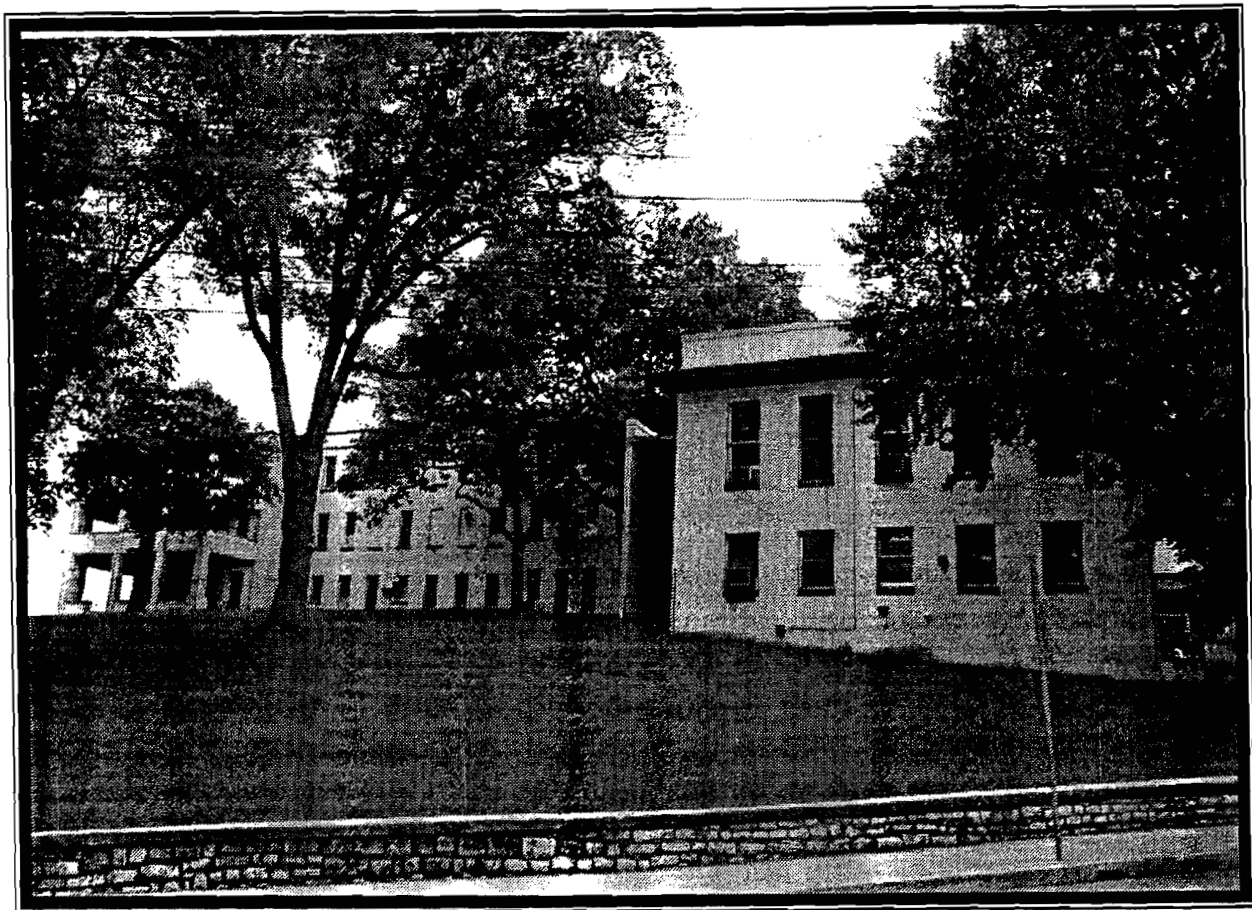


Excelsior Springs Job Corps Center: Historic/Architectural Survey



prepared by:
Deon K. Wolfenbarger
Three Gables Preservation
June 3, 1986

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Introduction

Architectural and historical information was gathered for buildings 50 years old or older at the former Veterans Administration Hospital Complex, now the Excelsior Springs Job Corps Center, in accordance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (P.L. 89-665, as amended). The Job Corps Center is located at Sycamore and St. Louis Avenues in Excelsior Springs, Missouri. Three Gables Preservation was hired to prepare historic/architectural inventory forms for the historic buildings located at the Center. Deon Wolfenbarger served as project manager, with Brad Finch assisting.

