

VETERANS ADMINISTRATION HOSPITAL, BUILDING NO. 5
(Hospital)
(Humphrey Hall)
(E.L. Morse Residence)
701 St. Louis Avenue
Excelsior Springs
Clay County
Missouri

HABS MO-1931-C
HABS MO-1931-C

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY

VETERANS ADMINISTRATION HOSPITAL BUILDING (Building 5; Humphrey Hall; E. L. Morse Residence)

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- Location:** 701 St. Louis Avenue, Excelsior Springs, Clay County, Missouri.
USGS Excelsior Springs Missouri Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator
Coordinates: 15S 394009.48mE 4354784.67mN (center of former building
location, east of building 13; Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical [Plate Caree]
Projection with WGS84 datum)
- Significance:** The Veterans Administration Hospital Building was significant as a contributing resource to an eligible National Register Historic District – the Veterans Administration Hospital complex. The district served as one of the cornerstones of Excelsior Spring’s economy as a health resort. It was the first building constructed at the complex, and at the time of its construction, was considered one of the most up-to-date hospitals operated by the Veterans Bureau. As the main hospital building, it was a key component of the district.
- Description:** The large masonry building was located on the north end of a twenty-six acre site that is generally bounded by S. Kansas City Avenue/Lake Mauer Road on the west and by St. Louis Avenue curving on the north and east sides. The east side of the property slopes down and contains mature deciduous trees. Vehicular entry to the site was on the northwest side of the property. A drive followed along the south and west elevations of the former hospital building, and also around the back (east) side for service vehicles.
- The building had a basic L-shape, with the main wing extending north/south approximately 60 x 390 feet, while a smaller 40 x 60 feet (original) wing extended to the west. A smaller “T” was formed by two bays extending east and west on the south end of the main section of the building.
- Due to the sloping site, the building was three-stories tall on the north, and four-stories on the south and east. The northeast corner contained the original Morse home. Due to the addition of a third story to the house and the stucco cladding, there was no evidence of the former Morse house on the exterior. However, the interior retained a stained glass window and elaborate cherry fireplace from the original Morse residence. The remainder of the interior on the first through third stories had a typical hospital floor plan, with a long central hallway flanked on either side by small rooms. The building was attached on the north end to Building #12 on the west, and a two-story walking bridge extended west approximately midway along the building’s length and connected it to Building #13 (formerly the recreation hall).
- There were verandah porches on the three upper levels of the north elevation, and the north half of the east elevation. The remainder of the east elevation had verandah porches on the upper two stories. Possibly utilized by tuberculosis patients, these deeply recessed porches had wide, square stucco columns and a

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solid masonry balustrade. After 1963, third story metal porches and fire escape stairs were added to the north and south ends of the building.

Reflecting its former use as a hospital and original design by the Navy Bureau of Yards & Docks, the stark building had flat roof with stucco cladding with few exterior stylistic or architectural treatments. The smooth, light-colored stucco clad elevations were broken up by regularly spaced, deeply recessed window openings featuring slightly projecting sills. Historically, windows on the original were 1/1 double-hung; many were replaced in later years or were closed-down with stucco panels. A thin projecting stringcourse above the third or fourth floors served to demarcate a simple, unornamented frieze band at the roof line.

History:

Summary: In 1921, Col. E. L. Morse agreed to lease his 1896 residence to the Public Health Service for use as a veterans hospital. As part of his agreement with the federal government, he agreed to add a third story and west wing. The hospital building was not completed until 1924, after the federal Veterans' Bureau was formed and the property was eventually purchased by the federal government. It was considered the most up-to-date hospital in the agency at that time, and helped to cement Excelsior Spring's reputation as "Missouri's National Health Resort." There were several additions over the years, including the construction of a large south wing in 1929-30. It served as a veterans' hospital until it was closed in 1963. By that time, the site contained several other buildings. It was converted in 1966 by the Department of Labor as a Job Corps Center. The building was renamed Building 5 - Humphrey Hall, and was used for support services, a cafeteria, and a male dormitory. Demolition of the building was completed in April 2011.

Elaboration: In 1896, E. L. "Liv" Morse and his second wife, Harriet, built a single-family residence in the Beacon Hill subdivision of Excelsior Springs, Missouri. The Beacon Hill addition was on a hill overlooking the Fishing River valley, where most of the town's famous mineral water springs were located. E. L. Morse purchased a drug store in Excelsior Springs in 1882, but left a year later to enter law school. He returned to the town where, in addition to his starting his law practice, he served as president of the company that built the Elms Hotel. Morse also organized the Excelsior Springs Land & Investment Company, and helped build the Excelsior Springs Light & Water Plant and the Excelsior Springs and Northern Railway. Morse was extensively involved in Republican politics; he was also the center of several scandals. The first was in 1920, when he was accused of involvement with a "slush fund" for Frank Lowden's presidential campaign. The other significant scandal evolved around the sale of the Beacon Hill mansion to the federal government for use as a veteran's hospital.

The Morse residence was the scene of many elaborate parties; guests included Senators, Governors, the Governors of Puerto Rico and Mexico, and the entire troupe of a New York show. In 1908, the Vice President of the United States,

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Charles Warren Fairbanks, was entertained at the mansion along with other distinguished guests. An addition was built in 1910, and the celebration following its completion included more than two hundred guests. When the home was leased (eventually to be sold) to the government, Mrs. Morse requested that the cherry fireplace be preserved as part of the hospital.

In May 1920, the federal Public Health Service approached Colonel E. L. Morse about leasing his mansion for a hospital. The Public Health Service was organized after at the end of World War I when the government realized that the returning wounded and disabled war veterans required hospital services. Since it was not allowed to purchase properties, the Public Health Service leased suitable buildings that could serve as hospitals. The agency considered the Morse residence to have an ideal location – situated in one of the best known health resorts in the nation and close to Kansas City. Furthermore, the house was large enough to be adaptable for hospital use. Although Morse did not initially acquiesce, after being called to Washington, D.C. in 1921 for further negotiations, he eventually decided not only to lease his house, but to purchase additional lands and lease them to the government as well. The agreement stipulated that Morse alter the residence and build an addition at his own expense, in accordance to plans approved by the Public Health Service.

