

NATIONAL HOME FOR DISABLED VOLUNTEER SOLDIERS,
NORTHWESTERN BRANCH, WARD MEMORIAL HALL
(Clement J. Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Building No.
41)
5000 West National Avenue
Milwaukee
Milwaukee
Wisconsin

HABS WI-360-B
WI-360-B

PHOTOGRAPHS

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FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

NATIONAL HOME FOR DISABLED VOLUNTEER SOLDIERS –
NORTHWESTERN BRANCH, WARD MEMORIAL HALL
(Clement J. Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Building No. 41)
HABS No. WI-360-B

Location: Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center, 5000 West National Avenue,
Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

Present Owner: U. S. Federal Government

Present Occupant: Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center

Present Use: Vacant

Significance: Ward Memorial Hall was built in 1881-82 during a period of expansion for the Northwestern Branch of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers. Originally the recreational facilities for resident veterans were housed in the multi-purpose Main Building (HABS No. WI-360-A). Expansion of the membership and a shift away from the centralized model in the 1880s and 1890s resulted in the construction of a number of specialized new buildings. Prominent Milwaukee architect Henry C. Koch designed Ward Memorial Hall with a theater/meeting room, store, restaurant, and railroad ticket office. This unusual combination of building uses was intended to address the growing recreational needs of the Northwestern Branch. Koch's firm was the architect for many buildings during this period of expansion including the hospital (1879), the chapel (1889), and the headquarters building (1894). In 1898 the theater space was reconfigured to have a sloped floor, balcony, and boxes flanking the proscenium stage.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1881-82

2. Architect: Henry C. Koch

3. Original and subsequent owners, occupants, uses: Amusement hall, train depot, store, restaurant and post office for Northwestern Branch, NHDVS. Gradually functions such as the train depot, post office, and store were moved to different structures and the theater facilities expanded (1898).

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: Anton Mauk, General Contractor¹
Charles Leunyman, Subcontractor
C. H. Schroeder, painting and glazing
R. L. Jones, galvanized iron and tin work
J. H. Harding, interior decorative painting²

5. Original plans and construction:

Original drawings of Koch's design for Ward Memorial Hall have not been located. Early exterior photographs indicate that the original appearance is still largely intact, with the exceptions noted below.

6. Alterations and additions:

c. 1888 – “General Grant” stained glass window installed on second floor of east façade, reconfiguring two preexisting window openings.

1898 – The theater was entirely reconfigured including lowering and sloping the floor on the first story, removing the floor for the second story, and adding side boxes and a balcony to create an 800-seat proscenium theater. It appears that the roof line over the stage area on the north end of the structure was altered during this renovation.

1899 – “Scenery room” added on west façade.

1930s – new dressing rooms and bathroom in west ell

¹ “Building Contract,” between Anton Mauk and General Jacob Sharpe, Governor of the Northwestern Branch, dated July 12, 1881, and listing H. C. Koch and Co, Architects, as superintendents of construction. Construction was to be completed by November 15, 1881. From the collection of Zablocki VA Medical Center Library.

² The above contractor names are found in “Memorial Hall Dedicated,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 16 March 1882, 8.

B. Historical Context:

The National Asylum for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers (renamed National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers in 1873) was established by an Act of Congress signed by President Lincoln in March 1865. Federal officials recognized the growing need to care for Union soldiers injured during their Civil War service and subsequently unable to support themselves. This unprecedented federal effort paralleled many state and local initiatives to care for disabled soldiers as the wounded filtered back North after years of fighting. The initial legislation did not specify where the Asylums would be located, but the general understanding was that several sites in different parts of the northern states would be needed. The Eastern Branch was opened in Togus, Maine on November 10, 1866 to serve veterans in the Northeast. The first of the original branches, the Togus property was a former health resort that offered a number of buildings for immediate use. The Northwestern Branch in Milwaukee also was established in 1866, after negotiations with the Wisconsin Soldiers' Home Society transferred the money and property already acquired by that group to the federal effort. The Central Branch was located outside of Dayton, Ohio in 1867 to be accessible to a large number of veterans in the lower Midwest, western New York and Pennsylvania, and states to the south. By 1930 when the National Homes were incorporated into the new Veterans Administration, the system had grown to include veterans of multiple conflicts cared for at eleven campuses located around the country.³ Many of the historic National Home sites are still part of the vast system of hospitals and other veterans' benefits managed by the Department of Veterans Affairs (the Veterans Administration was converted into a cabinet-level department in 1989).

The Board of Managers embarked on ambitious building campaigns for the Northwestern and Central Branches that erected large-scale institutional structures within carefully designed landscapes. Historian Patrick Kelly draws convincing connections between this embrace of high profile institution building and the political motivations of veteran services. In his assessment the Board of Managers were “highly partisan politicians, advocates of a strong and active central state, and eager, for humanitarian as well as political reasons, to demonstrate the power of the federal government to create a centralized institution for the care of war-disabled veterans.”⁴ Linking care for disabled veterans to domestic ideals of home was an important rhetorical device to gain public support for this endeavor. These efforts culminated in successful lobbying to have the name changed to National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers in 1873 (hereafter NHDVS). The Board of Managers was especially careful to disassociate their institution from others with highly negative connotations, such as poorhouses or insane asylums.⁵

Providing entertainment was an important consideration for all National Home branches, but the Northwestern Branch did not initially have a separate building for this purpose. During construction of the Main Building (HABS No. WI-360-A), the Board of Managers adopted a

³ Suzanne Julin. “Northwestern Branch, National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers,” Milwaukee County, Wisconsin. National Historic Landmark Registration Form (draft), (2008), 35. U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Washington, D.C.

⁴ Patrick Kelly, *Creating a National Home: Building the Veterans' Welfare State, 1860-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 85.

⁵ Kelly, 91.

resolution that a number of amenities be centralized in that structure, “such as a “chapel, to be also used for lectures, concerts, etc., and a reading room and library, with an amusement hall and work shops in the basement.”⁶ By the late 1870s, the Northwestern Branch began to shift to a decentralized arrangement like the Central Branch in Ohio. In 1879 a new hospital was built west of the Main Building. This structure was the first major step toward creating the cluster of buildings that define the historic core of the campus.⁷

In 1878 a report described two pressing needs for the Northwestern Branch. One was a suitable auditorium to seat large numbers of men. The other was a detached building for the “canteen” or home store now located in the main building. The report noted that “the increased business of the ‘canteen’ [home store] demands more commodious rooms, and hygiene considerations urge its removal from the main structure to a suitable detached building.”⁸ In 1880, a report from the Governor Sharpe of the Northwestern Branch was more specific regarding the need for an auditorium and the means for funding it:

This branch is now in great need of a suitable auditorium, of sufficient capacity to seat the increased number of beneficiaries present during the winter seasons, and it is recommended that the unclaimed effects of deceased beneficiaries, together with the interest thereon, and the profits of the Home store, be appropriated to the construction of a suitable Memorial Hall, of sufficient capacity to seat at least 700 persons, and to be so located that the first floor may be used for a railroad waiting room, post-office, telegraph office, etc.⁹

However, the “post fund” monies described here would not be sufficient to fund construction of the new hall. Instead, a combination of funding sources, including an unusual bequest to the National Homes, would provide the necessary means.

