A National Historic Landmark

The Grotto Gardens were a major attraction at the Central Branch of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers. The facility was built as a refuge and home for disabled soldiers of the American Civil War, and at its peak, sheltered over 7,000 Veterans. The Grotto area and lakes were formed from the quarrying of limestone and the site was used to foster the morale of the troops with the beauty of the Grotto's magnificent gardens in the Grotto and adjacent areas. The magnificent gardens in the Grotto and adjacent areas, together with the beauty of the Grotto's magnificent gardens, attracted thousands of visitors a year. Some came by train and often stayed at a hotel located on the grounds just outside the city. The gardens are a reminder of the time of war and the efforts of the people who worked to maintain them.

As the Veteran population at the Home declined, the Grotto Gardens fell into disrepair as the site became overgrown and mostly lost from view. Restoration began in 2012, and the next year, the OSU Extension Montgomery County Master Gardeners joined in a combined effort with Dayton VA Medical Center and AVHC to begin the restoration of the Grotto Gardens.

New projects are always on the horizon and there is always gardening to be done. We do conduct tours and provide speakers for those interested in more in-depth knowledge of the history of the Grotto Gardens. VA Grotto Volunteers are present on Tuesday and Wednesday mornings, weather permitting. From April through November, volunteers are always welcome.

Contact us:
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DaytonGrottoGardens.org
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Donations
All donations should be sent to: American Veterans Heritage Center 909 W. Third St. Dayton, OH 45401-5010
4100 W. Third St. Dayton, OH 45403
8AM - 5PM
(937) 268-6511

AVHC is a tax deductible 501(c)(3) non-profit Charitable Trust.
www.americanveteransheritage.org
James Birds eye McPherson, born near Clyde, Ohio, was a career United States Army officer. He served as a general in the Union Army during the Civil War. He was killed at the Battle of Atlanta, facing the army of his old West Point classmate, John Bell Hood. He was the 2nd highest ranking Union officer killed in the war. At the height of the Grotto Gardens (1875-1906), a small boat named McPherson was used to take visitors on tours of the grotto lakes.

Delphine Baker Access Ramp

During the Civil War, the female philanthropist Delphine Baker pushed for the creation and support of a federally run asylum for disabled Union Veterans. She, along with her notable and wealthy supporters (including Henry Longfellow, Clara Barton, Ulysses S. Grant and P.T. Barnum), submitted a 100-signature petition to the Congress in 1864 asking Congress to create such a home on the banks of the Hudson River, north of New York City. Although that proposal did not come to pass, her campaign brought attention to the issue of Veterans’ care, and on March 1, 1865, the Act providing for the establishment of a system of federal asylums “for the relief of totally disabled officers and men of the volunteer forces of the United States.” The Act passed quickly through the Senate and House, and was subsequently signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln on March 3, 1865.

This ramp was funded through a grant from Home Depot.

Lt. William Putnam Memorial Garden

When Chaplain Earnshaw first established a library and reading room at the Home, it resided on the second story of the Headquarters building. The room was described as light, airy and cheerful, with a 19-foot high, handsomely frescoed ceiling. One end of this room contained the renowned Putnam Library collection of books, engravings, art and other memorabilia contributed to the Home by a wealthy Massachusetts author and abolitionist, Mrs. Mary Lowell Putnam. During the war, she contributed over 10,000 books as a memorial to her son, William Lowell Putnam, who died in 1861 at the battle of Balls Bluff. William’s portrait was hung over a massive, ornamental bookcase made by the Veterans, and every year in commemoration of the anniversary of his death, his mother sent a wreath to the Home, and it was placed in a glass case that hung over the portrait. The book collection eventually became so large that the library was moved to the vacated Quartermaster Building (B 120). It garnered the reputation of being one of the finest libraries in the State of Ohio.

Chaplain William Earnshaw Rock Garden

Chaplain of the Central Branch of the National Asylum for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, and accompanied the first Veterans coming to the Home from the State Soldiers’ Home in Columbus, Ohio. Chaplain Earnshaw also served as the official librarian of the Home, and he helped organize the first school and was its first teacher. He died at the age of 54 due to illness and is buried in Woodland Cemetery, Dayton.