The Navy Bureau of Yards and Docks prepared the hospital plans under the direction of the Public Health Service, and work began on the hospital on May 10, 1921 under Morse's supervision. Obstacles quickly arose when the responsibility for veterans' hospitalization was transferred to the new Veterans Bureau, which was formed later that same year. Even after the Veterans Bureau purchased the property in 1922, there were several newspaper reports of project waste and allegations from both sides. In August 1923, the Hearst newspapers called for a Senate investigation of the Veterans Bureau in order to determine why so many hospitals, including the one at Excelsior Springs, were not finished. The Excelsior Springs site became embroiled in the controversy led by foes of Morse; their charges included 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. This led to a Senate investigation, where the stress of testifying apparently caused Morse to collapse on the witness stand. Among the charges of waste and inefficiencies, the most frequently cited was the fact that the hospital had been built without a kitchen, resulting in the moniker of the government's "kitchenless" hospital.

The investigation eventually exonerated Morse, and work continued on the hospital. The contractor was Jones Construction Company of Omaha. The portion of the hospital containing the Morse residence received entirely new interior woodwork, plumbing, and paint, as well as new finishes for the wood and concrete floors.

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Town residents were relieved when they heard of the hospital's official designation as a "general hospital" instead of the earlier rumors as a tubercular or shell shock hospital. Officials from the Veterans Bureau visited the site just prior to opening, and noted that the hospital was equipped with the "finest and most efficient fixtures and equipment on the market." One was especially impressed with the signal system in the patients' room, where "no matter how weak or helpless they may be," they only needed to move a hand and rest its weight on a small pad to set off a "triple alarm" in the nurses' office.

In October 1924, the government notified Veterans' Bureau staff across the country that they could begin recommending patients for the Excelsior Springs hospital. Not only did this finally signal the opening of the hospital, but residents were pleased to note that the Bureau's letter noted that the recommendations could include patients "who might reasonably be expected to receive benefits from taking mineral waters." City boosters took this as "official federal government cognizance of the curative powers of the waters, upon which the prosperity of this city is founded. . ." Unfortunately, new patients were disappointed to find that their regime at the Excelsior Springs hospital did not, in fact, include any mineral water treatments.

The official dedication for the new hospital was on Armistice Day, November 11, 1924, and the first patients arrived a week later. By March 1925, the hospital was nearing its "limited capacity" of ninety patients, as it was required to reserve approximately twenty percent of its actual capacity of 125 for emergencies. An inspector later that same year claimed that, of the more than fifty veterans' hospitals inspected by him, Hospital No. 99 was the second best in the nation, topped only by Walter Reed Memorial Hospital in Washington, D.C.

The hospital building was enlarged in 1927, increasing the capacity to 150 beds. The \$62,500.00 appropriation also included funding for a hydro-therapy department, as well as recreational and other vocational departments. Another expansion was proposed in 1928, with \$900,000 appropriated for a large south wing and other buildings. However, more land was required for this expansion. The citizens of Excelsior Springs were required to raise funds to help pay for the land, since the property owners were charging more than the federal government felt it was worth. The townspeople raised more than enough funds to complete the purchase, and the complex increased in size to over twenty-two acres.

The hospital closed on November 15, 1929 to begin work on the expansion, and work continued through the end of 1930. The new south wing was built by Murch Brothers Construction Company of St. Louis, and increased the capacity from 150 to 252 beds. It also included an infirmary and a small section for African American patients. The existing hospital building was extensively remodeled, involving removal of plaster and doors in order to rearrange the

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rooms. New buildings were added to the complex as well, including a recreation building, nurses' quarters, and a water tank and tower. While construction was ongoing, President Hoover established the Veterans Administration in 1930. Patients were admitted to the newly remodeled hospital in January 1931. As an indication of local prejudices of the period, more than one newspaper reported that "there will be no Negroes or neurotics received until later in the spring."

By the time the Veterans' Hospital celebrated its tenth anniversary in 1934, it had served nearly 12,000 patients. Its average daily patient load that year was 245. There was a small section for tuberculosis, but it was still classified as a general hospital with a major portion of its work devoted to surgery. Staff payroll was nearly a quarter million dollars a year, with the majority of that handled through local banks. The hospital also made significant contributions to other areas of the local economy, with over \$41,000.00 spent annually for produce and food supplies, and almost \$6,000.00 per year for fuel.

In 1939, the Missouri American Legion lobbied the Veterans' Affairs, requesting that the capacity of the Excelsior Springs' hospital be increased. More importantly, the organization felt that the curative waters in Excelsior Springs were not being utilized by the Veterans' Hospital, and recommended that diseases that would purportedly benefit from the waters be treated at this complex. In support of this argument, the American Legion cited the federal government's investment in the Army and Navy Hospital at Hot Springs, Arkansas; the Warm Springs, Georgia project; and the fact that the Veterans' Affairs utilized the baths at Biloxie and Tuscaloosa. While this plea for adding new beds and mineral water treatments was unsuccessful, in 1941 the hospital's classification was changed from "General Medical and Surgical" to "Tuberculosis." That same year, the regional office of the Veterans' Affairs moved to the Excelsior Springs site, remaining there through most of the duration of World War II. Through the 1940s and 1950s, additions to other buildings or new construction still continued at the complex. Air conditioning was installed in the hospital's surgery room in 1949, and as a possible reaction to the Cold War, surgery was made "explosion proof" in 1948.

During the 1950s, the Veterans Administration began an extensive reassessment of the hospitals nationwide, and in 1956 decided that the Excelsior Springs hospital was obsolete. In September 1958, the Excelsior Springs branch was consolidated with the Veterans Administration Hospital Center in Wadsworth, Kansas, and both were placed under a single management. Although new patients had a choice of which hospital they would go to, most were steered towards Wadsworth. Patient numbers declined, and on July 31, 1963, the Excelsior Springs Veterans' Hospital Complex was officially closed. Local residents initiated a vigorous letter-writing campaign to politicians. As a result, Senators Symington and Long, along with Congressman Hull of Missouri asked President Kennedy to reconsider the closing. Although President Kennedy did

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request that the Veterans Administration research the feasibility of converting the facility to a nursing home institution for convalescent and chronic patients, his assassination in November 1963 may have impacted the administration's involvement. The Veterans Administration's association with the property thus ended in 1963.

