

Approximate boundaries:
N-I-94; **S**-W. National Ave;
E-Miller Pkwy (partial)
Menomonee River-Wisconsin Hwy 175;
W-S. Hawley Rd (partial) S. 56th St

WEST SIDE *Veterans Affairs*

NEIGHBORHOOD DESCRIPTION

Most of the area in the Veterans Affairs neighborhood is occupied by the Clement J. Zablocki Veterans Administration Medical Center. The large veterans' hospital is just off National Avenue. To the north of the hospital is the Wood National Cemetery and various administration buildings--some dating from the 1870s. The area, laid out on winding roads, is very picturesque, with historically significant buildings and a great deal of landscaped green space between them. The architectural styles of the structures include Queen Anne and Italianate, with Colonial Revival and Renaissance Revival elements.

Parts of the neighborhood are hilly. On the northwest corner of Veterans Affairs are two additional cemeteries--the Spring Hill Cemetery and Mausoleum, and just to the south, the Anshai Lebowitz Cemetery. South of the cemeteries are a few residential streets with mainly bungalow style houses. See photos below.

HISTORY

The Veterans Affairs area existed as a recuperative village for returning Civil War soldiers long before any of its surrounding neighborhoods were developed.

Early populations

The earliest residents of the Veterans Affairs neighborhood were disabled soldiers of the Civil War. During the war, a group of women formed the Wisconsin Soldiers' Home Society. By the war's end, the Society had organized a fair and other fundraisers to raise more than \$100,000 and purchased land to begin planning for the construction of a state soldiers' home.

Under the guidance of architect Edward Townsend Mix, the five-story Main Building was constructed as the central building of the soldiers' home, followed by three gatehouses, a governor's residence, and a core road system. Physically and psychologically disabled veterans began to move in during the 1870s following a series of construction modifications to correct the ventilation and heating problems of the Main Building. Several other buildings followed including barracks, a hospital, a headquarters building, and an assembly hall, assisted in part by the oversight of architect Henry C. Koch. The Soldiers' Home Cemetery (today's Wood Cemetery) was established in 1871.

By the 1890s, veteran residents were able to enjoy a full-service and highly picturesque village on the grounds. A post office and library were added to the streets and pathways, as well as Ward Memorial Theater and a recreation hall for their leisure time activities. Other additions followed. A new hospital was constructed in 1933.

Soon families of diverse European backgrounds began to build homes at the southwestern corner of the Veterans Affairs neighborhood, including on West Washington and West Mineral Streets. Very early on, West National Avenue became the commercial corridor of the neighborhood.



Today's neighborhood--
The Old Main building

National Avenue

National Avenue got its name in 1877 when Elizabeth Street was renamed National Avenue after the National Soldiers' Home. Below is a list of businesses and organizations on National between 45th and 60th Streets in 1947. See notes that follow.

<i>Addresses on W. National Ave. in the VA neighborhood.</i>	<i>Businesses, offices, organizations from Milwaukee City Directory</i>
4505	Edwin H. Olson Barber
4509	Gabriel Kassin Tavern
4523	Victor J. Bortoluzzi Beer Distribution
4527	Herbert C. Schenkus Heating Contractor
4529	George Sidoff Grocer
4535	Raymond C. Brink Tavern
4539	Home Pharmacy Maas Drug Company
4603	Russell L. Rupert Filling Station
4625	Home View Apartments
4631	Albert G. Cesar Tavern
4633	Elmer J. Flintrop Sporting Goods
4635	John J. Zawerschnik Plumber
4803	Walter H. Funke Dentist
4805	Herbert H. Jochims Furrier
4809	Mrs. Molly Moran Tavern
4813	William H. Weltenhagen Drugs
4819	Robert L. O'Hara Tavern
4821	George J. Romanos Restaurant and Tavern
4831	Dewey F. Slocum Filling Station
5000	National Avenue Veterans Administration Home and Hospital Soldiers' Home Chapel
5029	Apartments
5103	Apartments

<i>Addresses on W. National Ave. in the VA neighborhood.</i>	<i>Businesses, offices, organizations from Milwaukee City Directory</i>
5109	Eli Basarich Tavern
5111	Northwestern Plastic Art Company
5113	Harry Sigun Tobacco Shop
5115	Michael Basarich Tavern
5131	Apartments
5548	Carl F. Weckmueller Toolmakers

Notes from U.S. census and other public records:

- Technically, all the businesses on the south side (odd numbers) of this stretch of National were in West Milwaukee, not the Veterans Affairs neighborhood, but they were surely accessible to the small VA population.
- This stretch of National had a whopping seven taverns and a beer distributor. The taverns may have been established to serve specific ethnic groups that were settled in the neighborhood and West Milwaukee. The owners were highly diverse. Gabriel Kassin was an immigrant from Austria; Albert G. Cesar was the son of German immigrants; George G. Romanos was a Greek immigrant; Robert L. O’Hara was the son of Irish immigrants; Eli Basarich was an immigrant from Yugoslavia; Michael Basarich was Eli’s older brother—also an immigrant from Yugoslavia; and Molly Moran was not at all what her name suggested she was (see her profile below).