At the Board of Managers meeting on December 17, 1880, a resolution was adopted to appropriate \$7500 from the Ward Bequest Fund, \$4500 from the Northwestern Branch posthumous fund, and \$3500 from the Northwestern Branch store fund. The Ward Bequest Fund came from the estate of businessman Horatio Ward. Ward lived in London, but was a native of New York City. In his will he left 100 government bonds from various states to the NHDVS.¹⁰ Ward died in 1867 and when his estate was distributed the bonds were worth approximately \$124,000. The Board of Managers established a separate account with this money and made periodic appropriations for recreational amenities or other facilities to benefit the veteran members according to Ward’s wishes. The Western and Central Branches also had Ward Memorial Halls built during the 1880s.

⁶ Minutes, 11 December 1868, *Proceedings of the Board of Managers, Vol. 1*, 30. Wolcott was the only no vote on this resolution.

⁷ Board of Managers – NHDVS, *Annual Report*, (1880), 111.

⁸ Board of Managers – NHDVS, *Annual Report*, (1878), 74.

⁹ Board of Managers, (1880), 105

¹⁰ “The Will of Mr. Horatio Ward,” *New York Times*, 24 July 1871, 5.

The December 1880 meeting minutes specified that the new building would be used as “an amusement hall, place of worship, restaurant, store, ticket office, waiting room, etc.” and that preliminary plans had already been submitted by H.C. Koch & Co., Architects. The estimated cost was estimated to be \$15,500.¹¹ By February 1881, public announcements were made in Milwaukee regarding the new “Ward Memorial Hall” at the Soldiers’ Home. The *Milwaukee Sentinel* confirmed that Koch and Co. furnished plans. This was to be Koch’s second building at the Northwestern Branch. The newspaper described the plans as calling for a brick building, two-stories high, and 120 by 60 feet. The railroad depot, including ticket office and waiting rooms, a post office, and restaurant were to be housed on the first floor. The second floor would contain an “amusement hall.” A new artesian well was dug nearby to provide water service for the Hall.¹²

Henry C. Koch, Architect

Starting with the new hospital, the firm of Milwaukee architect Henry C. Koch (1841-1910) was repeatedly hired to design the new buildings at the Northwestern Branch. Born in Hanover, Germany in 1841, Koch came to the United States as an infant. His German background linked him to the large population of German businessmen and entrepreneurs who were coming to power in Milwaukee during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. He was educated in Milwaukee schools and learned architecture through an apprenticeship with George W. Mygatt beginning in 1856. Mygatt was Milwaukee’s most important early architect, having started his practice in the 1840s. He designed numerous churches, stores, hotels, and residences as well as performing the duties of contractor and real estate investor. This range of projects and roles was an excellent learning experience for the young Koch. Along with Edward Townsend Mix, architect for the Main Building at the Northwestern Branch, Henry C. Koch was one of Milwaukee’s most noted and prolific architects.¹³ In May 1886, Koch wrote to *Inland Architect* that although there were approximately eighteen practicing architects in Milwaukee “Messrs. E.T. Mix & Co., and ourselves, have done fully three fifths of the entire amount of architecture work in the city.”¹⁴ By the 1880s, Mix’s career was starting to wane and Koch was in his most productive period.

For the Soldiers’ Home commissions, Koch had the advantage of being a veteran himself. He enlisted in the Wisconsin infantry in August 1862 and served as a topographical engineer under General Phil Sheridan from October 1862 until the end of the war. Then he continued to serve as a civilian employee on Sheridan’s staff for the occupation of Louisiana. Upon return to Milwaukee in early 1866, Koch formed a partnership with Mygatt. In 1870 he established his

¹¹ Board of Managers Report, 1881 (Fiscal Year ending 30 June 1881), 97.

¹² “General City News,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 3 February 1881, 2; “Artesian Well Dug for Memorial Hall,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 4 February 1881, 2; “General City News,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 4 February 1881, 2.

¹³ Joseph Korom, *Milwaukee Architecture: A Guide to Notable Buildings* (Madison, WI: Prairie Oak Press, 1995), xi-xii. The most complete study of Koch’s career is William P. O’Brien, *Milwaukee Architect: Henry C. Koch*. MA Thesis: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1989. Unless otherwise noted, information in the next three paragraphs comes from this work.

¹⁴ “Milwaukee, Wis.,” *Inland Architect and News Record* (May 1886): 71.

own practice. Koch was also a charter member of Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) Post No. 1, which was named after early Soldiers' Home advocate E. B. Wolcott. A biographical profile appearing in an 1890 GAR publication listed "the Soldier's Home" first among his prominent public building designs in Milwaukee.¹⁵

Koch excelled at securing government commissions, successfully winning contracts for courthouses, schools, hospitals, orphanages, asylums, and government agencies throughout the Midwest.¹⁶ Koch is best known locally for the German Renaissance Revival Milwaukee City Hall, built 1893-1895 and still in use.¹⁷ Unlike the conspicuous German identity displayed in the design of City Hall, built at the zenith of German immigrant influence in Milwaukee politics, business and culture, the Soldiers' Home structures designed by Koch and Co. exhibit a more diverse assortment of eclectic Victorian architectural modes. Prior to designing Ward Memorial Hall at the Northwestern Branch, Koch's most notable public buildings were the Science Hall at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (1875, burned and rebuilt 1885), a number of schools in Milwaukee and elsewhere, and an addition for the State Normal School in Oshkosh (1876). He designed a wide variety of building types in his career, including several theaters. The Grand Opera House (1871) in Milwaukee was an important early commission as while Koch was part of the firm of Koch & Hess (1870-1872). Shortly after Ward Memorial Hall, Koch designed Turners Hall (1882-83, addition 1886) on Fourth Street in Milwaukee. Turners Hall shares a Victorian Romanesque façade with Ward Memorial Hall, as well as a complex program that included a gymnasium, restaurant/beer hall, meeting rooms, and two-story ballroom.¹⁸

Construction and Dedication of Ward Memorial Hall

In April 1881 it was reported that the lowest bids to construct the Memorial Hall were still \$4000 more than the \$16,000 allocation.¹⁹ A rise in the cost of building materials was to blame. In July of that year construction did commence, with general contractor Anton Mauk to receive \$20,700 for his company's work.²⁰ If the original reports in the *Sentinel* were accurate, the footprint of the Hall was reduced 20 feet on the longer side to be 100 by 60.²¹

In spite of the particular desire to have a new amusement hall during the winter months, Ward Memorial Hall was still under construction during the winter of 1881-82. On January 23, 1882, the *Milwaukee Sentinel* described the progress of the new building and its planned uses:

¹⁵ "Henry C. Koch," *Soldiers' and Citizens' Album of Biographical Record*. (Chicago: Grand Army Publishing Company, 1890), 810-811.

¹⁶ O'Brien, 23.