The closing of the Veterans' hospital coincided with another blow to Excelsior Springs' reputation as a national health resort. An August 24, 1963 article in the *Saturday Evening Post* exposed the fraudulent treatments for arthritis offered facilities such as the Ball Clinic in Excelsior Springs. Journalist Ralph Lee Smith came to the Ball Clinic posing as a patient with lower back pain, and wrote about his findings in the article "The Hucksters of Pain." Smith was given a list of recommended treatments, all discredited by the Arthritis and Rheumatism Foundation. The clinic could not survive the negative publicity, and closed its doors at the end of the year. The loss of two key medical clinics in the same year proved devastating to Excelsior Springs' economy.

A new era at the former Veterans' Administration began just a few years later, though, when the Department of Labor began renovating several buildings in the former Veterans Hospital complex. Instead of continuing in health and medicine, the property re-opened in 1966 as the Excelsior Springs Job Corps Center. The former hospital building was renamed as Building 5 or Humphrey Hall, and was used for support services and a cafeteria on the first level, and later as a male dormitory on the second and third levels. A 2009 Facility Planning Report evaluated the general condition of the building as *poor*, stating that the "building in its entirety has reached the end of its useful life." Demolition of the building began in January 2011, and was completed in April 2011.

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Maps/plans: PBDewberry
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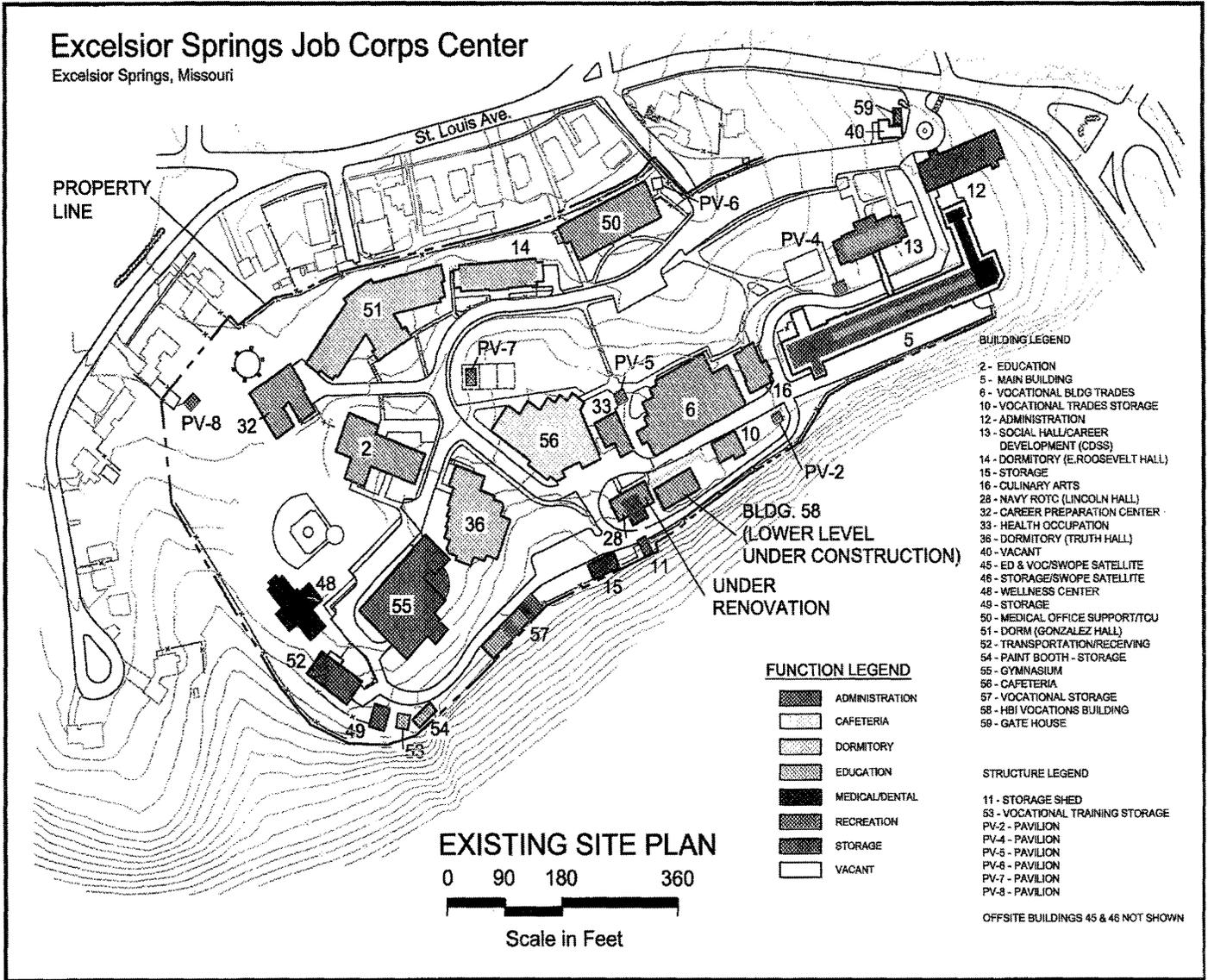
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PBDewberry
2101 Wilson Blvd., Suite 200
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Black and white: 1996
Deon Wolfenbarger
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320 Pine Glade Road
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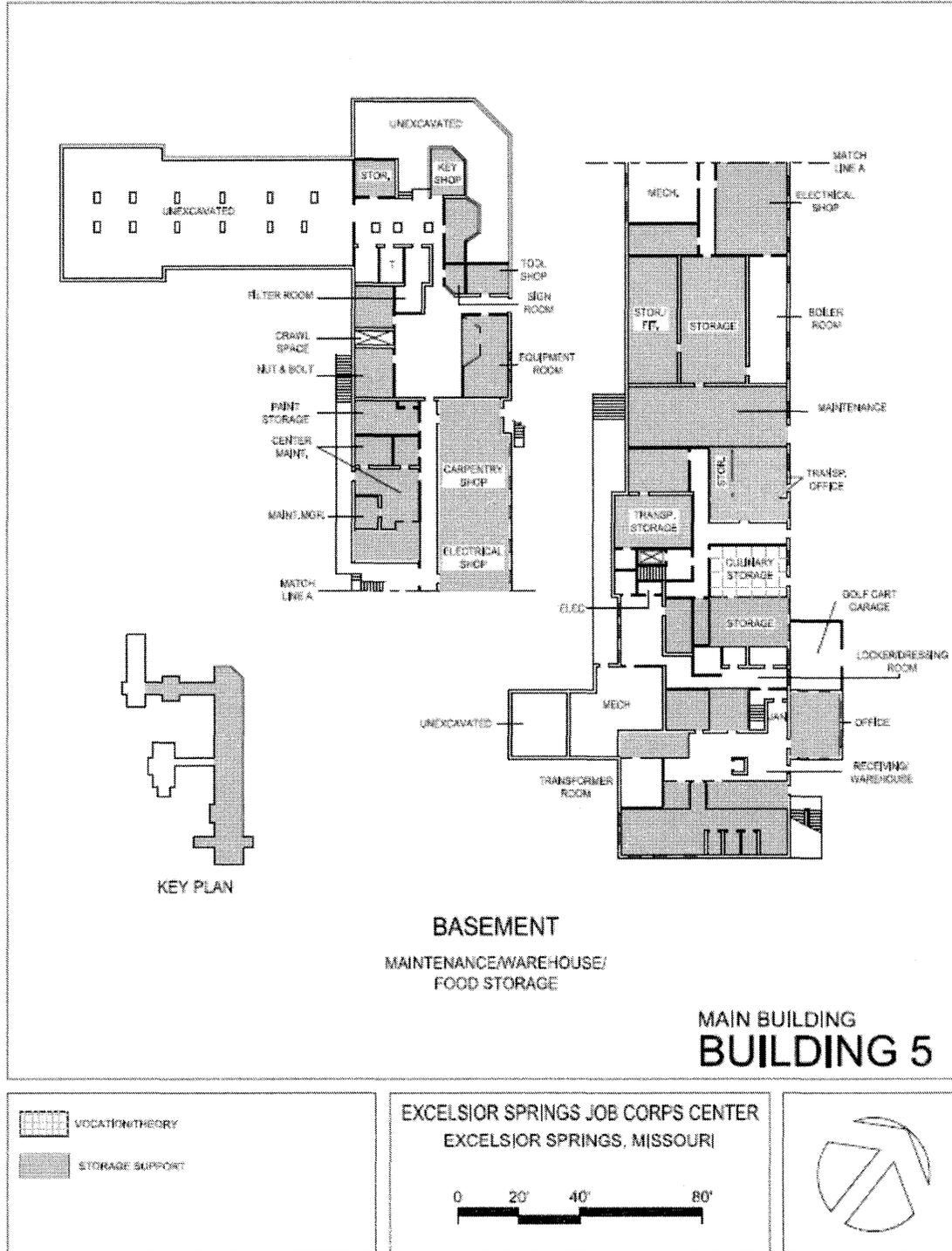
Excelsior Springs Job Corps Center

