

A Brief History of Valley Forge General Hospital

Valley Forge General Hospital was officially opened on Washington's Birthday in 1943 following nine months of construction. Built at a cost of \$10 million by the New York firm of Caldwell-Wingate under the supervision of the Army Corps of Engineers, it was one of 65 Army General Hospitals during World War II. It had the distinction at the time of its founding of being the only Army General Hospital named after a place rather than a person. At one point, it was also the only general Army hospital other than Walter Reed General Hospital in Washington operating east of the Mississippi River.

The site had been selected because of its close proximity to both New York City and Philadelphia. The land in Charlestown Township, about 182 acres, was acquired from the Foster family in the spring of 1942 and underwent a rapid transformation to a military complex. A city unto itself, with its own fire department, police department, and extensive recreational facilities, the hospital was capable of housing and treating about 3,000 patients at a time. It had a staff of almost 1,600 personnel, both civilian and military. In addition to treating patients, more than 250 German Prisoners of War were kept at VFGH during World War II.

In 1950, it was the backdrop for a major Hollywood production by Universal International Pictures with the filming of "Bright Victory". With extensive filming at both the hospital and within the Phoenixville community, the film told the story of a blinded soldier's adjustment to his illness and society. Many residents of the community landed roles in the film as "extras" during this production.

Originally intended to operate for about ten years, the hospital finally ceased operations in 1974. Slated to close in the early 1950s, the Korean War and later the Viet Nam War extended its life. Over the course of its thirty one years of operation, the Valley Forge General Hospital treated about 200,000 patients. Although a general hospital, it became famous for its work in the fields of plastic surgery, orthopedics and treatment of blinded soldiers.

After closing, portions of the land were taken over by Charlestown Township for recreational use by the Phoenixville Area School District and the Chester County Intermediate Unit. In 1977 Valley Forge Christian College took over the bulk of the campus. In recent years, Renaissance Academy, a charter school, has been located within the grounds.