

From largest Army hospital to infamous state 'school'

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In 1938, a story written by a Staten Island Advance reporter who discovered that the state planned to build an institution for the mentally retarded tipped Islanders off to a plan they vehemently opposed.

Civic groups battled against the plan, but the state Legislature went ahead and appropriated \$5.1 million for the purchase of a site and construction of a new hospital in Willowbrook.

Mayor Fiorella LaGuardia supported the project and it was approved by the city's Board of Estimate. The city sold the Willowbrook site to the state on Feb. 3, 1939, and the legislature

authorized expenditure of \$6.8 million more for construction.

The name Willowbrook State School was approved on May 3, 1942, five months after the United States entered World War II.

But because of the war, the state had to turn over the brand new facility to the federal government for use as a hospital before it was ever used for its intended purpose.

It was renamed Halloran General Hospital in honor of the late Col. Paul Stacey Halloran, a medical corpsman. With more than 3,000 beds, Halloran was the largest Army hospital in the nation. The facility was self-sufficient and came complete with bowling

alley, gymnasium and theater. Patients enjoyed fresh vegetables, fruits and even milk from the gardens and the farm maintained on the grounds.

The Red Cross provided soldiers with bandages and wheelchairs, razors and shaving cream. Sunday afternoon teas were held for patients and their visiting family members.

Patients kept abreast of current events in the "Halloran Beacon," which won second prize for Army newspapers nationwide. The soldiers were entertained by the likes of Frank Sinatra.

The end of the war brought a debate between the federal and state governments over the future of Halloran Hospital. In 1947, title

to the hospital was transferred from the Army to Veteran's Administration for temporary use as a VA hospital. At the same time, construction was started on Halloran's permanent replacement, Fort Hamilton Hospital in Brooklyn.

It was 1951 before the state finally got back its institution, although about 50 mentally retarded patients were admitted to a special wing while Halloran was still in use as a military facility.

The complex was expanded so that by 1953 there were 34 buildings in use on the 380-acre grounds. At the end of 1953, more than 2,800 patients were housed at Willowbrook.

By 1962, the population of men-

tally retarded and developmentally disabled children had topped 6,000, almost 2,000 more patients than the facility was equipped to handle.

Inhumane conditions at the institution came to light in 1971 in a series of articles written by Advance reporter Jane Kurtin. As a response, parents of children in the facility and the New York Civil Liberties Union brought a lawsuit that culminated with the Willowbrook Consent Decree of 1975, a court-approved directive calling for the patients to be transferred out of the facility and into group homes.

Last week — 12 years later — the last patients left the facility. Most who were clients a decade

County Legacy

ago have been transferred to group homes, but about 1,100 remain in other institutions in the metropolitan area. All of them must be moved to group homes by 1991.

Much of what was Willowbrook State School — which was renamed the Staten Island Developmental Center during the controversy in the 70s — was transferred to the state Dormitory Authority last week.

That property will be used to house a consolidate campus for the College of Staten Island. The remainder will continue to provide services for the mentally handicapped.

PAGE 2
of
2 PAGES