Excelsior Springs, Missouri

Excelsior Springs Job Corps Center site map, 2004. The former V.A. Hospital building is Building 5 in the upper portion of the site. (PBDewberry).

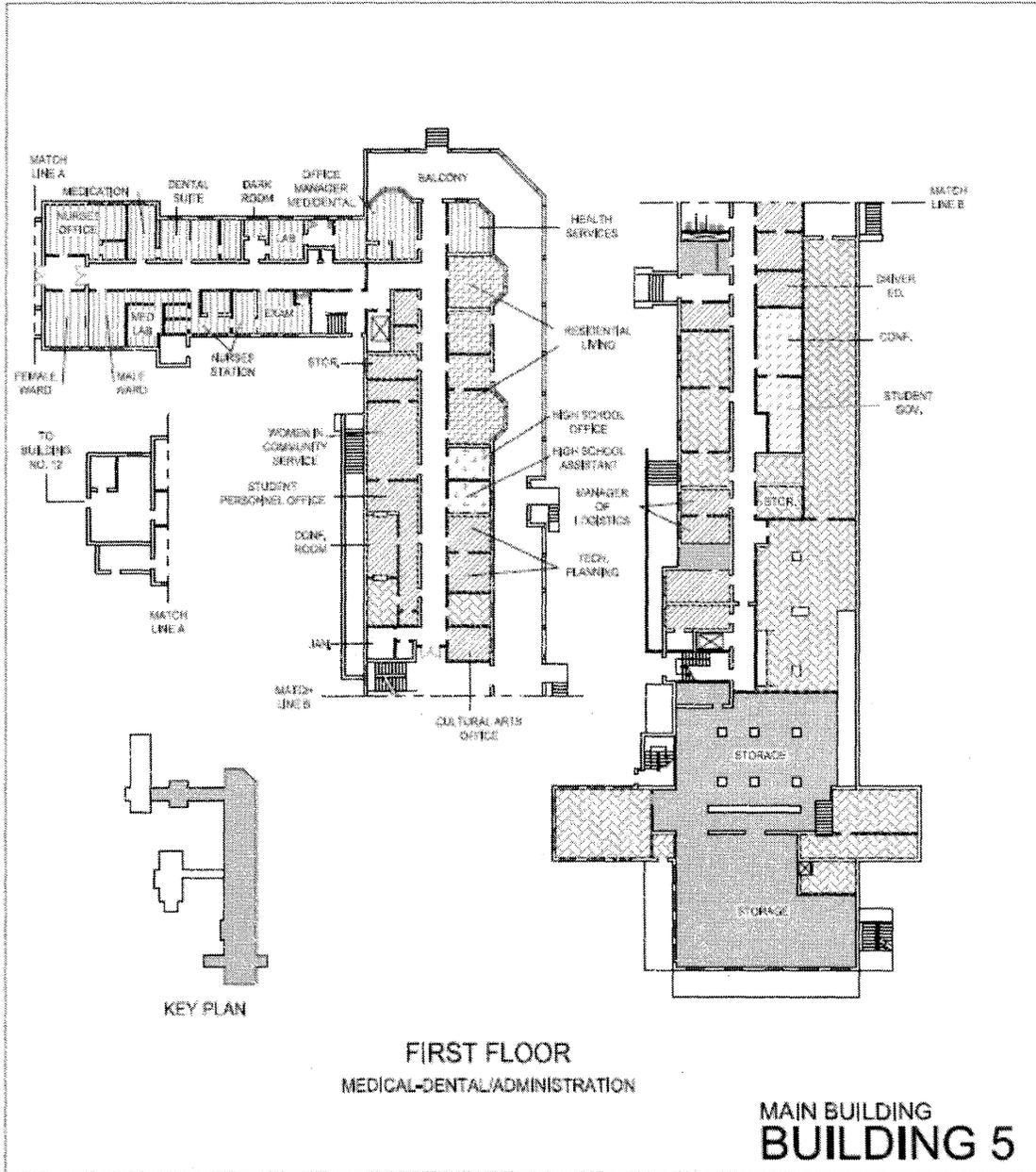


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Basement floor plan ca. 2009. (PBDewberry).

