U.S. ARMY GENERAL HOSPITAL NO. 19

The VA hospital at Oteen originated in 1918, when the U.S. Army acquired approximately 400 acres of farmland seven miles east of Asheville for the development of General Hospital No. 19. The hospital specialized in the treatment of tuberculosis and other respiratory illness. Its patients and staff were active Army personnel in training for or recuperating from service in the First World War.

“The hospital is located upon a plateau near the Swannanoa River and in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains...The hospital must not thought of as a single building of huge proportions, but rather as a town of about twenty-five hundred inhabitants and extending over a considerable territory. There are in all one hundred and four buildings...”

Quoted from Captain Benjamin Hays, Transactions of the Medical Society of the State of North Carolina, 66th Annual Meeting, April 15-17, 1919.

OTEEN VETERANS ADMINISTRATION HOSPITAL

In 1924, the federal government transferred the hospital property to the newly formed Veterans Bureau, which later became the Veterans Administration. In 1926, the agency initiated an ambitious building campaign, tearing down the wood-framed army structures in order to construct a permanent campus to administer all aspects of veterans' healthcare.

The new campus was substantially complete by 1934, and included patient wards, diagnostic facilities, administrative buildings, and a wide array of support structures such as kitchen and dining hall, laundry, power plant and staff housing.

“The second major step in the process which is turning the United States Veterans hospital at Oteen into one of the nation's best and most beautiful permanent institutions will soon get under way... This latest group of buildings will undoubtedly change the aspect of the hospital. It will turn the entire unit into a handsome, well organized hospital of large proportions...” Asheville Times, ca. 1926.

This site plan depicts the Oteen VA Hospital campus in the late 1960s. The U-shaped 1928 Administration Building, at center, faces US 70/Tunnel road. Hospital wards, covered walkways, and service buildings are arrayed behind it. Residential buildings, including the former nurses' quarters now occupied by NCDCR, are lined along Riceville Road at left. The V.A. relocated most of its facilities into a modern hospital building in 1967; the new hospital building is below center.
NCDCR Western Office, formerly V.A. Building 13, built in 1932 as a dormitory for African-American nurses employed by the Oteen V.A. Hospital.

The Oteen V.A. hospital drew medical personnel and support staff far afield from Asheville, necessitating on-campus housing for doctors, nurses, orderlies, and other various staff. The larger nurses’ dormitory next door to the NCDCR building, V.A. Building 9, was constructed in 1930. The two nurses’ dormitories and seven wood-frame duplexes and apartment houses aligned on the west side of Riceville Road, constructed between 1927 and 1930, comprised the main residential component of the hospital complex.

Little alteration was made to the Oteen V.A. Hospital campus until 1967, when the V.A. constructed a modern hospital building in front of the 1928 Administration building. As hospital beds and treatment facilities were located in the new hospital facility and staff no longer required on-campus housing, the V.A. gradually transferred ownership of many of the 1920s and 1930s buildings into private hands.

Apartments now occupy the former Administration Building and Wards A and B. The Laurels of Summit Ridge, an assisted living faculty, occupies former Ward C, the fire station, and garage. Wards D and F, as well as all of the covered and open-air walkways that once linked the wards, have been demolished.

In 1971, the V.A. transferred ownership of the former nurses’ quarters to Western Carolina University. NCDCR’s Western Office opened in September of 1978, leasing space within the building from WCU. NCDCR staff investigated the history and architecture of the V.A. hospital complex, and much of the historic campus was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in June, 1984 as the Oteen Veterans Administration Hospital Historic District. NCDCR acquired the Building 13 property in 1997. Rehabilitation of the building for state agency use was completed in February, 2011.
Following years of growing demand and local grassroots support, House Bill 1367 was passed in 1977 establishing a Western North Carolina office of the then Division of Archives and History. To be located in Asheville, the new office was to provide "comprehensive historical services to the western region of the State."

Three sites were considered for the Western Office in Asheville – Pack Memorial Library, Smith-McDowell House and the Oteen Center which at the time was operated by Western Carolina University. Eventually the Oteen Center was selected and on September 4, 1978 the Western Office officially opened for business. It would remain in Oteen until 1991 when it moved to a small office building in the south Asheville community of Skyland.

In September 1993 the Western Office moved for a third time to the former Clarence Barker Memorial Hospital building located in Biltmore Village. Placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979, this building was the home of the Western Office for 18 years until its recent move back to the Oteen Center in early 2011.

Today the Western Office continues to provide a wide range of cultural resource management services to local governments, state and federal agencies, historical organizations, and private citizens. Staff working for the State Historic Preservation Office, Office of State Archeology, and State Archives coordinates activities meant to identify, protect, and enhance historic buildings, landscapes, sites, and records so residents and visitors alike may better understand and appreciate western North Carolina’s rich history.
The North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources was formed in 1971 to serve North Carolina’s citizens across the state in an outreach to broaden minds and spirits, preserve history and culture, and to recognize and promote our cultural resources as an essential element of North Carolina’s economic and social well-being. It was the first state organization in the nation to include all agencies for arts and culture under one umbrella.

Cultural Resources serves more than 19 million people annually through three major areas: The Arts, The State Library of North Carolina and Archives and History.