Veterans Affairs merchant (1940s)
(information from U.S. census and other public records)

Molly Moran

No, Molly Moran was not born on the Emerald Isle. And no, she did not marry an Irishman. In fact not a one of Molly’s or her husband’s ancestors were from Ireland.

Molly Moran was born Amelia Doloratinski in Germany. But she was not German either. Molly, her parents, her siblings Erma, Frank, and Marian were Slovenians, and both her parents were born in Austria. She arrived in the United States at age 2 in 1912, and the family soon settled on National Avenue, on the boundary of the Veterans Affairs neighborhood. There is no record of Molly ever attending school.

By age 18 Molly had married Rudolph Maransek Moran. Rudolph was born in Germany in 1903, and was probably also Slovenian. He’d completed the 8th grade and worked at various occupations, including house painter, concrete finisher, and chauffeur. The couple had two daughters, Josephine and Dolores. By 1930, Molly and Rudolph were renting the building that would become Mrs. Molly Moran’s Tavern at 4809 W. National. This was approximately a block away from Molly’s family home.

No information was found on how long Molly operated her bar on National. Rudolph died in 1976 and Molly in 1990.

- The other shopkeepers on this stretch of W. National were also diverse Europeans. Edwin H. Olson, the barber, was the son of Norwegian immigrants; Victor J. Bortoluzzi, with the beer distribution business, was the son of Italian immigrants; Herbert C. Schenkus, the heating contractor, was the son of a German immigrant father; George Sidoff, the grocer, was born in Greece; Russell Rupert, with the gas station, was the grandson of immigrants from Canada and Germany; Elmer J. Flintrop, with the sporting goods store, was the grandson of German immigrants; John J. Zawerschnik, the plumber, was an Austrian immigrant; Herbert H. Jochims, the furrier, was the son of a German immigrant; Harry Sigun, with the tobacco shop, was the (probably Jewish) son of a Polish immigrant.
- Like in most Milwaukee neighborhoods prior to 1970, few shopkeepers had attended high school.

The 1950s and baseball

For many years, the VA grounds have offered a scenic view of American Family Field, and before that, County Stadium. This began in the early 1950s when rumors started that Milwaukee might attract a major league team. Ground was broken for what would become County Stadium, a project that would also reduce the size of the VA grounds. In 1953 the Boston Braves arrived and were renamed the Milwaukee Braves. During the years between 1953 and 1965 the Braves broke major league attendance records, won two pennants, and one World Series. But all this fell apart in 1965 when new owners made the decision to move the team to Atlanta. Milwaukee County's first County Executive and resident of the bordering Story Hill neighborhood, John Doyne, urged the County to take legal action to force the team to stay, citing major league conspiracy to deprive Milwaukee of a major league team, punishable under the Wisconsin Antitrust Act. Doyne and the County eventually lost the suit via a Wisconsin Supreme Court ruling.

However, in 1969 an executive in a local family car leasing business, Bud Selig, purchased the bankrupt Seattle Pilots franchise and brought the team to Milwaukee. The team was named after the former minor league team, the Milwaukee Brewers. The Brewers made County Stadium their home. In 2001, Miller Park (now American Family Field) replaced County Stadium.

Soldiers Home endangered

Over the years the buildings on the VA grounds were used sparingly and were falling into disrepair. Veterans and other groups continued to advocate for their continued existence, as a recuperative village for aging Vietnam vets and soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2011, the Milwaukee Soldiers Home was listed among 11 Most Endangered Historic Places.

Current populations (as of 2021)

After 150+ years of service, advocates for preserving the Soldiers Home and its mission were heard. The Department of Veterans Affairs announced in 2016 that it had selected the Alexander Company and the Milwaukee City Housing Authority to enter into an Enhanced Use Lease to rehabilitate six historic buildings on the grounds of the Soldiers Home, including the Old Main. With the restoration, 100 units of housing will be provided for homeless or at-risk veterans.