¹⁷ Milwaukee City Hall was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2005. See Quinn Evans, Architects. "Milwaukee City Hall," Milwaukee County, Wisconsin. National Historic Landmark Registration Form, 2004. U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Washington, D.C.

¹⁸ The Turners, or *Turn Verein*, were a German-American political and social organization that particularly promoted physical education and the arts. Turners Hall became a National Historic Landmark in 1996.

¹⁹ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 28 April 1881, 7.

²⁰ "Building Contract," (12 July 1881), in collection of Zablocki VA Medical Center Library.

²¹ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 27 July 1881, 2.

The memorial building at the Soldiers Home is now nearly ready for occupancy, and will be quite so in about a fortnight. The hall in the new building which is to be devoted to the giving of musical and dramatic entertainments is completed except as to the placing of seats in the auditorium and the arranging of the curtain and other stage accessories. On Friday evening the acoustic properties of the hall were tested by means of the Soldiers' Home band. The result was deemed satisfactory, only a slight echo being noticeable which it is believed, will soon disappear as soon as the furniture is put in place. The hall has floor dimensions of 70 by 45 feet, and bids fair to be a very cozy place of amusement, and a satisfactory substitute for the chapel of the Home, in which the disciples of Thalia and Melpomene connected with the institution have provided such royal entertainment for their friends. Besides the amusement hall, the memorial building will contain a post office for use by the inmates of the home and a store and restaurant. The latter will provide a convenience to visitors in the summertime who go out from the city to spend the day.²²

With construction of the new building, theatrical entertainment would be removed from the chapel in the Main Building. In addition the improved store and post office promised new amenities for the growing population of veterans housed at the Northwestern Branch. Finish work on the new hall continued through the winter months. In early February 1882 it was reported that a J. H. Harding was at work with a "force of men" painting decorative "frescoes" on the interior of the new hall.²³

On March 15, 1882 the new Memorial Hall was dedicated. The *Milwaukee Sentinel* published a glowing account of the proceedings and the details of the new structure. Appropriately, the opening of the new hall was celebrated with a concert featuring the National Home band with assistance from the local Arion Music Club and the Cecilian Choir. Approximately 100 guests traveled via a special train from Milwaukee and were treated to a banquet in the basement restaurant after the concert. The article estimated that the new hall would seat 500-600 people. In addition to mentioning the architect, contractor, and various subcontractors, the article went into some detail regarding the "new Renaissance style" frescoes "designed by J. H. Harding and executed under his supervision":

The ceiling is divided into many panels; the half circular one near the stage is filled with peacock plumage, as is also the corresponding panel at the other end of the hall. The remaining panels are filled with unique tracery. The main ceiling corner has black for its ground color in which there are running vines and rosettes or rose color and greenish blue. The shelving sides of the ceiling are decorated with conventional curtains with a gold festooned border hanging over a sky blue color. The huge cornice is divided into diamond shaped panels the smaller ones with dark maroon ground covered with rose and gold ornaments. The main ground tint was rich grays and buffs. The proscenium arch is decorated

²² "Memorial Building," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 23 January 1882, 4.

²³ "General City News," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 1 February 1882, 6.

elaborately with rustic work. Very little space is left on the side walls owing to the many windows which are decorative in themselves, the upper portion of each containing stained glass. The work in the hall is equal to anything in the Northwest orchestra.²⁴

The original appearance of the “amusement hall” was recorded in a photograph for the 1889 souvenir booklet (Figure 1). However, this elaborate painting was covered over by the current barrel vaulted ceiling, probably when the theater was expanded. The original peacock feathers, tracery, and other decorative vignettes are preserved beneath this ceiling and partially visible through holes in the attic floor (Figure 2).

After the building dedication in March, Northwestern Branch officials continued to work toward occupying all of its new spaces. There was some difficulty finding an operator for the restaurant, perhaps because of the prohibition on selling alcohol.²⁵ On June 1st the branch post office was officially moved from the Main Building to Ward Memorial Hall, into a room “fitted up in an elegant and commodious manner, greatly facilitating the transaction of post office business.”²⁶ The earliest photograph of Ward Memorial Hall dates to c. 1887 (Figure 3). This stereopair image shows the exterior of the building from the northeast. The railroad tracks and platform are visible in the foreground.²⁷ The final cost of the “Ward Memorial Hall” was \$22,000.²⁸

Expansion of the facilities for the Northwestern Branch was timely because rather than slowing as originally expected, the demand for the National Homes continued to grow as the Civil War veterans aged and Congress broadened admission requirements. In 1884 there was a major expansion of the eligibility requirements for the NHDVS branches. Previously proof had to be provided that one’s disability was a direct result of military service. Now any honorably discharged Union veteran was eligible for admission, as well as veterans of the War of 1812 and the Mexican War. As previously self-sufficient veterans became disabled due to various causes, including the long term effects of their military service or simply old age, the demand for Soldiers’ Home admission grew rapidly.²⁹ When testifying before a Congressional committee in 1884, General Sharpe, the current governor of the Northwestern Branch, expressed

²⁴ “Memorial Hall Dedicated,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 16 March 1882, 8.

²⁵ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 9 April 1882, 6. The location of the restaurant was alternately referred to as the first floor or the basement. Given the *piano nobile* arrangement of the amusement hall on the second floor, it is uncertain whether the restaurant was located at the current basement level where remnants of a brick floor are located, or on the raised first floor with the railroad depot and post office.

²⁶ Board of Managers, NHDVS, *Annual Report*, (1882), 89.

²⁷ Image WHI-34889, H. H. Bennett Studio Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI. There is another stereopair image that shows the building around the same time from a more northward angle. See WHI-54269 in the Place File at the Wisconsin Historical Society.

²⁸ Board of Managers, NHDVS, *Annual Report*, (1882), 95. Here Ward is listed as “of Virginia, who at his death left \$100,000 to the Homes to be used for the benefit of the inmates.”

²⁹ Kelly 128; Judith Gladys Cetina, “A History of the Veterans’ Homes in the United States, 1811-1930,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Case Western Reserve University, 1977), 171, 167. Disabled veterans of the Mexican War and War of 1812 were first eligible in 1871, but there was some confusion regarding how to interpret the law requiring proof of service-related disability.

dissatisfaction with the large main building. He attributed most of the discipline problems to “herding” the men together in one large structure. The governor speculated that if he had enough money, he would prefer to tear the building down and start over on a decentralized barracks plan like the Central Branch.³⁰

Changes for Ward Memorial Hall

The veterans of the Northwestern Branch proceeded to use their new hall to attend theatrical performances, lectures, and other events. In July 1889, the *Milwaukee Sunday Telegraph* published a reprint of a report from the Home describing the entertainment offerings in Ward Memorial Hall:

In this building is a first-class theater, fully equipped with scenery and 600 folding opera chairs. During the season first class lectures, concert, minstrel and theater companies are hired to come here and give entertainments once a week free to the members of the Home; the expenses being paid out of the “Post fund.”