Methodology

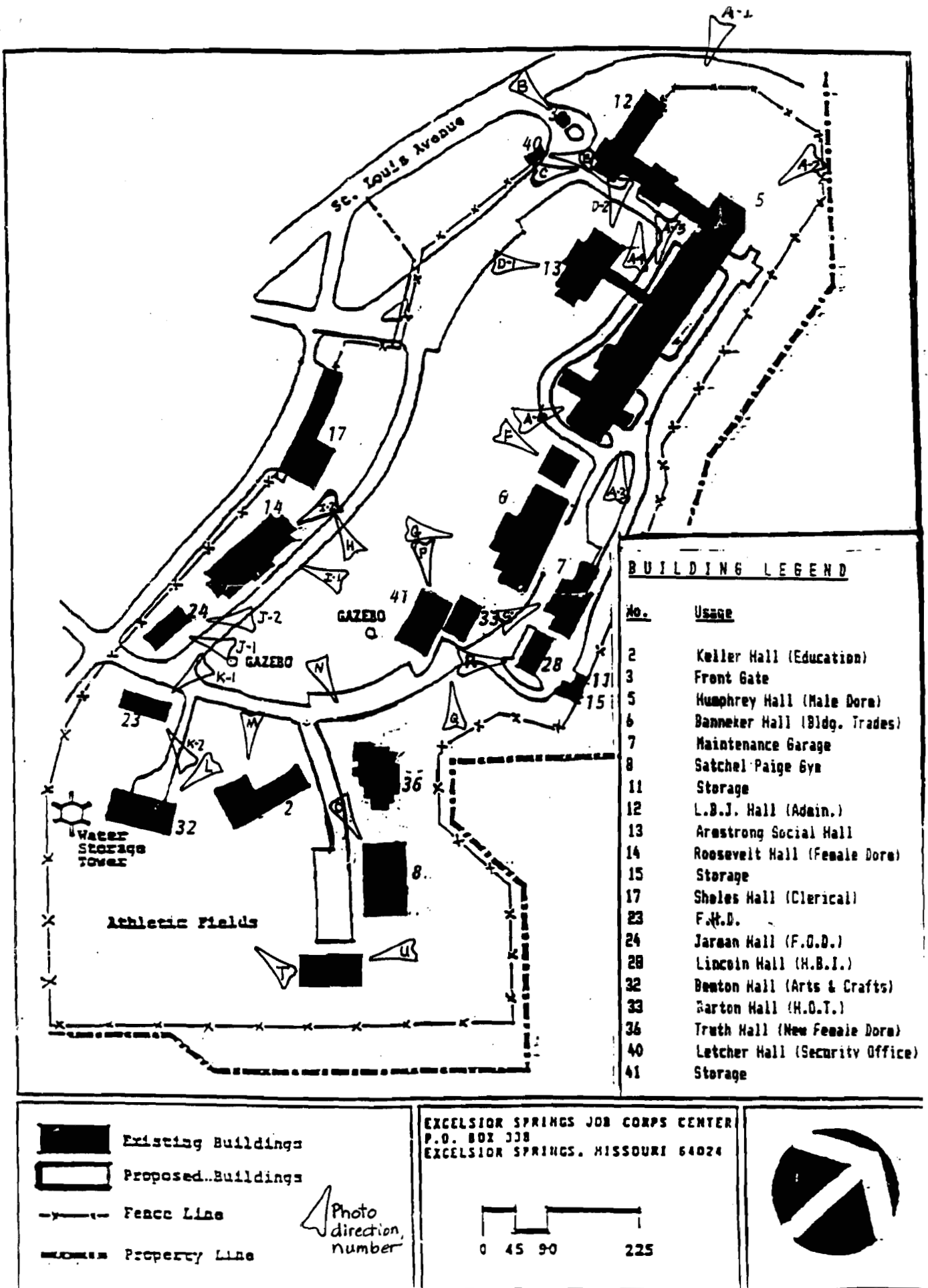
The historic buildings at the Job Corps Center were inventoried according to guidelines presented in National Register Bulletin 24, *Guidelines for Local Surveys: A Basis for Preservation Planning*, and evaluated according to guidelines in National Register Bulletin 15, *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation*.

An intensive level survey form developed for 106 review, the *Missouri Historic Preservation Program Historic Property Inventory Form*, was completed for the nine buildings which preliminary research indicated were at least 50 years old or older: Building #'s 5, 7, 12, 13, 14, 23, 24, 28, and 40. The remaining buildings on the site are less than 50 years old. In order to complete the form, site visits were conducted and archival data gathered. The following sources were consulted for this survey:

- Excelsior Springs Historical Museum; Excelsior Springs, MO.
- Missouri Valley Room; Kansas City Public Library; Kansas City, MO.
- Excelsior Springs Job Corps Center; Excelsior Spring, MO.
- National Archives; Kansas City, MO.
- General Services Administration, Real Estate Division; Kansas City, MO.