In terms of nearby residents, today the Veterans Affairs neighborhood has just under 400. Of these, a little over one-third each are African Americans and Latinos (most of Mexican and Puerto Rican descent). Approximately 2 in 10 are European Americans (most of German, Irish, and mixed European ancestry). There is also a scattering of Asians (nearly all Hmong), indigenous Africans, Jamaicans, American Indians, and people of mixed racial backgrounds in the area.

Over half of the residents of Veterans Affairs live in one-person households. The median household income for residents is approximately \$14,000 annually, placing the neighborhood in the low-income stratum (not uncommon for areas with many single- occupant residences). The most numerous occupations of residents are in the fields of production, administration, and healthcare support.

RECURRING NEARBY OUTINGS (Health conditions permitting)

In the following section the website addresses have been eliminated due to technical problems with the various ways different web browsers display PDF files. Website information on these events is available through the book *Milwaukee Area Outings on the Cheap*. See below.

SELF-GUIDED TOUR OF VA GROUNDS

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Daily, daylight	Just north of Zablocki VA Medical Center, 5000 W. National Ave.	A walk through the historic district just north of the Zablocki VA Medical Center, which includes the Soldiers' Home, barracks building, old fire station, old hospital, Ward Memorial Theater, and more.	Free

MILWAUKEE BREWERS GAMES

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Early Apr. to late Sep., see website for times	American Family Field. 1 Brewers Way	Major league baseball games.	Prices vary

ECO ART WEDNESDAYS

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Weds., 4-5:30pm	Menomonee Valley 3700 W. Pierce	Children work on nature-inspired recycled arts and crafts. Take home own creation every week! Register at Urban Ecology website.	unk

EARLY MORNING BIRDWALK

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Most Tue.'s. 8-10am	Menomonee Valley, 3700 W. Pierce St.	A walk for bird watchers of all ability levels to explore Three Bridges Park for birds. Register at Urban Ecology website.	Free, need to register

SLEDDING THE SLOPES OF MENOMONEE VALLEY

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Late Jan. Tue. 4-6pm	Menomonee Valley, 3700 W. Pierce St.	An evening of snow and sledding in Three Bridges Park with hot chocolate (if there is no snow, will hike Three Bridges Park). Register at Urban Ecology website.	Free

FAMILY HIKE

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Mar. & Apr, Nov, Tue.'s 4-6pm	Menomonee Valley, 3700 W. Pierce St.	Guided hike to see changes in seasons through Three Bridges Park. Register at Urban Ecology website.	Free

SHAKESPEARE IN THREE BRIDGES PARK

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Late Jul., Fri. 7pm	Menomonee Valley behind Palermo Villa next to 33rd Ct.	Play performed by Summit Players along river in the park.	Free, but donations welcome

FRIENDS OF HANK AARON STATE TRAIL 5K RUN/WALK

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Early Aug., Sat. 7- 8:15am	Start and finish near Klement's Sausage Haus (on the east end of Miller Park Stadium)	Opportunity to walk or run in race on Hank Aaron trail, or be a spectator—entertainment and food available. (Requires registration to participate)	Free (to watch)

Most of these outings are provided courtesy of MECAH Publishing. To access the book that provides nearly 600 outings—all priced under \$10—for the entire Greater Milwaukee area, go to <http://mecahmilwaukee.com/NonFiction.html>

QUOTE FROM RESIDENTS

“In 2007 and 2008, Urban Anthropology was collecting signatures to petition the feds to modify some of the VA ground buildings to house homeless veterans. They collected thousands of signatures all over Milwaukee and turned them over to Vets Place Central. I have to think that this effort, in some way, played a role in finally getting the government to actually renovate some buildings for the homeless and at-risk vets.”

--Anonymous

If you are a resident of the Veterans Affairs neighborhood and would like to make an interesting observation about the area, please send your quote to JFLanthropologist@currently.com

PHOTOS



Today's neighborhood-
The Old Main building



Today's neighborhood-
Ward Memorial Hall



Today's neighborhood-
Historic building at General Mitchell Rd.
and Hines Blvd.

Today's neighborhood-
The Hiker Monument on the VA Center grounds



Today's neighborhood-
Houses on Oak Park Ct. (1)



Today's neighborhood-
Houses on Oak Park Ct. (2)





Today's neighborhood-Spring Hill Cemetery

For more information on Milwaukee neighborhoods, refer to John Gurda's *Milwaukee, City of Neighborhoods* and Jill Florence Lackey's and Rick Petrie's *Germans in Milwaukee: A neighborhood history*.

Do you have great photos of this neighborhood? Are you a resident with an interesting quote about this neighborhood? Do you have recurring outings, additions, corrections, or general comments about this neighborhood? Please email your input to:
JFLanthropologist@currently.com



www.urban-anthropology.org