



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

From military barracks to an unsanitary military hospital

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Image: Slough barracks. Photo, Library of Congress.

One of the more interesting aspects of the history of Alexandria's original West End neighborhood is the Union Army's use of certain land areas within the rural village, once centered on Duke Street and the Diagonal Road. As early as 1861, level parcels of open land in the area were used as camps for the 1st and 8th New York infantries. Soon after, federal troops built a large cattle yard, stable and guards' houses at the head of King Street, and the fortification Fort Ellsworth atop Shuter's Hill.

The campgrounds provided protection for the U.S. Military Railroad trains leaving and entering Alexandria and the fort structure high above the city provided sweeping views down the Potomac River, Great Hunting Creek and across major transportation routes from Fairfax County that might be used in a confederate attack. Fannie Catts, the owner of the nearby Drover's Rest, complained bitterly that her property and outbuildings had been damaged by the federal presence, and that her fences were disassembled and used to construct crude cabins to house soldiers on her land.

South of Duke Street, in the area that now contains the Carlyle development was a hastily arranged tent complex known as Camp Slough, named for military governor John Slough. The conditions at the camp were barely tolerable, and by 1863 the small tents were replaced by a series of temporary wood-frame barracks intended to house several hundred Union soldiers.

But as soon as the complex of buildings were completed in 1864, they were converted into a large medical facility called Slough Hospital. The hospital served the ever-increasing number of wounded and sick men. Laid out in a large quadrangle, the large complex included a headquarters building, 15





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medical wards, a kitchen, laundry, washhouse, outhouses and one large “Dead House,” where corpses were kept until they could be processed for burial.

To compensate for the loss of the barracks, the army quickly patched together a series of 100 tents provided by the Quartermaster Department and arranged them to form ten 140-foot long canvas structures arranged in a half-circular, spoke-like configuration. These new shelters opened onto a muddy drill field just opposite the hospital complex, as seen in these 1865 images, which could be accessed by a series of boardwalks. Latrines emptied into nearby Hunting Creek, which was also used as a source for bathing and drinking water.

In a May 1864 letter to his superiors, Col. Richard Rush lamented that his men were living in such poor and cramped conditions and were forced to routinely expose themselves in an indecent manner to women passing on the street or living in nearby homes.

When the war ended in 1865, military hospitals in Alexandria began to close and transfer their patients to Slough. The facility was the last to close in the city, ending its medical services in June 1866, and the buildings were sold at public auction.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.