Due to the Center's checkered history of government management (see "Significance: *Health/Medicine*"), valuable historical records have been lost over the years. The preliminary evaluation of significance summarized in this report was made based on the data available.

In addition to historic information, the physical characteristics of each building were recorded. A summary of both the architectural and historical data can be found on the enclosed Missouri Historic Program Historic Property Inventory Forms and continuation sheets. Black and white photographs are labeled by present building name, and photo angles are shown on the following site map. Several of the photographs were taken in 1993 by Kevin Morgan. A site visit was conducted in May, 1996 to compare the existing condition of the buildings to the 1993 photographs. The remainder of the photographs were taken in May, 1996 by Brad Finch.

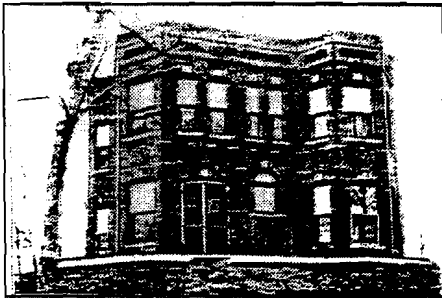


Significance: *Health/Medicine*

Although final determination of eligibility for listing in the National Register of Historic Places will be provided by staff of the Historic Preservation Program of the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, background information about the development of the site and preliminary evaluation of potential eligibility are provided herein. As noted, a description of each of the individual historic buildings can be found on the inventory forms.

The Colonel E.L. Morse Residence: 1896-1920

Colonel E. L Morse owned a large mansion on Beacon Hill, and depending upon varying reports, he either unloaded his house and property to the federal government at an outrageous price, or he had to be talked into the lease and eventual sale. Negotiations occurred which did result in more money for Col. Morse than what was originally offered. Morse was an early businessman and promoter of Excelsior Springs, and was additionally heavily involved with Republican politics on the local, state, and national level. He was president of the company that built the Elms Hotel, and later organized the Excelsior Springs Land and Investment Company which took over the assets of the original townsite and land company. The house which was first leased, then



purchased for use as a hospital was constructed in 1896 for Morse and his second wife, Harriet. Invariably described as a mansion by newspaper columnists, the two-story brick residence was the scene of many elaborate parties. Senators, Congressmen, Governors, and the Vice-President were among the many illustrious guests there. It was said that nearly as many political questions were settled at the Morse mansion as at the White House, and that the lights in the mansion on Beacon Hill were never turned off.

Descriptions of the house noted that it faced northeast and had a porch running across the front and the east side about half the length of the house. This porch was not discernable in the copy of an early photograph of the house seen above. The parlor contained two fireplaces, one of mahogany and one of cherry. This latter fireplace is still extant in building #5, and was preserved as a part of the hospital by a special request of Mrs. Morse. In 1910, an addition was constructed which added a ballroom and enlarged the dining room on the first floor, and added two additional bedrooms above. Upon complete of the alterations, a reception to celebrate on New Year's Eve held more than 200 guests in the building.

In May 1920, the Public Health Service approached Colonel Morse in order to lease his home for a hospital. Their first attempts were not successful. After Morse was called to Washington D.C. in 1921 for negotiations, he agreed not only to lease his property, but to purchase additional lands and lease them as well. Under terms of the agreement, Morse was to alter and construct an addition to the house at his own expense in accordance to plans approved by the Public Health Service.

Excelsior Springs -- Missouri's National Health Resort

When he returned to Excelsior Springs after completing negotiations for the property, Colonel Morse was greet by a welcoming demonstration staged by the Commercial Club. The Excelsior Springs band was taken up the hill to the Morse house, where the president of the Commercial Club voiced the townspeople's appreciation to the family for "cheerfully surrendering their home in the interest of the up-building of Excelsior Springs."¹ Responding with a speech which primarily served as a rebuttal to those who doubted his altruistic efforts, Colonel Morse declared that:

No political influence was exerted. None was required. The fame of Excelsior Springs as a health resort was the attracting cause. The sightly and commanding position of my residence overlooking as it does this valley and city, attracted the attention of this inspection party which caused them to visit my home. I was somewhat reluctant to even entertain a proposition which would sever me from a home that has sheltered my children: . . . you can readily see that I was not prompted by greed or the expectation of great profit. I have always been obsessed with the idea that it would be a great thing for the Government to become interested in this health resort and to establish a hospital or an institution that would help us in our struggles to make this the greatest health resort on the American continent. It means much to every one and all of us. More than nine hundred thousand dollars will be spent among our people annually. It will bring people here from all parts of the United States for treatment and our mineral waters and baths will speed to recovery those who are afflicted. It is my firm conviction that more people will be cured here and in shorter time, than in any other institution of the like character in the United States -- and this will be done by the waters which will supplement and aid the work of those in charge of the hospital -- all of which will add fame and honor to our place as a health resort.²