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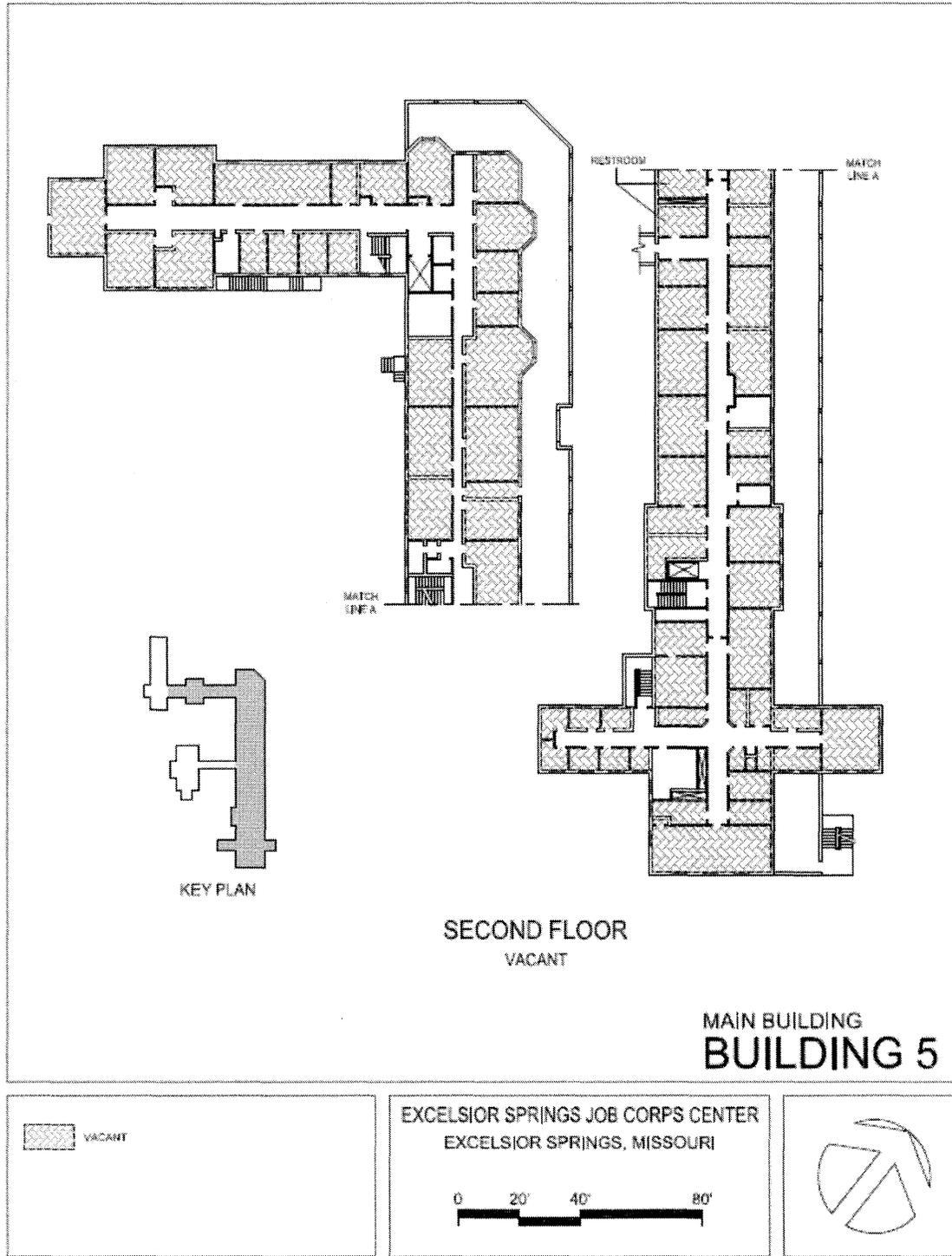
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EXCELSIOR SPRINGS JOB CORPS CENTER
EXCELSIOR SPRINGS, MISSOURI

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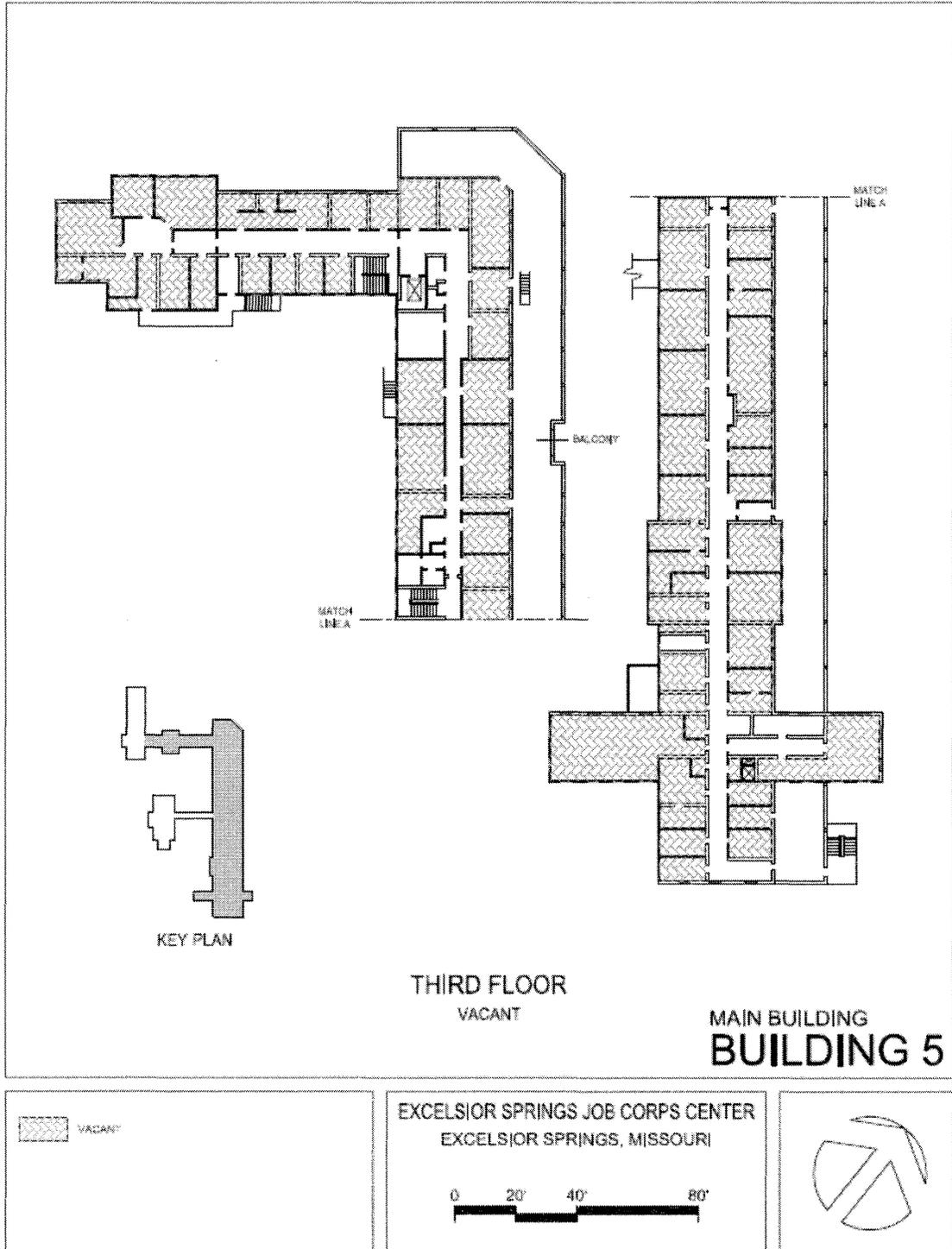
First floor plan ca. 2009. (PBDewberry).

