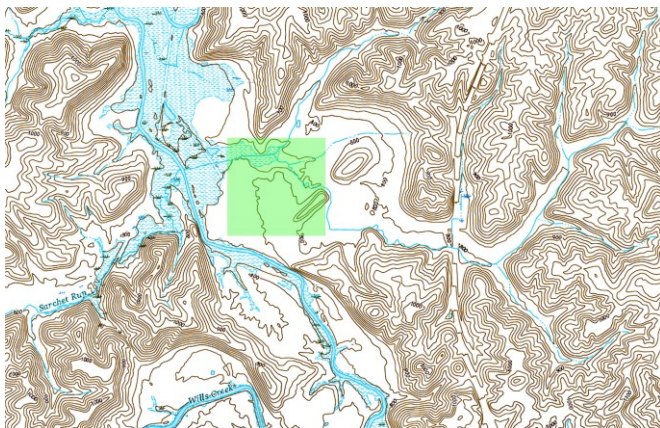


## Remembering the Army's Fletcher General Hospital

*“Resembling the fungus growth of a mushroom, a miniature city was springing up. A building here, one there, and soon the general outline of 131 buildings could be seen.”*

— Army annual report description of the building of Fletcher General Hospital in the winter of 1942-3.

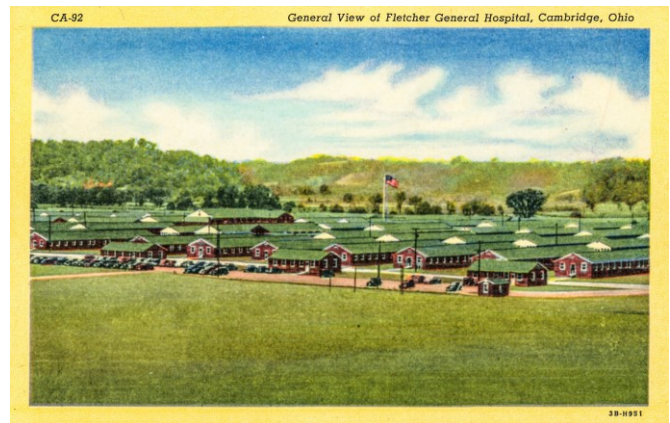
In 1805, a young man named Isaac Oldham came wandering down Zane's Trace in search of land on which to build a farm. At the Wills Creek bridge crossing, he encountered Jacob Gomber and Zaccheus Beatty, engaged in clearing land for what they hoped would become a town. He worked with them for a while, helping to clear off lots for sale in what was soon to become Cambridge, but his main objective was to find really great farmland in the wilderness nearby – level land that wouldn't flood. In the woods three miles north of Cambridge, he found exactly what he thought was the rarest of ideal spots – a 160-acre quarter section of land that was largely flat, yet set slightly higher than the valley's floodplain. For just \$200, he bought it. The early bird had gotten the worm! Little did he know then, however, that the same features that led him to snap up the land while Thomas Jefferson was President would, 137 years later, lead Franklin Roosevelt's federal government to take it back from his Oldham descendants in time of war. In 1942, the U.S. Army desperately needed a good flat piece of land on which to build a city-sized regional hospital for the casualties of World War Two. The acres long-gone Isaac once found were perfect!



**Contour map showing the original Oldham quarter section in green – rare flat, dry land.**

A few short months after Pearl Harbor, the Army went searching for the ideal place in Southeastern Ohio to build a giant medical complex

for its wounded soldiers. Several dozen such hospitals were to be built throughout the United States with the goal of treating both servicemen and servicewomen in facilities reasonably close to their hometowns so they could receive visitors and family support. They could also be allowed to recuperate staying with family while on furlough nearby. The complex the Army intended for this part of Ohio required about 200 acres of fairly level land so that corridors interconnecting the buildings could be easily navigated both on foot and by wheelchair. The Oldham farm, which had expanded its borders over the years, was the best site they could find in this part of the state. So they took it!



**A postcard view of Fletcher General Hospital.**

The Army's Fletcher General Hospital was actually built in the winter months of 1942-3. The Columbus-based construction company Haig A. Boyajohn and Associates broke ground on the project on November 3, 1942. The Army's own internal report on site construction reads as follows:

“Grim determination that nothing should be permitted to halt the building of this sorely needed institution made possible its completion in the face of weather obstacles that at times seemed unsurmountable. The workers faced one of the worst winters that had been experienced in years in this territory. They were stymied at every turn by cold, rain and snow. The hospital located as it is, on the only flat piece of ground for many miles, in the valley between rolling hills, became a quagmire after the heavy rains and snows set in. Because of the intense cold and damp, wet weather, the men were forced to work under tents a great amount of the time. To see one of the large bulldozers mired down to the hubs was not an unfamiliar sight during the early construction days.