Colonel Morse was not suffering from local boosterism when he talked about Excelsior Springs' role as a national health resort. The development of Excelsior Springs is inexorably linked with the discovery of its mineral waters and their use for medicinal purposes. As the *Golden Jubilee* booklet published by the local Chamber of Commerce in 1930 noted:

We are, first of all, a HEALTH RESORT. Just that. Not a commercial or manufacturing center, mining town, or national airport -- no, those things are purely secondary to an industry devoted to the mineral water cure.³

¹*History of the VA Hospital*, n.p. 31 December 1950, p. 3.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

³*Excelsior Springs: America's Haven of Health*, Excelsior Springs, MO.: Excelsior Springs Chamber of Commerce, 1930. Foreword.

The healing properties of the mineral waters were first "discovered" in 1880 when a farmer noted that the rust iron waters from a nearby spring cured his daughter's scrofula. Quick to recognize the possibilities associated with such a valuable resource, the owner of the property on which the first spring was discovered platted a 40 acre townsite by September 1st of that year. Within another year, over two hundred houses were built in the Fishing River valley and on the hillsides surrounding the original spring. Hundreds of other visitors were forced to camp in tents or covered wagons. Other springs were discovered, wells were dug, and the promotion of the city began in earnest. For the next eight decades, visitors swarmed to Excelsior Springs seeking cures for a variety of their ailments.

The fame of the city as a health resort was sealed with the recognition of the waters at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. There were four types of waters discovered in Excelsior Springs - Saline Sulphur, Iron-Manganese, Lithia and Neutral Waters (calcium), and Soda -- and twenty separate mineral springs. Adding to Excelsior Springs' unique position in mineral water history was the fact that it had two of the six known iron-manganese springs in the world, and the only two commercially known in the United States (in 1930).

Numerous boarding houses, hotels, and clinics were constructed to accommodate the influx of visitors to the community. The construction of rail lines made the city more accessible and it began to be increasingly used as a convention center as well. The mineral waters of the city were not only prescribed for internal use by the many physicians and clinics in the town, but were used in baths as a part of most medical regimes. Most of the major hotels and clinics had bath departments. There were also numerous other bath houses in the city, most of which were located downtown. As noted in the 1930 *Golden Jubilee*,

It has been fully recognized that bathing is one of the most valuable curative agents employed in the modern watering place. The action of the waters is exerted on all the emunctories of the body, external and internal. Here, the tub, vapor, showers, sprays, local hot packs, electric light (dry heat) and massage each plays its part in hastening elimination, allaying local inflammation and easing pain.⁴

To the local citizenry, locating a veterans hospital in Excelsior Springs was a natural choice and served to seal the community's reputation as a national health resort. The *Golden Jubilee* booklet devotes a chapter to "A New Era" in Excelsior Springs, discussing recent enterprises which were "the result of intelligent planning and persistent fighting for a town meriting consideration and recognition."⁵ Of the numerous construction projects that were undertaken at this period, the "dominating" program was the veterans' bureau hospital project. Not only was this project important in confirming the city's role as a national health resort, but the construction expenditures help alleviate some of the economic woes of the Great Depression.

⁴Ibid., p. 18.

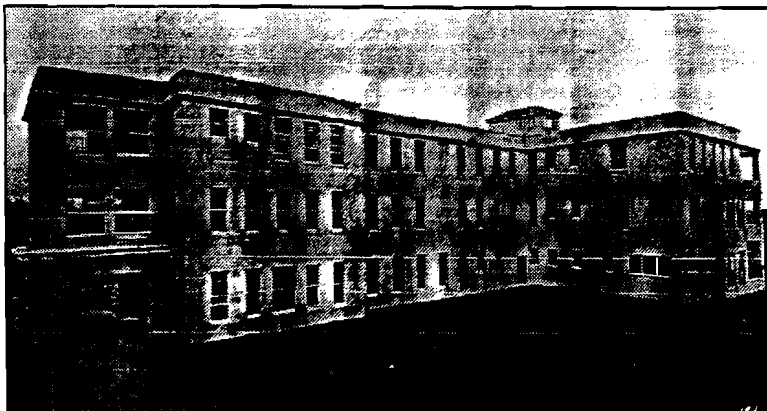
⁵Ibid., p. 29.