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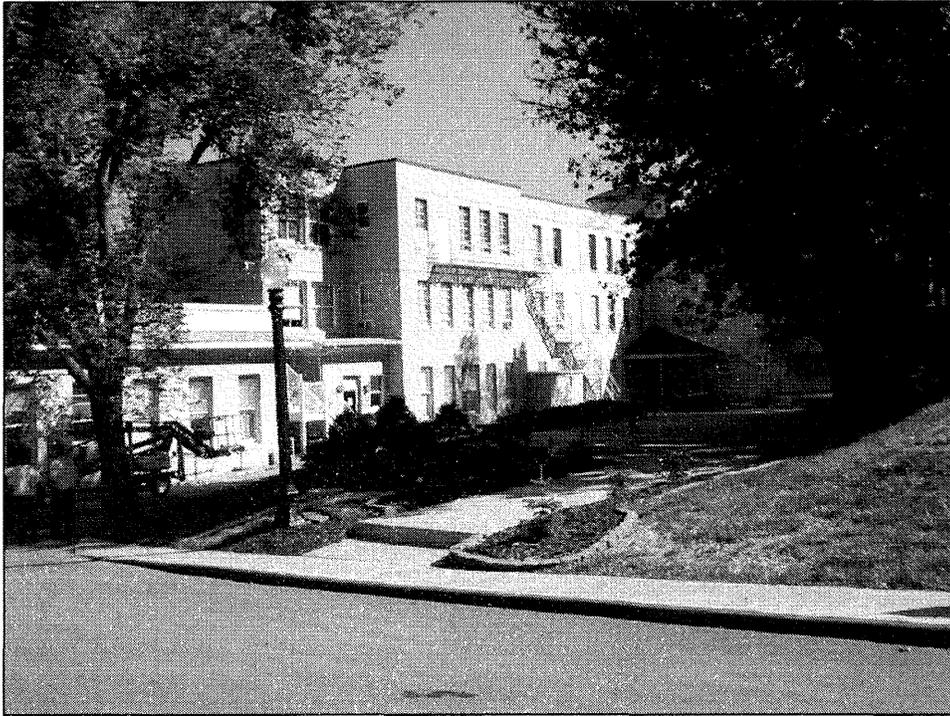
Second floor plan ca. 2000. (PBDewberry).

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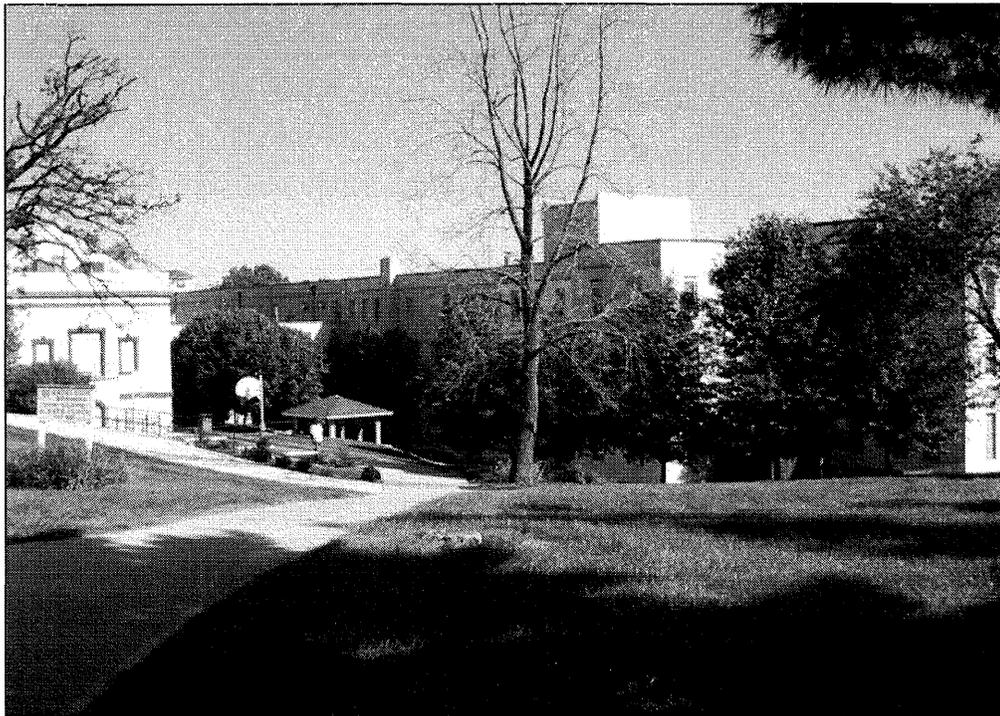


Third floor plan ca. 2009. (PBDewberry).