“In spite of the elements, Major McGavock, Mr. Boyajohn and his associates soon began to show

progress, and out of the maze of mud and building materials there began to appear the semblance of what in a few short months was to be Fletcher General Hospital.”

In just four and a half months, 131 buildings arose from the fields, not to mention the construction of the roads, sidewalks, water lines, sewers, and electrical system that also had to fall into place. Three of the buildings served as steam heating plants for the others, fueled by up to 36 tons of coal a day. The construction cost was about 4.5 million dollars. To get ready for hospital trains, a rail line spur to Fletcher was built off the nearby Pennsylvania Railroad’s north-south line between Cambridge and Newcomerstown. Trains would pull in and unload at the northwest corner of the hospital base, across the street from the chapel.



**The Fletcher train platform and chapel.**

Named in honor of Lt. Col. John Pierpont Fletcher, a career Army Medical Corps officer who had died shortly before the war, the 1,520-bed Fletcher General Hospital was dedicated on Memorial Day, 1943. Col. Fletcher’s daughter even spoke at the dedication. The hospital then received its first patients in June. By the end of the war, the facility had grown to 2,000-bed capacity spread out within its then 168-building complex, five buildings of which served to house a German POW camp. The prisoners, brought in in early 1945, did work for the hospital.

When peace finally arrived in September, 1945, preparations began for the facility’s ultimate closure. After serving an officially reported 17,608 patients during the war, Fletcher General Hospital shut its doors on March 31, 1946. A few months later, the buildings were reopened as the Cambridge State Hospital, which continued in operation (with

its name later changed by merger to “Appalachian Behavioral Healthcare”) for 62 more years until its final shutdown in 2008.

Today, only about a dozen of the original 168 buildings remain. The rectangular road grid of the old hospital is there, but where scores of long brick ward buildings once stood, there is now mostly well-tended grass. In newer buildings, the privately run Cambridge Behavioral Hospital occupies part of the northeast corner of the original site. Much of the rest of the north side of the campus is used by the Cambridge Developmental Center, a state-run facility which maintains mostly recently-built residential buildings for about 70 individuals with developmental disabilities.

The impact of Fletcher General Hospital and its State Hospital descendant has been long and large in Guernsey County’s history. Thousands have been employed there over the years. In wartime, the total staff peaked at roughly 1,400 people – not including the 238 POWs working on shoe repair, laundry, gardening, etc. – about equally split between civilian employees and members of the military. Hundreds of area residents also volunteered services, including the 66 Red Cross Gray Ladies who worked to make patients comfortable and brighten their days in 1945.



The 168-building Fletcher General Hospital in October, 1945.



The former site of Fletcher General Hospital today.



Today we usually associate hospitals with extreme need for acute care. Insurance companies want people to leave as soon as they are able. But Fletcher General Hospital wasn't like that. It was largely a place where soldiers could recover from wounds, regain their health, and usually go back to active duty. A 1944 newspaper article cited the statistic that more than 80% of patients returned to service. Those who couldn't were given physical and occupational therapy to help make the most of their return to civilian life with handicaps.

The mortality rate at Fletcher was low. Only 32 deaths were recorded there in three years, including five who came dead on arrival. Many of the other deaths had nothing to do with war wounds. Some were the result of local car crashes, workplace accidents, or other medical problems unrelated to war. If patients were well enough to be shipped back from Europe or the Pacific, they usually survived. Orthopedic rehabilitation and mental recuperation (from what has been called shellshock, battle fatigue, or PTSD through the years) were the main focus of the hospital. This is not to say that there wasn't a lot of surgery going on, too. Declassified records state that 2,442 operations were performed at Fletcher in 1945, and 2,762 casts applied. Some 90 hospital trains brought in the wounded in 1944. That number increased to 165 in 1945.



