



# Milwaukee VA Soldiers Home A National Historic Landmark District

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

## Historic Significance

Opened in 1867, the Milwaukee Soldiers Home is one of the three original Soldiers Homes in the country, with some of the oldest buildings in the VA system. It is the only Soldiers Home that retains the majority of its recuperative village and designed landscape. Milwaukee architects Edward Townsend Mix and Henry C. Koch designed several of the earliest and most prominent buildings, which are set amidst the picturesque grounds designed by landscape architect Thomas Budd Van Horn. The buildings and landscape were asylums – places of refuge and healing – aiding veterans’ recuperation and easing their transition back into society.

There are about 48 historic resources and 90-plus acres of designed landscape at the Milwaukee Soldiers Home. Old Main, the original domiciliary, was designed to combine multiple basic veteran care



**Old Main**  
Photo Credit: M Daniels, Milwaukee Preservation Alliance

functions under one roof. The rest of the district was designed to create the appearance and feeling of a village and includes a post office, library, recreation hall, theater, chapel and recreation areas.

Originally built in 1881, Ward Memorial Hall was converted to a theater in 1895-97. Many popular artists visiting Milwaukee performed for the veterans at the Ward Theater, including Bob Hope and Liberace.

The Milwaukee Soldiers Home is beloved by veterans today who believe its recuperative powers remain.

## Learn More and Get Involved!

Visit [SavetheSoldiersHome.com](http://SavetheSoldiersHome.com) to:

Sign up for our Email Updates

### Download a Self-Guided Walking Tour

The Milwaukee Soldiers Home Walking Tour takes users on a fascinating journey through a hidden jewel in the heart of Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

### Sign the Consensus Report

The Milwaukee VA Soldiers Home Community Advisory Council’s Consensus Report outlines the group’s shared views regarding unmet veteran needs, potential reuses of the district’s unused buildings and its commitment to partner with VA, local, state and national decision makers to make its vision for the District a reality.

### Share your Story

Share your memories, stories and personal anecdotes about the grounds. Help us spread the word about this significant historic asset.

### Follow us on Twitter

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## The Need for Rehabilitation

Though many of the Soldiers Home buildings remain in use, five of the largest and most visible – Old Main, Ward Memorial Hall, the Chapel, Administration Building and Power Plant – are currently unoccupied and deteriorating.

In February 2010, a roof collapse in the rear wing of Old Main galvanized the people and organizations that care passionately about this site. It also led the Milwaukee Preservation Alliance (MPA) to submit a successful nomination for the Milwaukee VA Soldiers Home to be named one of the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s “America’s 11 Most Endangered Places.” In 2012, the Milwaukee Soldiers Home was named one of the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s “National Treasures.”



**Ward Theater**

Photo Credit: M. Daniels, Milwaukee Preservation Alliance

Following the momentum of the District’s 11 Most Endangered Places designation, the National Trust and the Milwaukee Preservation Alliance formed a Community Advisory Council (CAC) to help save the Milwaukee Soldiers Home. It includes members from veteran groups, preservation organizations, and representatives of neighborhoods, associations, and civic and government leaders. Since forming, the CAC has created a Consensus Report that describes the most critical veteran needs and how the vacant Milwaukee Soldiers Home buildings can be used to meet those needs. CAC members are committed to working together with the decision makers at the VA to help

make its vision of reuse in the service of veterans a reality. The Consensus Report has been shared with numerous members of the VA, including personnel in charge of the site, and has served as the basis of discussions as the VA considers potential reuses of Old Main and the Ward Theater.

## Current Successes

To date, there has been significant progress made toward returning the District’s vacant buildings to the service of veterans, including the:

- Completion of work on Old Main to repair the hole that occurred after the rear wing roof collapsed in 2010;
- Repair of the roof trusses on Old Main’s rear wing second story, lifting them back into place to prevent another collapse;
- Completion of work on Ward Memorial Theater to repair roof trusses and to stop water infiltration;
- Reroofing projects for all of the Old Hospital Building and Ward Memorial Theater;
- Repairs to the Barracks Buildings, including re-pointing, scraping and painting;
- Identification of potential reuse of the Ward Theater by the Milwaukee VA Medical Center; and
- Start of initial conversations regarding potential future uses of Old Main, the Soldiers Home Chapel, and the Administration Building using public-private lease arrangements

Through the work of the CAC, there have been many successful outreach efforts to “spread the word” about this important historic resource right in the middle of Milwaukee. Recent efforts include the collection of personal remembrances through the #MySoldiersHome campaign, which has resulted in great media and public attention for the site; information tables staffed by Soldiers Home advocates at multiple events to increase public awareness; presentations to organizations, including the VA and consulting parties, to discuss our ongoing efforts to save the Soldiers Home and a downloadable self-guided walking tour of the Soldiers Home grounds.

Additionally, a successful campaign led by MPA raised funds to purchase and install landmark signage along Interstate Highway 94 and interpretive signage along the Hank Aaron State Trail to direct visitors to the Milwaukee Soldiers Home.