Lovell, US Army Surgeon General from 1818–1836.

Two steamships transported the first contingent of soldiers wounded on a Virginia battlefield to Portsmouth on July 6, 1862. According to the Naval War College Museum blog,¹ the initial influx of patients numbered 1,724. Treatment



Figure 1. Photograph of Lovell General Hospital, Portsmouth, Rhode Island, shows view of main building of hospital, also known as Portsmouth Grove Hospital, with water and boats in front.

[WILLIAMS, JOSHUA A., PHOTOGRAPHER, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS]

was provided by nine surgeons and more than 100 nurses (Figure 3).

Nurses played a crucial role in addressing the critical needs of the burgeoning hospital population. In Portsmouth, nurse Katherine Prescott Wormeley was a leader in the field (Figure 4). A Newport resident, she volunteered on the Virginia frontlines and later on the ships conveying the wounded to the newly established Army hospitals. She

joined the U.S. Sanitary Commission relief organization and, in August 1862, was appointed Lady Director (essentially superintendent) of the 1,700 bed Portsmouth Grove Hospital.

Most patients were treated for typhoid and gunshot wounds, with amputations done closer to the battlefield sites. During the construction of hospital buildings, patients were housed in tents. Ultimately, a complex grew over the 12-acre site in Portsmouth Grove, and included wards,



Figure 3. Assistant Surgeon William F. McCormick, MD, of Lovell General Hospital in uniform with his son. [LIBRARY OF CONGRESS]



Figure 4. Katherine Prescott Wormeley of Newport, superintendent of Portsmouth Grove Hospital. [LIBRARY OF CONGRESS]



Figure 5. Civil War soldier, with one leg, full-length portrait, seated, facing front, holding guitar. [BELL & BROTHER, PHOTOGRAPHERS, WASHINGTON, D.C. FEINBERG-WHITMAN COLLECTION. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS]

each accommodated 59 patients; a mess hall, barracks, a chapel, bakery, laundry, carpenter shops, blacksmith, and a store, or hospital PX.

Robert F. Reilly, MD, writes that in the Civil War “twice as many soldiers died of disease than in combat.”² It was the pre-antibiotic and germ theory of disease era. Poor sanitation and overcrowding were the norm in the early field hospitals, resulting in gastrointestinal disorders, with chronic diarrhea and dysentery prevalent. There were measles outbreaks but no recorded cholera. Smallpox outbreaks occurred as well, despite the fact that the vaccine was developed by Edward Jenner 70 years prior; however, most of the soldiers were unvaccinated.

He writes that medical care was not in the Middle Ages; rather medical and surgical advances rapidly evolved, including: the use of quarantine, which virtually eliminated yellow fever; quinine

to prevent malaria, bromine to treat gangrene, the use of anesthetics in surgery (mostly chloroform), and development of techniques for arterial ligation, the performance of the first plastic surgery, and rudimentary neurosurgery.²

Medical response, education and infrastructure underwent seismic changes. A comprehensive ambulance corps and hospital system was developed by Jonathan Letterman, MD, medical director under Surgeon General Hammond. It included mobile, field, brigade, general, specialty and rehabilitation hospitals.¹ Medical inspectors were sent to make sure standards of care and sanitation were compliant.

“One of the major accomplishments during the Civil War was the establishment of an effective hospital system that threaded the wounded and diseased through a series of continuously improving treatments and rehabilitation,” writes Stanley B. Burns, MD.³

During the war, more than one million soldiers received care in Union hospitals,

and probably as many in Confederate hospitals.³ (Figures 5,6) By the end of the war, the Portsmouth hospital had treated more than 10,500 patients, with 308 deaths recorded.¹ It closed in 1865, and today no traces remain of the buildings. The vintage photographs shown here, however, offer glimpses of the soldiers and heroes – military and medical – who stepped up to the enormous challenges wrought by the weapons of war. ❖

References

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Figure 6. Civil War soldiers shown at a U.S. Army hospital. [LIBRARY OF CONGRESS]