**A Fletcher patient receiving physical therapy.**

Besides supplying local employment directly, Fletcher provided a lot of business to Cambridge, to which it was connected by regular bus service. Both military employees and patients on leave would come into town, usually being dropped off or picked back up at the hospital-connected Cambridge Service Center, located in a large house that stood immediately behind today's post office at 122 South Tenth Street. In April, 1944, John P. Sherby became the first Cambridge native to be brought back from the war to Fletcher, no doubt glad to find they had a local bus headed for home. He survived the war and lived to the ripe old age of 89, passing away in 2004, still a resident of Cambridge.

There was no shortage of entertainment for the patients at Fletcher during the war. It had its own theater. Free movies were shown regularly, and Hollywood stars and famous big bands showed up at the hospital frequently. Tommy Dorsey and Gene Krupa were there, as was Sammy Kaye and his orchestra in 1945. Among others, film star Boris Karloff visited. So did child star Peggy Ann Garner, fresh off filming *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.

Besides the Hollywood stars who were famous at the time, there was at least one such unknown future celebrity at Fletcher before he gained national recognition. A young officer in the Army Medical Corps named Joe Flynn was, for a time, in charge of editing the hospital's locally published newspaper, the *Fletcher Features*. He would also occasionally entertain patients with his ventriloquism act. Many, though, will better remember him today as the irascible, bumbling Captain Binghamton from the TV sitcom series *McHale's Navy*, which ran from 1962 to 1966, back in the days when you could still safely make a sitcom about war. Fletcher's Joe Flynn can still be found causing humor-filled angst for Ernest Borgnine and Tim Conway in various video archives on the Internet.

As World War Two ended, the patient load at Fletcher shifted from battle casualties to returning American prisoners of war, liberated from both German and, especially, Japanese POW camps. Records appear to indicate that the hospital took in some of the malnourished survivors of the infamous 1942 Bataan Death March in the Philippines. Kept half-starved in jungle camps until 1945, many were freed in the daring Cabanatuan POW Camp raid of January, 1945. Fearing that the Japanese would execute prisoners rather than surrender them as American forces retook the island of Luzon, a force

of about 120 Army Rangers slipped 30 miles behind enemy lines to stage the well-planned breakout raid. An American plane was sent over the camp at just the right time to distract guards' eyes skyward as the Rangers crept within feet of their prey. The raid achieved total surprise with few American or POW casualties, an injury rate the opposite of the nearly 100% who fell on the Japanese side. The Rangers, 489 imprisoned Americans, and 30 more of other nationalities successfully made the 30-mile trek back out to freedom, despite Japanese pursuit. Then they came home.



Fletcher Chapel circa 1947.



Fletcher Chapel today.

In their flight from the camp, the former POWs took along a few of their most important personal items and mementos. Among these were the Nativity figures they had made for themselves in order to continue to celebrate three Christmases in captivity. Chaplain Kilian Dreiling rescued those figurines from the camp and brought them along as he accompanied recovering POWs back to Fletcher General Hospital. Carved half a world away in a spirit of hope, the Cabanatuan crèche adorned Fletcher Chapel at Christmastime, 1945. Three months later, Fletcher General Hospital closed its doors. The war was over.

Old Isaac Oldham could never have foreseen the future use of the prime real estate he picked for

his family in 1805, even as he helped clear the land for Cambridge, set to grow three miles to the south. The southeast corner of his property, known as Oldham's Grove and located approximately where the Greystone Health and Rehabilitation Center is today, became a popular place for community picnics and outdoor gatherings from the late 1800s until the 1930s. In the Roaring Twenties, the future hospital site itself was even used for playing polo. Teams of four mounted horsemen each faced off on level ground more than five times the size of a football field. In the summer of 1928, Cambridge and Somerset, for instance, clashed there. No word on who won, but the next year, the stock market crashed and may have taken the polo games with it.

Then on December 7, 1941, came the war, and Isaac Oldham's old land served again, and well. The Guernsey County Historical Society is currently leading the effort to acquire an official Ohio Historical Marker to be placed beside Old Twenty-One Road near the Fletcher site. With luck, it will be dedicated next Memorial Day, the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the hospital's original dedication. Fletcher General Hospital needs to be remembered.



**For those who returned, a white Christmas, at last.**

Today, other than its empty streets, most of Fletcher General Hospital has disappeared. Only one of the old long corridors connecting ward buildings, 860 feet in length, still exists. Though the rail line beside it is gone now, old Fletcher Chapel still stands sentry on Isaac Oldham's pioneer field of dreams, one last reminder of a long-ago war, and of those whose faith, hope, and service brought it to an end.