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Looking northeast at south elevation of northwest wing. (PBDewberry, 2010)



Looking northeast at west elevation of south wing. (PBDewberry, 2010)

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Looking north/northwest at east elevation. (PBDewberry, 2010)



Looking north/northwest at east elevation. (PBDewberry, 2010)

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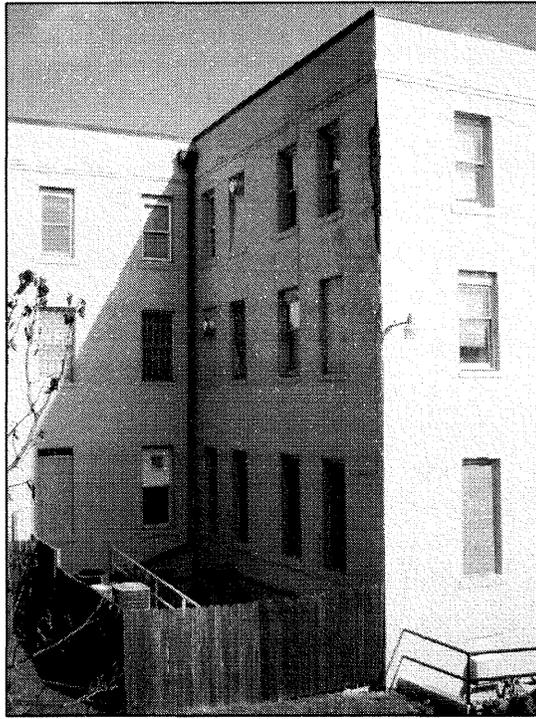


Looking west at east elevation. (PBDewberry, 2010)

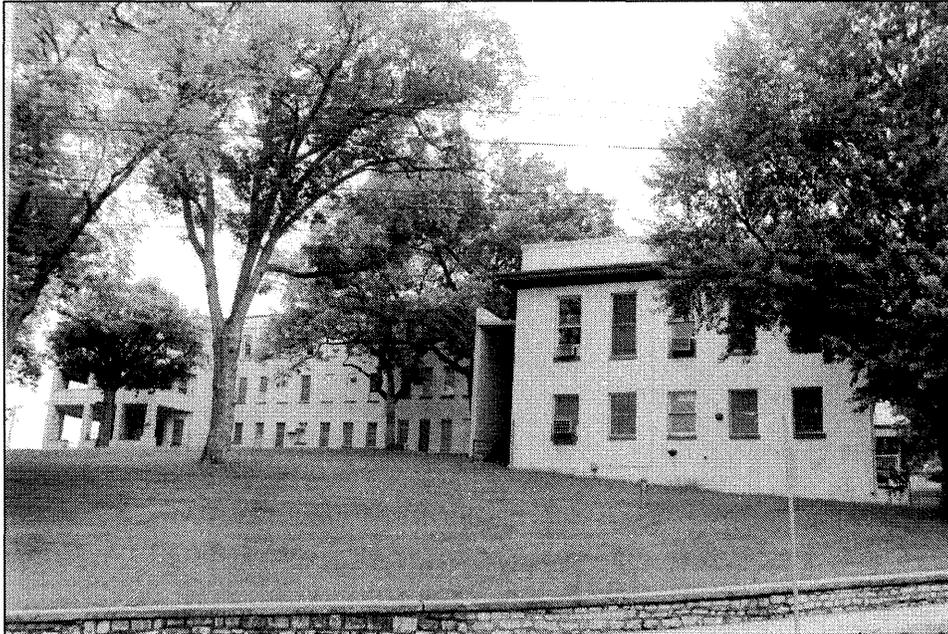


Looking north at south elevation of north wing. (PBDewberry, 2010)

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Looking northeast at southeast corner. (PBDewberry, 2010)

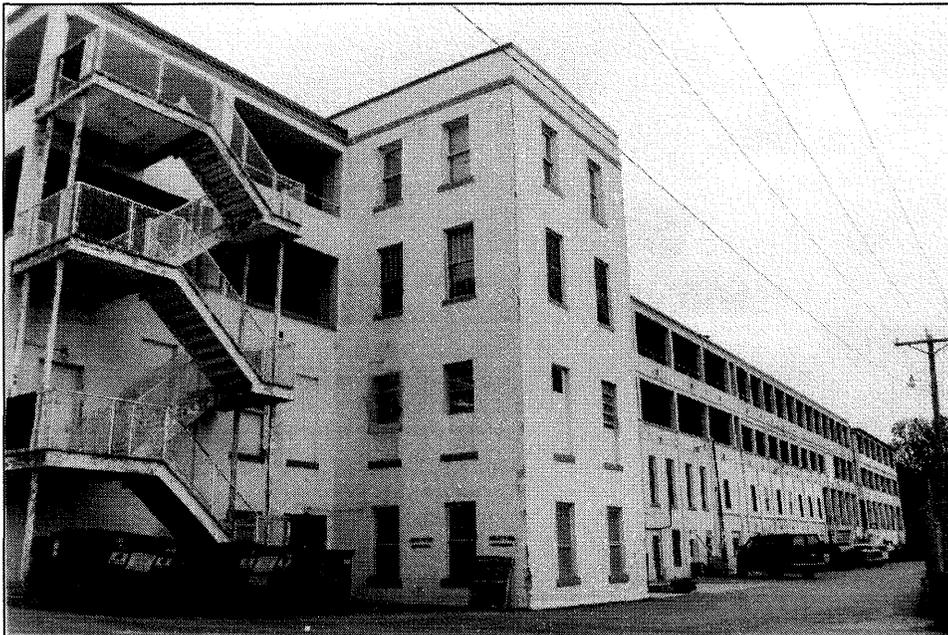


Looking southeast at north elevation; building 12 is attached on the right.
(Deon Wolfenbarger, 1996)

