

Willowbrook's final chapter?

Since Willowbrook Developmental Center was carved out of lush, tree-filled land in mid-Staten Island in 1939, it has provided three controversial, crisis-filled chapters in the Island's history.

The 1980s will probably add a fourth stormy chapter as the center reduces its population to 250 and the city and state begin a planning process for about 260 remaining acres of the center's land.

The first chapter began in 1939 when, with little if any consultation, the state announced plans to build a state school to house "mental defectives." Island officials protested vigorously to no avail.

The center was built for \$12 million and surrounded by wooded areas so that the retarded residents could be virtually hidden from the general population.

Included on the grounds of the 3,000 to 4,000-bed institution was Halloran Hospital, a

1,500-bed veterans hospital. In October 1942 Willowbrook's second chapter began when the War Department took over the hospital to treat American servicemen wounded in World War II.

The U.S. signed a three-year lease with the state and the hospital became known as the "hall of valor," as 163,252 soldier-patients passed through the busiest veterans' hospital in the country.

The lease lapsed in 1945 and a battle ensued for the next six years to keep Halloran Hospital as a veterans' health center run by the federal government. Island Congressman Ellsworth H. Buck attempted to have the government purchase the property for \$16 million, \$4 million more than the original price.

Finally, in 1951, after 21,000 patients had passed through Halloran Veterans Administration Hospital, the facility was given back to the state and became Willowbrook State School once more.

The retarded population of Willowbrook grew steadily, and in the mid-'60s chapter three began to take shape as parents and the press joined forces to expose sordid, dehumanizing conditions at the center, where as many as 6,000 persons were crowded into wards.

The national scandal of Willowbrook ended in U.S. District Court and was finally settled in April 1975 with a consent decree outlining radical changes and a reduction of the center's population to 250 by 1981.

With the population substantially reduced, however, there will be 260 acres of land available for alternate uses: Chapter four will probably be the battle over how best to use the natural beauty of the Willowbrook property.

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