The center of the rock garden is the phrase “Last Full Measure.” This phrase appears in Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address: “that from those honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion.” The phrase was chosen to honor all our Veterans. This garden was designed to be low maintenance by using easy care low-evergreens and sedums. The intent was to focus on the boulders. The garden is sponsored by the Centerville Garden Club.

Charles Harper Garden

Charles Harper was a long-time employee and groundskeeper at the VA Center in the 1980’s. Under his direction, the VA grounds crew did major restoration on the Grotto in the early 1980’s, by shoring up much of the rockwork, clearing weeds and pruning flowers. Harper, due to his undying devotion of that era, it became difficult to maintain the Grotto in a consistent manner in later years. This garden was his last major project to support the Grotto project.

Since many visitors use the parking lot, this garden is the first one you encounter when entering from there. The garden offers color, texture and scents to welcome visitors to the Grotto Gardens.

Lewis B. Gunckel Memorial Fountain

The fountain is a replica of the fountain that can be seen in the original Grotto gardens and is dedicated here in honor of Lewis’s efforts to bring the National Home to Dayton.

The Board of Managers wanted to place a National Home branch in Ohio, because of its central location, and because many powerful politicians in Washington were from Ohio. Through the diligent efforts of the Board’s Secretary, a Dayton-area attorney named Lewis B. Gunckel, the Board was convinced to locate the new Home in Dayton. Citizens of Montgomery County donated $20,000 for the purchase of land, and the United States Sanitary Commission in Cleveland, provided a home for disabled Union Veterans. When the Ohio State Soldiers Home opened in 1866, Emma Miller was the first woman to receive a commission in the United States Army. When she died in 1914, her body was wrapped with an American flag as she lay in state in the Chapel, and she was buried with full military honors in the officer’s lot in the Home’s cemetery.

This garden was developed to promote healing for patients, families and staff. It was designed with colors, texture and scents to produce a calming effect. The garden was funded by a generous donation from the Four Seasons Garden Club.

Chaplain Thomas B. Van Horne Memorial Wet Gardens

Thomas Budd Van Horne, a Civil War Veteran and Army chaplain, designed the layout of the Central Branch grounds. The campus resembled a small village, with streets following a grid pattern, and a major thoroughfare dividing the barracks from the administrative offices. Around these streets and buildings, Van Horne designed large parks and open spaces using a curvilinear pattern with extensive walking paths and gardens.

This garden is a micro-climate garden, meaning its soil and growing conditions are different than other areas in the Grotto. The natural underground springs seep water constantly through the limestone rock wall that is the backdrop of the garden and causes a bog-like environment. This is the perfect condition for the magnificent Bald Cypress tree and its “knees” that grace the area.

Col. Edwin F. Brown Memorial Waterfall & Grotto Gardens

Dedicated to Col. Edwin F. Brown, the first permanent Governor of the Central Branch. A wounded Civil War Veteran himself, Col. Brown lost an arm during the Battle of Cedar Mountain, near Culpeper, Virginia, and was taken as a prisoner of war. He escaped, was recaptured and then sent to Libby Prison. In a prisoner exchange, he was returned to his regiment where he took command as Colonel. After the war, he governed the Central Branch for eleven years until 1879, when he was made Inspector General of all the National Homes. In 1930, a new inpatient facility was built to replace the original Home Hospital and it was named after Col. Brown to honor his memory.

WWII Memorial Overlook Garden

Dedicated to all veterans who served in WWII. The site provides a relatively unobstructed view of the Grotto landscape.

Emma Miller Memorial Tranquility Garden

Emma Miller was fondly known as the “little Mother of the Soldiers Home.” Widowed early in the Civil War, she began caring for soldiers as a member of the United States Sanitary Commission in Cleveland. When the Ohio State Soldiers Home opened in 1866, she transferred to Dayton with the first group to make her home here for the next 50 years. Her official title was Matron, and with her tireless energy and attention to detail, she also became Superintendent of the General Depot (which provided clothing for all the National Homes), and manager of the Home’s hotel and restaurant. For her selfless service to Veterans, Emma was the first woman to receive a commission in the United States Army. When she died in 1914, her body was wrapped with an American flag as she lay in state in the Chapel, and she was buried with full military honors in the officer’s lot in the Home’s cemetery.

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