Apparently initially the theater hosted “volunteer lecturers and amateur theatricals but amusements of this kind were discontinued owing to their unsatisfactory character and the annoyance connected therewith.”³¹ Professional entertainers were instead booked to play for the resident veterans and invited guests. The home store enjoyed brisk business in its improved quarters. The *Sunday Telegraph* report mentioned that the “nick-knacks” sold in the store at Ward Memorial Hall, “such as brushes, combs, neckties, shirts, confectionery, nuts, etc.” generated additional profits for the Post fund. Visitors and veterans both utilized the new railroad passenger station facilities incorporated into the north side of the first floor.

The first important alteration to the structure occurred after the National Encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic in St. Louis, Missouri during September 1887. The GAR was a social and political organization for Union veterans that had many chapters around the country, including one at each branch of the NHDVS. A pair of large stained glass windows was on display at the encampment – one featuring Abraham Lincoln and another with General U. S. Grant depicted astride his horse. After the encampment the Grant window was presented to the Northwestern Branch. By 1889, the window was installed in the east façade of Ward Memorial Hall, at the second floor level (Figure 4). This section of the façade had a tall round arch window flanked by two narrow rectangular windows. One narrow side window, a section of brick wall, and the bottom two-thirds of the round arch window were replaced by the Grant window. This asymmetrical placement was probably for structural reasons, as was the I-beam inserted across the top of the new decorative window.³²

³⁰ Quoted in Kelly, 114.

³¹ J.C. Breckinridge, *Report of the Inspector General on the Several Branches of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers from October 18, 1895 to January 8, 1896* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1896), 30.

³² According to Mollenhoff and Tupek. “Ward Memorial Hall,” Section 7, 2, the Lincoln window was installed in the library at the Western Branch of the NHDVS in Leavenworth, Kansas. An inscription describing the provenance of the window and its presentation to the Northwestern Branch by “the people of St. Louis,” was added to the window before its installation. For more information on the GAR and veterans’ homes see Judith Gladys Cetina, “A

Starting in the mid-1890s, complaints about the theater in Ward Memorial Hall began to appear in the Inspector General's annual reports. Chief among the concerns was insufficient exits from the second floor space in case of fire. The theater was also deemed too small for the growing population of the home. Often two performances of each play, usually comedies, were given to accommodate all the members.³³ Then in late 1898 it was decided to drastically remodel the theater in Ward Memorial Hall to make it larger and safer for the resident veterans. The floor was lowered and the previously two-level space totally reconfigured into an 850-seat proscenium theater with a balcony and box seats.³⁴ Box seats were for the use of officers and their families. As recalled by Elizabeth Corbett in her memoir of her childhood at the Northwestern Branch, prior to the renovation the officers and their families sat in the balcony.³⁵ As was the case before, the Ward Memorial Hall theater hosted professional performers as well as lectures, meetings of the branch members, and concerts featuring the branch band. The railroad station was repurposed into the stage area. The theater orchestra now had a sloped floor and direct access to the exits on the south façade, as well as doors at the east and the west. After the renovations were complete, the Inspector General mentioned that the Home Store was still on the first floor of the building. Perhaps he was referring to the pyramidal-roof, one-story ell on the west side of the building, because there would not have been another likely space on the first floor of the main building now entirely occupied by the theater.³⁶

The next change was initiated shortly thereafter when the Board of Trustees appropriated \$1,000 from the post fund for a one-story addition to Ward Memorial Hall at their meeting on September 25, 1899.³⁷ It is likely that this addition is one of the small shed roof expansions on

History of the Veterans' Homes in the United States, 1811-1930." (Ph.D. dissertation, Case Western Reserve University, 1977), 213-216.

³³ J.C. Breckinridge, *Report of the Inspector General on the Several Branches of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers from July 21 to November 1, 1896*. (Washington, DC: GPO, 1897), 25; J.C. Breckinridge, *Report of the Inspector General on the Several Branches of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers from July 31 to November 1897*. (Washington, DC: GPO, 1898), 41.

³⁴ The Inspector General visited the Northwestern Branch on August 18-21, 1898 and mentioned that the theater was "at present being remodeled." Fourteen performances had been given there throughout the year. See J.C. Breckinridge, *Report of the Inspector General on the Several Branches of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers from August 8 to November 12, 1898*. (Washington, DC: GPO, 1899), 17.

³⁵ Elizabeth Frances Corbett, *Out at the Soldiers' Home: A Memory Book*. (New York: D. Appleton Century Company, 1941, reprinted in 2008 by Acta Publications and the West Side Soldiers Aid Society), 45.

³⁶ J.C. Breckinridge, *Report of the Inspector General on the Several Branches of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers from August 8 to November 12, 1898*. (Washington, DC: GPO, 1900), 15-16. This small wing is visible in photographs published in 1889, and appears in footprint on an 1886 site plan. Perhaps it dates to the original building campaign and was always intended for use as the Home Store and/or a boiler room. See photograph captioned "Fighting Their Battles Over Again," *National Soldiers' Home Near Milwaukee*, (New York: The Albertype Co., 1889). The site plan appears on a "Map of Milwaukee County," WHI-54266, Place File, Wisconsin Historical Society. Souvenir booklets just after the turn of the twentieth century only indicate that the home store was in a "convenient building," presumably not the theater structure. See Richard Corbett, *Souvenir of the Soldiers' Home*. (1904), 13.

³⁷ Board of Managers Meeting Minutes, (25 September 1899), NHDVS, *Annual Report*, (1900), 240; Building notes compiled in the historical collection at the Zablocki VA Medical Center library list a "scenery room" for this structure, built in 1899 at a cost of \$896. This document also notes that \$5,233.21 was spent in 1898 on rebuilding the theater.

the west façade. These spaces were used as dressing rooms and scenery storage for the visiting performers. The Northwestern Branch was a regular stop on the regional vaudeville circuit. A storage closet at the second floor stair landing behind the balcony is still papered with turn-of-the-century lithograph posters featuring many now forgotten acts such as Henry Woodruff, William Kibble, and the Who is Who show featuring Tom Ricketts. An Inspector General report from 1902 noted:

The old veterans at this Branch are well supplied with amusements of different kinds, from which they derive much pleasure and pastime. The theater, with a seating capacity of 850, and in which different kinds of light drama, vaudeville, lectures, and concerts by the band are given, is one of the principal sources of amusement. No charge is made for these entertainments to the members of the Home, but others are charged from 15 cents to 25 cents each.³⁸

Elizabeth Corbett noted that her father, Richard (he was Chief Clerk, and later Treasurer), was also responsible for booking the professional entertainments. She recounted the strong preference for musicals and comedies among the old soldiers, and their tendency to simply walk out in large groups if a performance was deemed “too talky” or pedantic.³⁹ By 1910, weekly motion pictures were added to the entertainment options at the Northwestern Branch.⁴⁰ The growing population of Spanish American War and then World War I veterans enjoyed many hours of live and motion picture entertainment in the theater.