The Veterans Administration Years: 1921-1963

The federal government organized the Public Health Service at the end of World War I, when it realized that the returning wounded and disabled veterans from that war would require additional hospital space. Whenever possible, the agency was assisted by the American Legion, but its efforts to hospitalize veterans was hampered by the fact that it did not have authority to purchase lands. Instead, the Public Health Service depended upon being able to lease suitable properties. In Excelsior Springs, a city nationally known as a health resort, a site was chosen overlooking the town on Beacon Hill. The principal issues used by the government in selecting the Morse residence was the ideal location of the home, its adaptability for hospital purposes, its location in one of the best known health resorts of the country, and its location near Kansas City and accessibility.

After negotiations were complete for the leasing of the Morse residence and grounds, plans for the hospital were drawn up by the Navy Bureau of Yards and Docks by the direction of the Public Health Service. In addition to the enlargement of the Morse residence, which was to be the main building, the plans included seven buildings: a boiler house, garage, receiving and surgical section, dietetic and recreation building, two officer's duplex buildings, and a nurses' home. The dietetic and recreational section and the receiving and surgical section were each planned as separate buildings joined to the main building by enclosed corridors. Four cottages were on the "reservation;" Cottage No. 1 was upgraded to livable condition, but was planned for demolition at a later date.

Work began in May 1921 under the supervision of Colonel Morse. The roof was raised and a third floor added on his former residence. The west wing was constructed, along with the boiler house and a small shop building. The ground were cleared, sewer and steam lines laid, and cinder roads were laid out over a small portion of the property.



Main hospital building (#5) ca. 1923. Colonel Morse's residence is the section on the right.

In spite of work progressing towards completion of the plans and the fact that the Acting Surgeon General of the Public Health Service declared the premises "ready for occupancy" in April 1922, that agency did not begin the lease. The main reason that the Public Health Service did not begin leasing the property is that during this period, the Veterans Bureau was formed. Veterans hospitalization was no longer a responsibility of the

Public Health Service agency. Work was stopped at the Excelsior Springs site, the plans were

destroyed, and it was reported that the project was to be discontinued. After a storm of protest by groups such as the American Legion, Senator James A. Reed was pressed to investigate. Through the efforts of Senator Reed, the many benefits of the Excelsior Springs site were promoted. First, considerable effort and expense had already gone into the project. Second, there were nearly unlimited opportunities for expansions due to the size of the grounds. The newly charged board of the Veterans Bureau thus reconsidered the Excelsior Springs project and decided to purchase the site outright. The purchase price was \$116,000.00, plus \$66,000.00 for alterations already made, and the purchase was officially recorded as July 26, 1922.

Upon finding that the work on the hospital site was unfinished, the Bureau of Yards and Docks prepared plans to complete the facilities. A south wing was added for the kitchen, mess hall, attendants' dormitories and dressing rooms. Four cottages at the southern boundary were also acquired for personnel quarters. The estimated cost for carrying out these plans, together with new sewer and steam lines, roads, and equipment for a 150-bed hospital was \$200,000.00. Work could not begin immediately, however, as there were no funds available in the recently set up Veterans Bureau.

Many newspaper reports decrying the waste and allegations from both sides were prevalent during this period. It was the opinion of some that the fact that a kitchen and mess hall were not provided for in the original plans was proof that the government did not really intend to use the hospital when the project was first launched. Many army officers preferred that hospitals be located at army posts, such as Fort Leavenworth.⁶ After construction began again in 1923, an investigation of the Veterans Bureau was called for by the Hearst newspapers. The Excelsior Springs site became embroiled in a political controversy led by foes of Colonel Morse who charged that the price paid for the home and land was exorbitant; the property, situated on a barren rocky cliff, was too isolated and inaccessible for its purpose; and that the administration has used favoritism in selecting the site. An appraisal of the property in 1923 related some of the features extant at that time:

- Main building -- 126,243 cubic feet
- Porches -- 52,000 cubic feet
- 18 lots
- 1,100 feet of "granitoid" sidewalk
- 800 feet of curbing
- 564' driveway with curbing on each side
- 400' sidewalk and steps from house to road
- Pressed brick garage building
- Grading, "shrubby and other outside improvements"⁷

⁶"Government Waste is Typified in Excelsior Springs Project." *Kansas City Times*, 17 January 1923.

⁷*History of the VA Hospital*, n.p., 31 December 1950. p. 20.