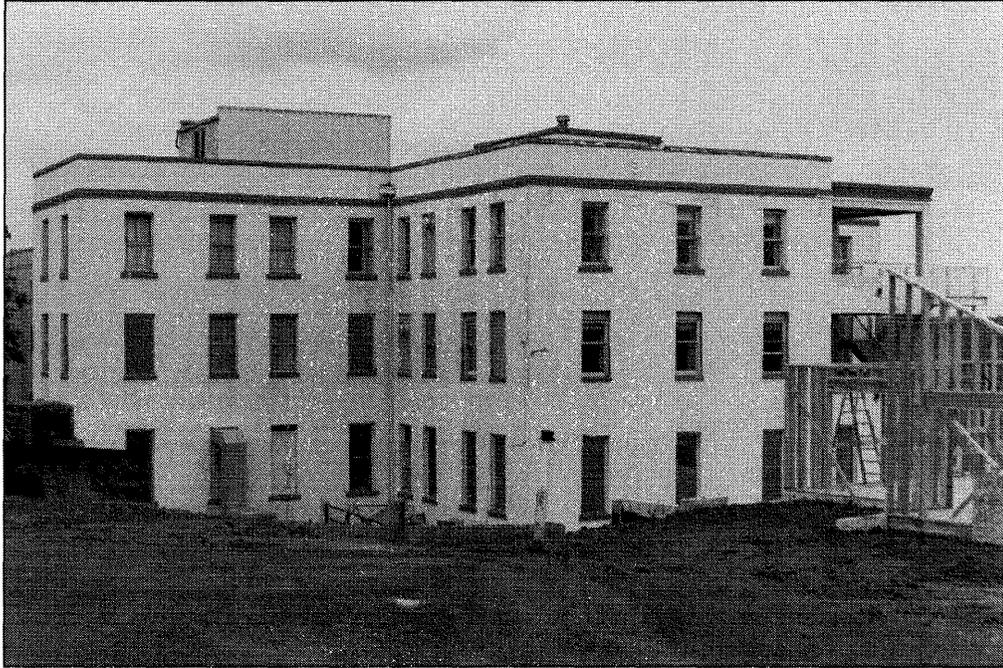
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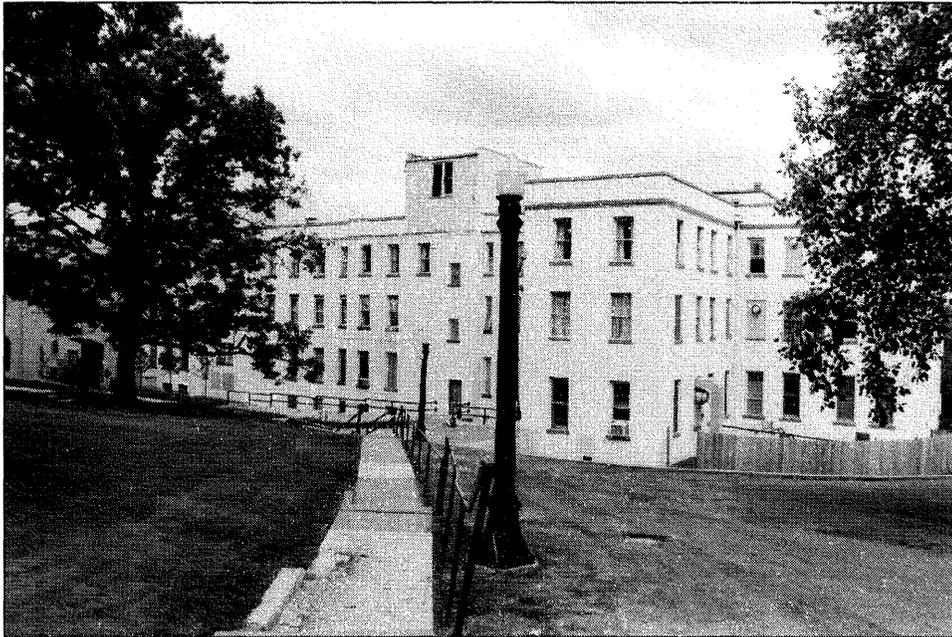
Looking south at north elevation; building 12 is attached on the right.
(Deon Wolfenbarger, 1996)



Looking northwest at east elevation.
(Deon Wolfenbarger, 1996)

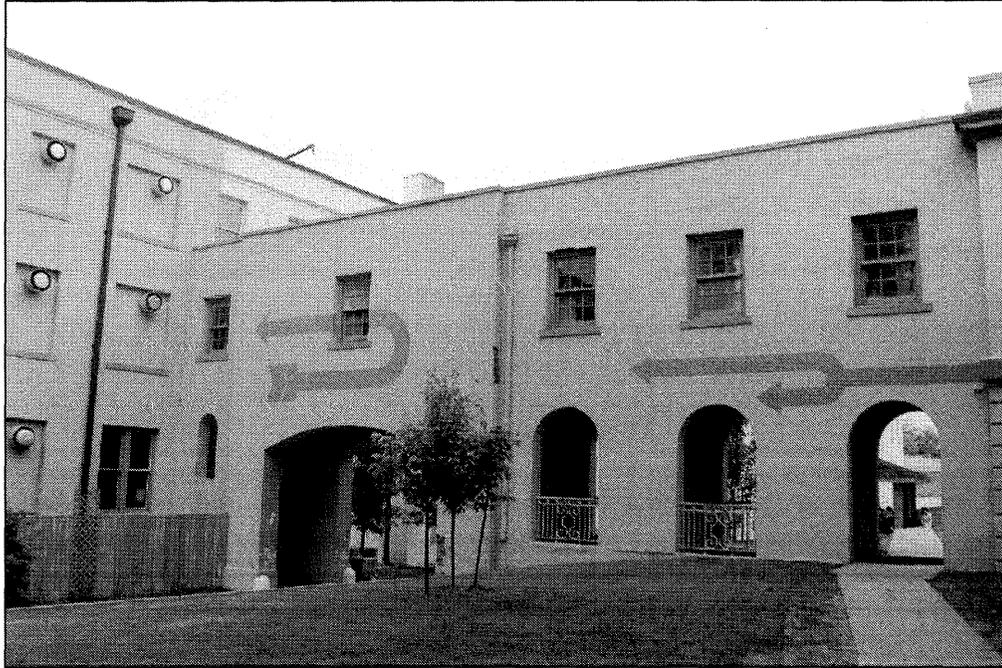


Looking north at south elevation.
(Deon Wolfenbarger, 1996)



Looking northeast at south elevation of south wing.
(Deon Wolfenbarger, 1996)

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Looking southeast at bridge connecting former hospital building on left with Building 12 on right.
(Deon Wolfenbarger, 1996)



Cherry fireplace mantel from original Morse residence, located in northeast section of hospital building. (Deon Wolfenbarger, 1996)