Around 1928, members of Congress began advocating for restructuring federal veterans services. Three different agencies served veterans – the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, the Pension Bureau, and the Veterans' Bureau (founded in 1921 and primarily involved with medical care and insurance). Various restructurings were considered; the most straightforward and ultimately successful proposal combined all three agencies under a new Veterans' Administration. This proposal was approved by Congress on July 3, 1930 and instituted through an executive order. The NHDVS Board of Managers resisted the initial proposals, but finally their eleven branches were folded into the new VA. The NHDVS was no longer an autonomous agency; now their primarily domiciliary services were just one of many offered by the Veterans' Administration.⁴¹ The former Northwestern Branch became known as the Wood, Wisconsin station of the Veterans' Administration and Ward Memorial Hall was designated Building No. 41.

New Deal funding for improvements at the Veterans' Administration facilities brought changes to the Ward Memorial Hall. An addition for new dressing rooms was added to the northwest corner and the backstage spaces adjacent to here and in the west ell received updated

³⁸Thomas T. Knox, *Report of the Inspector General on the Several Branches of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers made from July 15 to October 22, 1902*. (Washington, DC: GPO, 1902), n.p.

³⁹Corbett, *Out at the Soldiers' Home*, 81-82.

⁴⁰A. W. Brewster, *Report of the Inspector General on the Several Branches of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers made from August 28 to November 19, 1910*. (Washington, DC: GPO, 1910), 22.

⁴¹Cetina, 382-383.

bathrooms and new dressing rooms.⁴² Additional bathrooms for theater patrons were added in the basement beneath the main exterior stair on the south façade. Paintings of nature scenes were added to the interior walls of the theater, painted on acoustic tiles attached to the plaster walls. A new painting of the Soldiers' Home seal and Wisconsin scenery was done in the proscenium arch above the stage. After World War II, the theater gradually fell in to disuse, as many of the gatherings for resident veterans were held in the new medical facilities or smaller venues around the campus.

In 1981 a local theater company called the Milwaukee Players began using the theater for rehearsals and offices at the request of then Milwaukee VA Medical Center Director Leon Edman. A movement led by the Soldiers Home Foundation, Inc., American Legion and other interested groups sought to raise money to renovate the theater. Key to these efforts in the early 1980s was the help of Milwaukee native and famous performer Wladziu "Walter" Liberace (1919-1987). A young Liberace performed at the theater when visiting veterans with his mother during the 1920s. He grew up just across the street at 4905 West National Avenue. The efforts to renovate Ward Memorial Hall as a performing arts venue included benefit concerts, fundraising, and renaming as the Liberace Playhouse. Unfortunately Liberace and later his estate were never forthcoming with the major donation hoped for by the Foundation. The structure was individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1984 as part the effort to renovate and preserve it. These efforts experienced a major set back in 1983-84 when Director Edman retired and fundraising activities actually left the Foundation \$75,000 in debt.

In a controversial move, the Veterans' Administration determined in 1992 that the Milwaukee Players could no longer use Ward Memorial Hall for rehearsal space due to safety concerns, particularly the lack of compliance with modern fire code standards. This building in particular became indicative of the challenges of adaptive reuse for historic VA structures. The VA initiated a series of preservation plans and studies for the site, but could not supply the necessary funding for renovation. The Wisconsin State Historic Preservation Office advocated for preservation and resisted any suggested demolition. Beyond some basic exterior painting and roof repairs in the early 1990s, the VA could not financially support preservation of the theater. Ambitious fundraising efforts by the Soldiers Home Foundation floundered and currently Ward Memorial Hall sits vacant and in deteriorating condition.⁴³

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Ward Memorial Hall is a two-and-a-half story High Victorian Gothic Revival structure on a raised basement. Elements of its High Victorian Gothic Revival

⁴² Photographs taken c. 1940 show the addition on the west façade of the Building No. 41. Binders in VA Washington Headquarters office, Room 270.

⁴³ Correspondence and clippings regarding efforts to preserve and use the theater during the 1980s and 1990s are located in the files of the VA Federal Preservation Officer, Headquarters Building, Washington, D.C.. Both the National Register nomination (Mollenhoff and Tupek) and the Proposal for Adaptive Reuse (Recker) have inaccurate dates and other information about changes to the theater.

decorative mode include ornamented polychromatic brickwork, a steeply pitched hipped roof with cross gables and finials, and a veranda wrapping around three sides with ornamental wood posts and railings.

2. Condition of fabric: Poor. While Ward Memorial Hall appears to be structurally sound and retains a very high level of integrity, including historic seats and other fixtures, the building is deteriorating, mainly due to water infiltration and lack of climate control. There is water damage, mildew, and evidence of animal infestation throughout the building.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The main portion of Ward Memorial Hall is primarily a two-and-a-half story structure with shallow cross plan (see HABS drawings for precise dimensions). There are a series of lower ells and additions on the west façade.

2. Foundations: rusticated yellow stone with brick supporting piers in the basement. The foundation is mostly hidden on the exterior by the verandas or ground level. There are additional wood reinforcing beams on brick piers in the basement probably installed when the floor was lowered to expand the theater in 1898.

3. Walls: “Cream City” yellow brick laid in a seven to one common bond with red brick decorative accents, particularly around the windows and in the cross gables. The top of the gables have a red and yellow brick checkerboard motif. At the cornices the brick walls are corbelled. A red brick belt course is located at the bottom and middle of the second floor windows. There are diamonds and other geometric motifs rendered in red brick in the walls at the porch level. Buttresses with stone shoulder caps appear at the upper corners. In the south cross gable there are recessed spandrel panels under the second floor windows. Two larger spandrel panels outlined with red brick are located underneath round windows on either side of main second floor window grouping. A long stone panel below the second floor windows on this façade reads “WARD MEMORIAL HALL.”

4. Structural system, framing: The basic structural system consists of heavy timber wood roof trusses with load bearing masonry walls. Drastic changes to the theater configuration and floor levels in 1898 also altered the framing, although the exact nature of the changes is not entirely clear. There are two large cross trusses in the attic at the center and near the south wall of the building. A different partial truss supports the large gable at the south façade. The collar beam at the south truss was cut to allow room for a galvanized metal ventilation duct. At the cross gable closer to the north end there is an iron strap with a pole and screw arrangement reinforcing the wood purlin. The roof is supported on purlins with pieced-together rafters. This system was reconfigured at the north end, probably to accommodate the expanded stage and support areas. Metal posts were added to support the balcony – two below the front edge in the orchestra seating area and two near the top of the balcony at the projection both. The upper posts are connected to the truss in the attic above.

5. Porches: A one-story wood porch on brick piers extends around the south, east and north facades of the building. On the south elevation a wide wood staircase with fourteen steps and a metal pipe railing rises to the main entrance. Changes in grade make the wood stairs on the east side shorter as the grade rises to the north. Originally there were three wood stairs with balusters and railings that matched the rest of the porch. There is a set of three stairs for a change in porch floor level on the east side. On the north side the porch sits nearly at grade. The shed porch roof is supported by heavy square columns topped by a capital with stylized floral motifs (similar to the popular Eastlake decorative arts motifs of this period) and exposed decorative brackets and roof structure. The porch roof has a decorative front gables at the stair openings on the south and east façades. The beveled exposed beams are most elaborate on the south, but also ornate at the east stair openings. There is a wood balustrade between the porch posts that is executed in a simplified Chinese Chippendale geometric pattern.