Although the investigation which eventually exonerated Colonel Morse slowed down the progress of construction, work continued throughout the proceedings. The exterior of the south wing was completed in August 1924. Kitchens and baths were added to three of the four cottages on the 5 ½ acres of additional land which had been purchased to the south, and the fourth was demolished.⁸ A 3-car garage was built.⁹

Rumors were circulating that the hospital would either be a tubercular or neuropsychiatric hospital, but official word in October 1924 was that it was to be "General Medical and Surgical." Dedication for the 125-bed hospital was on Armistice Day, November 11, 1924. A bill authorizing appropriation of funds to increase the bed capacity to 300 was passed in 1928. Plans showed that additional land was required; two acres were purchased in 1929, and another half-acre in 1930. The hospital closed for alterations and was evacuated in the fall of 1929. Construction began on the following projects on December 29, 1929.

Alterations to Building 5 (main hospital building): Addition to south wing; installation of new vacuum return piping system; installation of elevator no. 2 & dumbwaiter in kitchen.

Construction of Buildings 12, 13, & 14

Erection of flag pole

Construction of corridor between buildings 5 and 13.

Addition to the Boiler House

Outside service systems

All roads, walks, drainage & grading

Construction of 75,000 gallon water tank and tower

Installation of Zeolite water softening system¹⁰

The hospital re-opened on August 30, 1930 with an official bed capacity of 290 beds, but the first patient was not admitted until January 5, 1931. A special "Veterans' Hospital Edition" of the local newspaper, *The Daily Standard*, recorded that "an elaborate installation of shrubbery" was included with this phase of work.¹¹ It noted that grounds on the rolling northeast slope of Beacon Hill were covered with a:

natural growth of oak, walnut, elm and other valuable trees. The landscaping has

⁸Three cottages, probably these mentioned here, were later moved from the ground to Crescent Lake in Excelsior Springs. They are extant and are used as single-family residences. Tom Collins, telephone interview, 3 June 1996.

⁹Possibly Building No. 6, "Garage and Warehouse." *History of the VA Hospital*, p. 26.

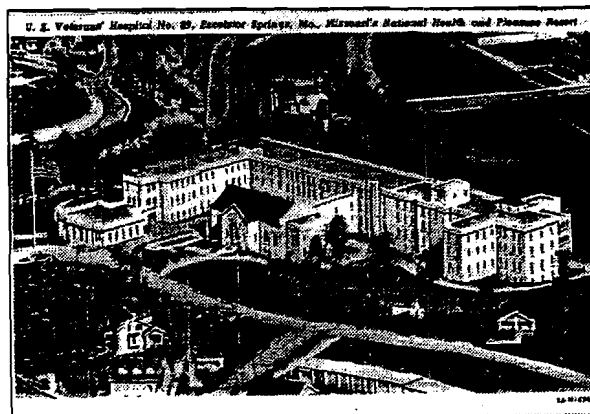
¹⁰"Historical Facts: Veterans Administration Hospital," unpublished manuscript. V.A. Hospital file, Excelsior Springs Historical Museum: Excelsior Springs, MO. pp. 3-4.

¹¹"Pay Tribute to Veterans and Facility," *Daily Standard*, 11 November 1934, Veterans' Hospital Edition, p. 3.

been undergoing a steady program of improvement and it is now supervised by a full-time gardener. Lawns have been improved through the efforts of the utility crew under the charge of the foreman. Every effort is being bent toward making the Government reservation an outstanding project from the landscaping point of view and future years will rapidly show the results of the efforts directed toward that objective.¹²



A historic view of one of the Officers' quarters.



A postcard view of a ca. 1938-39 aerial photograph.

The extensive construction work carried out at the Veterans hospital complex during the early 1930s greatly helped to sustain the economy of Excelsior Springs during the Depression. Other projects on the reservation at this time included a Howe platform scale (1930, south of building 6), Buildings 23 & 24 -- Officer's duplex quarters (1930, extant and shown in photo on above left), and Building 17 -- 16-car personnel garage (1931, partly seen in lower right hand corner of upper right photo; later replaced by a different building). Subsequent site work and the year of construction or contract is as follows:

1937-38	Building 28 -- Shops (extant)
1938	Building 26 -- Garbage Incinerator
1939	Building 37 -- Scale House
1940	Building 12 -- North addition (extant)
1945	Building 35 -- Barracks
1946	Building 40 -- Bus shelter (either extant but greatly altered, or replaced)
1947	Building 32 -- 2-car garage (replaced by different building)
1947	Building 33 -- Animal house (replaced by different building)
1947	Building 36 -- Quonset
1954	Building 38 -- Transformer Station
1956-57	Building 39 -- Water Tank & tower ¹³ (extant)

¹²Ibid.

¹³*History of the VA Hospital.*, p. 5. A 1959 aerial photograph shows both water towers standing next to each other.

The barracks built during WWII were originally intended for German POW's. However, the local population "just wouldn't have it," and the building was used for storage during later years.¹⁴ Most of the medical services at the hospital in the first decade were surgical. From its opening through November 1, 1934, approximately 12,000 patients received treatment. At this time, there were nearly 80 institutions in the United States devoted to the care of ex-service men and women. In February 1941, the hospital's classification was changed from "General Medical and Surgical" to "Tuberculosis." In April of that year, the Regional Office of the Veterans Administration moved to the hospital at Excelsior Springs, where it remained until January 1944.

In the 1950s, the Veterans Administration reassessed their hospitals, and in 1956 decided that the hospital in Excelsior Springs was obsolete. In September 1958 the Excelsior Springs station was consolidated with the V.A. Hospital Center in Wadsworth, Kansas and placed under one management. New patients had a choice of which hospital they would go to, but most were steered towards Wadsworth. The Excelsior Springs VA Hospital was eventually closed on July 31, 1963. Its closing followed a pattern established by the Veterans Administration a decade earlier. In 1954, there were 21 tuberculosis hospitals with 17,000 beds. By 1963, there were only seven hospitals with 7,000 beds.

In 1965, the VA hospital was "mothballed" and the maintenance crew was transferred to other institutions by the end of May. A newspaper article from that year noted that a variety of proposed uses had been considered for the site: a school for girls, a junior college, or a Job Corps training center.¹⁵ Just before its closing, a new roof on a building, a fireproof metal ceiling, a new sprinkler system, a 200,000 gallon water tower, and two boiler units were installed on the premises.

Job Corps Center: 1965-1996

A new use for the former VA Hospital complex was found by the end of 1965. About \$375,000.00 was initially spent to rehabilitate the former VA hospital as a women's job corps center. A newspaper reported in late 1965 that the center would be able to train 385 women to be "employable, self-confident individuals who will make good mothers and good housewives."¹⁶ Operations were expected to begin in late January or early February of 1966 with an expected staff of 140 persons. Most of "rehabilitation" work was clearing, painting, moving walls, installing new electrical fixtures and purchasing educational equipment. Five women Job Corps center were operating in 1965, training 13,000 women from ages 16-21. The nearest center at that time was in Omaha, Nebraska.

¹⁴Tom Collins, telephone interview, 3 June 1996.

¹⁵"VA Hospital Goes Into Moth Balls," *Kansas City Times*, 1 April 1965.

¹⁶"Push VA Hospital Change to Job Corps Center," *Kansas City Star*, 7 November 1965.

Today the Excelsior Springs Job Corps Center trains both young men and women between the ages of 16 to 25 years who qualify for eligibility. Vocation programs include business clerical, health occupations, culinary arts, welding, painting, carpentry, cement masonry, HBI (apartment/building maintenance), and advanced training programs in transportation communications and a college program.

Since becoming a Job Corps Center, different private companies have sub-contracted with the Department of Labor for the management of the reservation. Many records have been lost during the change from one management agency to another. From the record of construction during the VA Hospital years, it is apparent that many historic buildings have been demolished, and several new buildings have been constructed in their place. Some of the newer buildings at the Job Corps Center, such as the Culinary Arts Building, were constructed by Job Corps students.

Summary

The following evaluations are to be considered preliminary. It is possible that more complete records of construction, demolition, and alteration exist in some government agency. However, due to the fact that management of the complex changed at least four times during the VA years and three times during the Job Corps years, it appears that such documents have been either destroyed or scattered. Further research on some of the ancillary buildings may yield critical additional information, such as construction or potential moving date for Building #40 date or historic appearance of a relatively undocumented building such as #28.

- The accompanying map shows boundaries for a historic district which is potentially eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Contributing buildings to the potential district are (listed by building number): 5, 12, 13, 14, 23, & 24. These boundaries represent the most concentrated collection of historic buildings on the complex. For the present survey, not all of the interiors of the historic buildings were examined. However, all of the interiors have been altered over the years, particularly after the complex became a Job Corps Center (although #13 is little altered). This reduces the likelihood that the above listed buildings would be individually eligible.
- Another version of the above noted district may be considered which would include building #7, the former boiler house. Although some undocumented additions have been constructed, the building does appear to retain historic integrity in the original portion. However, by including building #7 and still avoiding non-contributing buildings such as #6, it would necessitate drawing boundaries which would begin to form a "doughnut hole" on the complex -- generally not recommended for a National Register district.
- Not enough information is presently available to evaluate the eligibility of Building #28. It is a nondescript stucco-covered structure which may or may not be the building listed as constructed in 1937-38. No historic photographs are available to document its original appearance.
- Although Building #40's construction date is listed as 1946, the original construction cost does not correlate with the present building. Then listed as a bus shelter, a very small, simple wood gazebo-like structure is apparent in some undated historic postcards. The present stucco building may be a historic building moved from another location on the reservation.¹⁷ However, there is presently no documented evidence that this building is 50 years old or older. It does not possess "exceptional significance" which would make it eligible as a building less than 50 years old.