Low concrete stairs with landings and metal pipe railings were added to the west ell and at the southwest corner of the main building. There are metal fire escapes from the second floor level on the east and west facades that replaced earlier wood fire escapes.

6. Chimneys: There is a tall decorative brick chimney at the center of the pyramidal roof on the original west ell. The Cream City brick chimney has a heavy corbelled cap. A pair of similar chimneys with elaborate pyramidal caps has been removed; the capped openings are still visible near the north end of the structure. There are metal pipe ventilators at each end of the ridge that were added during the twentieth century.

7. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance to the theater is at the raised first floor porch level on the south façade. Here a group of three elaborate doorways is set behind corresponding round arch openings. The center arch is slightly larger. Each arch has alternating red and yellow brick voussiors and stone capitals at the piers flanking the center opening. The capitals are carved with three high relief acanthus leaves. Each opening has a pair of solid wood doors with six recessed panels with a curved beveled edge. This is the typical door for this structure and appears to be original or from the 1898 reconfiguration. Each opening has a fixed four light transom above.

Additional doorways at porch level on the east and north facades have segmental brick arch openings. The north opening also has a shallow yellow brick hood. On the east there are double doors with a four light fixed transom. On the north there is a single wood paneled door with a fixed three light transom. A similar double door on the south end of the west façade now opens onto a concrete landing and stair.

On the second floor level exterior doorways provide access to fire escapes on the east and west façades. These openings are windows that were modified early the building's history, given the matching nineteenth century doors throughout and the stained glass transoms that match the upper sash of the adjacent windows. There is a single door in the south side of the west cross gable accessible from the stairway behind the west boxes. Another door nearby on the west façade is accessible from the balcony. Another door is on the east façade near the south end and

accessible from the balcony. The wood doors here are consistent with the ones below and have early push bar opening hardware.

There is a series of more utilitarian doors on the additions and ell on the west side of the building. A doorway on the north façade of the backstage addition has a rectangular opening and a door sheathed with metal. The door also has a fixed wire glass opening in the top half and a one-light fixed transom. On the west side of the addition there is a double door in a segmental arch opening and sheathed with metal. The ell has utilitarian openings on the north and west facades as well. A pair of cyclone basement doors located on its south side provides access to the crawl space under the original ell.

Early twentieth century wood doors were inserted below the porch flanking the main stair on the south elevation. These doors provided access to the bathrooms added in this area.

b. Windows and shutters:

The typical window is a six over six or four over four wood sash set into a segmental arch opening in the brick wall. The top rail of the upper sash is curved. On the second floor level the window openings are more ornamented. Each window has a flat brick hood rendered in bands of yellow and red brick and a stuccoed brick sill. Originally intended to illuminate the second floor meeting room, many of the windows on this level are painted over or boarded up. The cross gables have a more elaborate window grouping with a decorative pier between a pair of windows and a large round arch opening above filled with blue and gold colored diamond pane glazing. The window decoration is most elaborate on the south and east façades, and somewhat simplified on the north and west. A round window framed by a wide yellow and red brick band is located on each side of the main second floor window grouping at the south cross gable. The one on the west side is bricked up; the one on the east retains its four light glazing. Two window openings in the west cross gable also have been bricked up.

Also noteworthy is the “General Grant” window added to the east façade cross gable c. 1887. The stained glass window depicting Ulysses S. Grant on his horse was displayed at the September 1887 encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic in St. Louis (along with a Lincoln window now located at the Western Branch in Leavenworth, Kansas). Later the window was presented to the Northwestern Branch as a gift from the Ransome Post, G.A.R.. It was installed on the east elevation by inserting an I-beam and spanning the bottom section of the main window pair and a flanking window to the south, creating an asymmetrical appearance.

8. Roof:

a. Shape, covering: Ward Memorial Hall has a steeply pitched compound hipped roof with cross gables. The roof pitch may have been altered at the north cross gable. Originally sheathed in slate, this roof is now covered with green composite shingles.

b. Cornice, eaves: Shallow box eaves with hidden gutters connected to downspouts. The cross gables have a low decorative parapet, and finials at each peak. The more elaborate south cross gable finial is partially missing.

c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: There are hexagonal towers with a conical roof at the southeast and southwest corners flanking the main entrance. Finials at the top of each tower are no longer extant.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

Basement: Originally designed as a restaurant, the basement became an unfinished space after the ceiling was lowered to accommodate expansion of the theater above in 1898. Probably during the 1930s, structural clay tile walls were added to partition the section under the south porch into bathrooms with shower stalls.

First floor: The main interior space is the sloped floor theater with proscenium stage entered at the raised first floor level. From the main entrance on the south façade, patrons would enter a narrow lobby extending across the width of the building. The orchestra seating was accessible straight ahead, while staircases to the balcony are located at each side of the lobby. On the north side of the first floor adjacent to the stage are backstage support areas such as bathrooms, dressing rooms, and storage.

Three levels of box seating used by officers of the Home and their families flank the stage and are accessed via narrow winder stairs along the west and east walls. Sloped balcony seating extends across the south half of the theater space, supported at front edge by metal poles with simple Doric cap. There is a wide landing at the second floor before entering the balcony stairs that includes a partitioned storage space papered with late-nineteenth-century theatrical posters. Because the storage room appears to be original as well as much of the decorative trim at this landing, it is likely that the original circulation at this level would have involved entering the second floor theater/meeting hall from openings at either side. Historic images have not been located to confirm this theory, but the physical evidence suggests that the original meeting hall floor would have been in alignment with the upper landing. A metal-sheathed motion picture projection room has been added at the top of the balcony.

2. Stairways: The main, and probably original, staircase is a pair of split dogleg stair at the entrance hall on the south, one at each side. Each staircase features wide enclosed stairs with a gentle rise that turn 180 degrees at a midway landing. Both stairs have chunky square wood newel posts with beveled corners and Eastlake-type geometric forms. The complementary turned balustrades are interrupted at the landing by a matching double newel posts topped with heavy balls and including newel drops. There is a pipe railing that was added along the opposite wall. The decorative railings for this stair stop at landing/hall on the second floor. Stair access continues through modern doorways at either end of the hall to the balcony. The balcony portion of both stairs is narrow and fully enclosed, with a ninety degree turn near the top and plain wood pole railings. This portion of the stairs is in the upper section of the hexagonal corner towers and appears to have been partially reconfigured when the theater was altered in 1898. It also appears to contain some wire nails that may reflect later changes

Narrow winder stairs with bead board side walls were inserted between the outer wall and the box entrances on the east and west sides of the theater. Small landings at various levels provide access to the boxes and to the front of the balcony. The west stair goes up two additional straight runs. The first goes to the doorway of the theater stage loft with access to the ropes and pulleys for moving scenery and other apparatus. Much of this hardware is still intact. The next flight goes through a doorway to the unfinished attic above the theater space.