¹⁷Oral interviews with local citizens record that several buildings on the site have been moved over the years.

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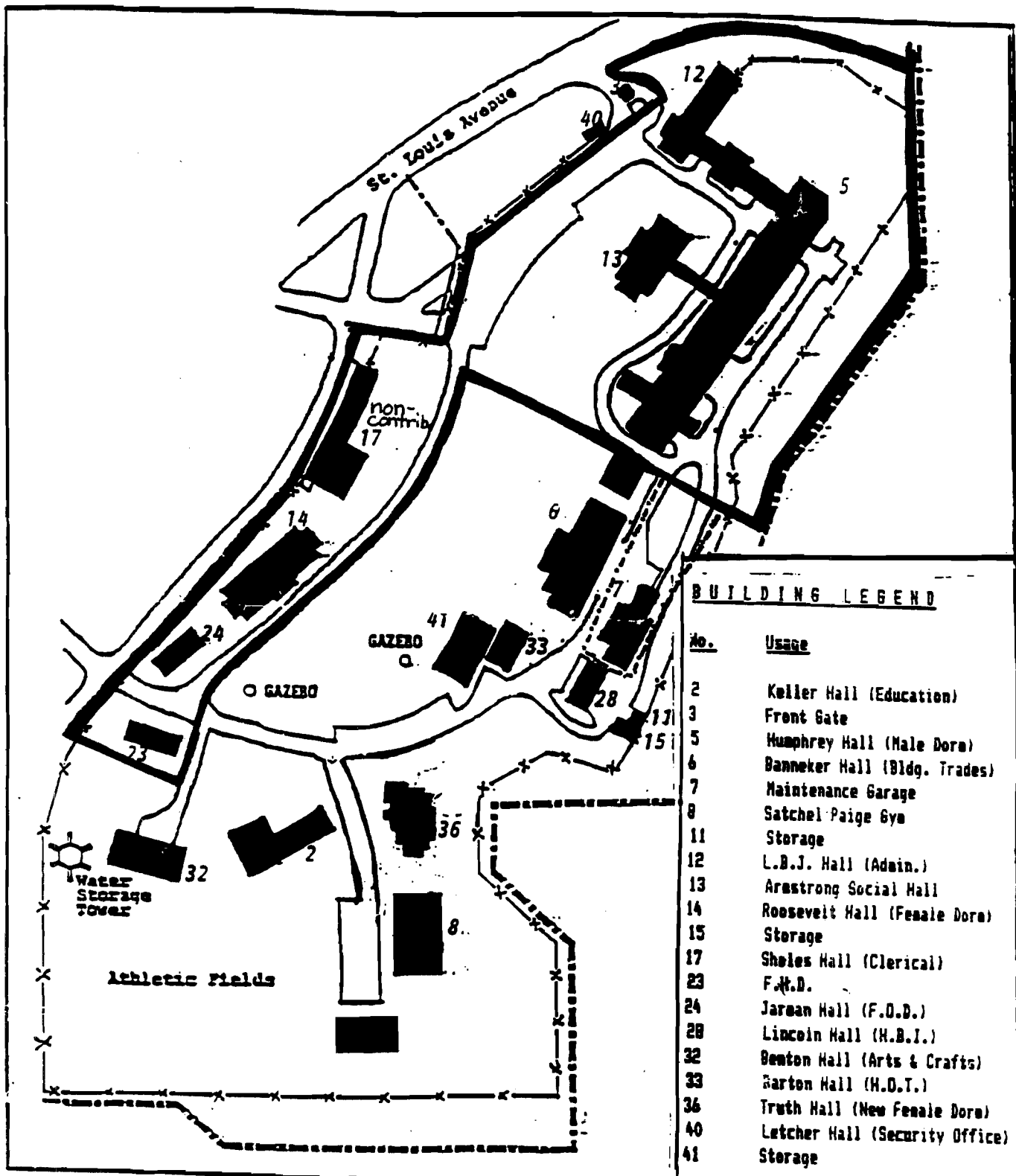
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Existing Buildings
 Potential N.R. district boundary
 Fence Line
 Property Line
 Version 2 N.R. boundary addition

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