A straight run, wood stair at the northwest corner goes down to the mechanical room area of the basement. This is accessed via a trap door in the backstage floor surrounded by a pipe rail.

There is a permanent wood ladder in the attic allowing access to a hatch in the roof, near the north end.

There is a tornado door at the west side of the ell leading to an inaccessible basement space.

3. Flooring: Flooring in the basement is a mix of materials – concrete, brick, dirt, and tile in the bathrooms under the south porch. In the theater and other areas of the upper levels the floors are wood, either exposed or covered with dark gray linoleum. In 1898 the original second floor was removed and the original first floor sloped and lowered into order to retrofit a larger theater space into the building.

4. Wall and ceiling finish:

Basement - In the basement the walls and ceiling are unfinished except for bathrooms, which have plaster on metal mesh lath walls and pressed metal ceilings.

Lobby and Upper Stair Hall - In the entrance lobby and the second floor landing the walls and ceilings are plaster on lath with a chair rail and beaded wainscot stained dark brown. There are tall baseboards with simple molding also painted dark brown.

Theater and Boxes - There is a variety of ornamentation on the theater walls, with the most elaborate concentrated near the stage and box seating. Overall the interior walls of the theater feature a mix of plaster on lathe and acoustic tile. In the orchestra seating area there are landscape scene paintings on plaster walls in niches framed by molding. Probably during the early twentieth century, additional landscape scenes were painted on the acoustic tiles covering the back wall and on wood panels inserted into the original window openings. This area also has wide wood baseboard and molding. The stage is framed by an entablature with monumental pilasters. The pilasters features raised plaster decoration of a gold lyre motif on a blue background. The cornice of the entablature has bands of ogee molding with egg and dart, bead and reel, or acanthus leaf motifs, painted gold. The seal of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers is painted on the plaster on the proscenium arch over the stage and flanked by landscape scenes reminiscent of the Northwestern Branch topography.

From the theater seating area the three levels of boxes are framed by a plaster entablature with stacked pilasters. The gold plaster decoration in these pilasters and in the entablature molding matches that framing the proscenium. There are also gold plaster wreaths and palm fronds in the

spandrels of the arch over the uppermost box. All of the boxes are enclosed by simple rectangular wood panels stained a honey brown; each panel is open at the top half to form a rail. The single box at the top has an elegant curved rail panel that reflects the curved opening above and gives the space a semicircular plan. The middle box level has three stepped rectangular boxes, each with a corresponding rail panel. The two rectangular boxes at orchestra level have a similar rail panel. The interior walls of the upper boxes are plain plaster; the lowest boxes have painted scenes of flowers, urns, and formal garden stairs and balustrades. This painting has an amateur quality and was probably done during the early twentieth century along with the other landscape scenes. The ceilings of the upper boxes are plain plaster; the lowest boxes have decorative pressed metal ceilings.

The walls at the balcony level are plaster painted ivory with a tall beaded wainscot, stained dark brown. This area also has tall baseboards. The front of the balcony has a curved panel railing matching the ones for the private boxes.

The ceilings in the theater area feature a mix of plaster and pressed metal coverings. There is a decorative pressed metal ceiling under the balcony that is painted silver. There is a barrel vaulted plaster ceiling over the entire seating area with some evidence of decorative plaster ribs. Portions of the original ceilings with decorative "Renaissance Revival" motifs of peacock feathers and stylized flowers are still extant above the current barrel vault. However it is only possible to glimpse sections of this original decorative scheme through holes between the joists in the attic.

On and Back Stage - The stage area has plaster on lath walls and an exposed wood beam ceiling. The walls are painted brick in the added portions of the backstage area and plaster with a later plastic tile wainscot in the original ell and added bathroom. There are faded remnants of decorative stenciling around the inner edge of the stage proscenium, and also inside the storage closet at the second floor landing.

5. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: There are numerous doorways in the theater space, most notably the wide opening with a transom between the entrance lobby and theater. There are numerous doorways at the rear of the boxes and sides of the balcony leading to the stairs behind. There are also modified doorways at the second floor stair hall leading to the balcony; these openings are partially filled with drywall and have modern doors, indicating that the modification was probably done for fire safety purposes. The original generation of doors is solid wood stained dark brown, with six deeply recessed panels. These panels are of unequal size, with the largest pair in the middle and matching smaller pairs above and below. The edges of the panels are beveled and tapered. Openings with these doors have thick wood molding decorated with a band of beading at the center. The sides of the molding extend above the bulls-eye corner block and are topped by a trio of carved, semi attached circles. Most of this molding has been painted white or light colors. This same molding appears on the cased openings for the second floor hall at the top of the main staircase. These doors have Victorian pin hinges decorated with stylized foliage. The slightly later openings at the back of the boxes have plainer, thinner molding with

simpler bulls-eye corner blocks. The doors on these openings are simple five-panel wood doors typical of the early twentieth century.

Between the west side of the stage and backstage spaces, there is a metal-sheathed rolling fire door that would retract to seal the large opening in case of fire. In the backstage dressing room areas, there is a mix of modern metal doors and plain hollow core wood doors in doorways with plain metal moldings.

b. Windows: Many of the original window openings are still visible, but painted or boarded over in the theater spaces. The north wall at the back of the stage in particular has former second floor windows boarded up and stranded high above the existing stage floor. The original window molding matches that for the original doorways, with a section of thick beading at the center and an odd three-circle motif on a block extending above the corner block with a recessed bull's-eye. The top rail of the molding is curved to match windows with a curved top sash. The window molding is typically painted white. The large window at the south end of the theater at the balcony level is now mainly blocked by the projection booth, but still has a decorative plaster pilaster between a pair of two over two windows.

6. Decorative features and trim:

Seats: The theater still has several types of early seating bolted to raised platforms built into the floor. The seats vary in detail but all have a decorative cast iron frame and folding seats. The main floor, or orchestra, has seats with a molded wood back and seat, set into a cast iron frame. Two slightly different types of seats appear in the balcony. One has a more elaborate cast iron framing with a slightly taller back and upholstered leather seat. These appear to be the oldest and date to the original period of construction. Another has molded wood seat and back with decorative perforations. This style of seat features a five-pointed star inscribed in a circle and the entwined initials NSH – for National Soldiers Home. The seats in the balcony are numbered, but have been moved because the numbers are out of order. Several rows of seats – front and middle of the orchestra level, front of balcony – have been removed, probably to allow additional circulation avenues in case of fire. There is no evidence remaining of the seating for the boxes.

Stage: As currently configured the wood stage has an added extension over the orchestra pit. There is a small four step staircase at either downstage corner leading into the seating area. The original stage has a maple floor with thin tongue and groove boards.

7. Hardware: The most noteworthy surviving hardware is the decorative metal hinges on the original doors. The doors for the boxes have simple wood doorknobs and a plain rectangular metal escutcheon. The bathroom under the east stair in the front hall has a plain white porcelain knob. Early push bar emergency handles added to the exterior doors leading to the fire escapes and porches are still extant.

8. Mechanical equipment:

a. Heating, air conditioning, ventilation: The theater still features a number of cast iron radiators from different periods ranging from large, ornate late-nineteenth century examples, to large but plain turn-of-the-century models, to the small utilitarian ones indicative of the 1920s or later in

the dressing room areas. After 1895, these radiators would have been connected to the central steam heating plant.

It appears that the theater was retrofitted for mechanical air handling during the early twentieth century. In addition to the large galvanized pipe connected to the roof ventilators on the south, there is a large fan with an electric motor located in the basement under the stage on the north. The fan is a Type F Plexiform Fan manufactured by the Bayley Blower Co. in Milwaukee.

b. Lighting: There are both incandescent and fluorescent light fixtures throughout the theater and support areas, mainly of recent vintage. Most notable is the surviving stage lighting of incandescent red, white and blue light bulbs around the proscenium, in light bars suspended over the stage, and in rotating panels built into the foot of the stage.

c. Plumbing: There are early twentieth century porcelain plumbing fixtures in the bathrooms under the south porch, in the dressing room area of the west ell, and the small bathroom room under the east stair in the main entrance hall. The large bathroom in the ell includes three wash basins, a utility sink, two toilets in metal stalls, and a shower with a metal surround.

d. Theater apparatus: A curtain is still extant, along with the counterweights and pulleys to raise and lower it, and a variety of booms that held scenery or operated lights. There is a catwalk and loft in the backstage area that allows access to this equipment. A large truss is mounted perpendicular to the stage across the loft with heavy wood pins to tie off ropes moving various lights and other pieces of equipment.

D. Site: The theater is located south of the Main Building and below the core of the historic Northwestern Branch campus. The site slopes down towards the southeast. A level area along north side used to be a railroad siding for access to the passenger depot included in the original building design. This use was discontinued with the expansion of the theater in 1898.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Architectural drawings: No original architectural drawings have been located for the initial construction campaign in 1881-82 or the 1898 alterations.

B. Early Views:

Stereopair view of exterior from northeast (WHi-34889), H. H. Bennett Studio Collection, c. 1887, Wisconsin Historical Society. This is a very clear image showing the building before addition of the General Grant window.

“The Theater” (interior of theater prior to reconfiguring) and “Fighting Their Battles Over Again” (perspective view from northwest in background), published in *National Soldiers' Home Near Milwaukee*. New York: The Albertype Co., 1889. The interior image shows the original seats, decorative ceiling, and smaller stage. The exterior shows the original appearance of the west elevation and ell (partially).

Stereopair view of exterior from north (WHi-54269), Woodward Stereoscopic Company, c. 1882, Place File, Wisconsin Historical Society. This photograph shows the north side of the structure prior to 1898 when it was still used as a train passenger stations.

“Ward Memorial Hall – Theatre, Home Store and Post Office,” in A. Wittemann, *National Soldiers' Home Near Milwaukee*. New York: The Albertype Co., 1894. This photograph shows the east elevation after installation of the General Grant window.

“View Looking from the West,” in Richard Corbett, ed., *The Soldiers' Home: Detailed Description of the North-Western Branch National Military Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers*. Milwaukee: Burdick, Armitage & Allen, Print., 1895. This panoramic view shows the west elevation of the theater, including the ell.

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PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Documentation of Ward Memorial Hall (Building No. 41) at the Northwestern Branch of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers (now Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center) was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS, Catherine Lavoie, Chief) during the summer of 2008. HABS is part of the Heritage Documentation Programs (Richard O'Connor, Chief) of the National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior. The project is sponsored by the Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Construction and Facilities

Management, Kathleen Schamel, Federal Preservation Officer, as part of a multi-year effort to record the significant examples of National Soldiers Home architectural currently under the jurisdiction of that agency. It was made possible through the cooperation Robert H. Beller, Director, Zablocki VA Medical Center and many members of his staff, especially Librarian Jill Zahn. The drawings team was led by HABS architect Mark Schara, working with HABS architects Paul Davidson, Anne Kidd, and Jason McNatt, and student architects Daniel DeSousa and Alex Matsov. The historical reports were prepared by HABS Historian Lisa P. Davidson. Large-format photography was undertaken by HABS Photographer James Rosenthal.

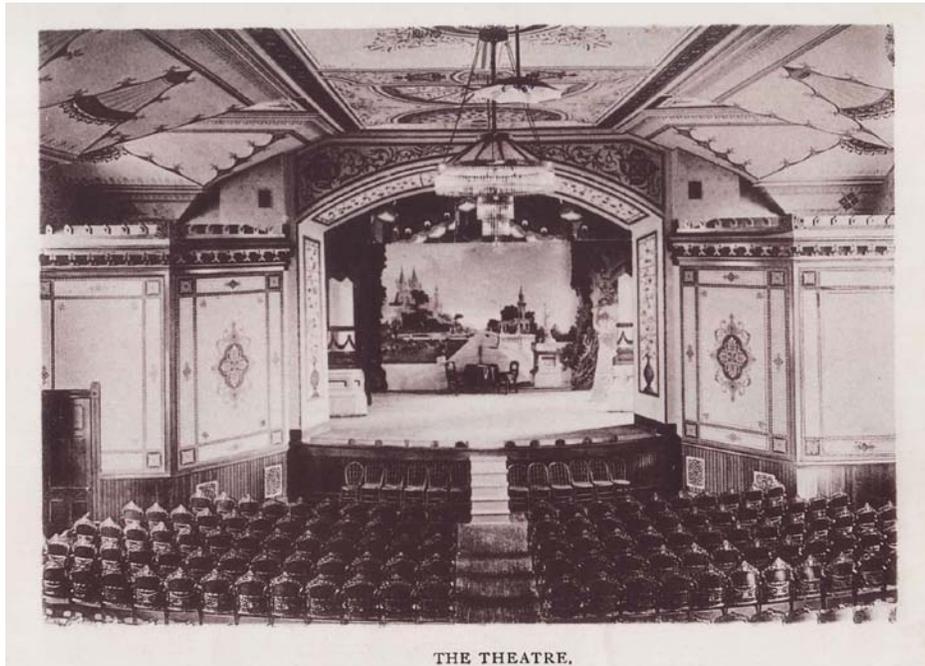


Figure 1 – Interior view of original theater, c. 1889.

Source: *National Soldiers' Home Near Milwaukee*. New York: The Albertype Co., 1889, original in Zablocki VA Medical Center Library.



Figure 2 – View of original decorative painting preserved above current ceiling.
Photograph by Paul Davidson, HABS Architect, Summer 2008.



Figure 3 – Perspective view from northeast, c. 1887, prior to installation of Grant window.
Source: WHi-34889, H. H. Bennett Studio Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society.



Figure 4 – East façade of Ward Memorial Theater with General Grant window.
Source: A. Wittemann, *National Soldiers' Home Near Milwaukee*. New York: The Albertype
Co., 1894, original in Zablocki VA Medical Center Library