

# Historic Beauty on the Bluff

Situated on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River, in one of the most beautiful spots in Memphis, sits a group of abandoned-looking buildings adjoining the site of the National Ornamental Metal Museum. These buildings, along with those of the Museum, occupy the entire block north of DeSoto Park. The complex is known as the United States Marine Hospital.

The largest of these buildings is a three-story, neo-classical brick structure built in 1936. Beside it, nestled under the huge oaks that shade the site, is a building that appears to be much older—and it is. This white, two-story building is constructed of red brick and is surrounded by a beautiful, deep porch with square columns and bracketed eaves. It has a six-bay façade, two-over-two rectangular double-hung sash windows with stone sills set into slightly arched openings. These openings are decorated with double radiating voussoirs and carved wood tympanums, but the thick encrustation of paint makes it difficult to see this detail. The doors are single-leaf panel doors with single-light transoms set into openings of the same configuration as those described from the windows. The building's metal hip roof has a projecting cornice over a wooden frieze decorated with brackets and carved panels. This building was constructed in 1883 and is one of two remaining original buildings on the site. The other, now used by the Museum, had its original Italianate-style two-story wooden porch replaced in 1937 by the present neo-classical enclosed addition, probably in an effort to harmonize with the new construction done at that time.

The United States Marine Hospital dates back to July 16, 1798, when President John Adams signed an act creating the Marine Hospital Service. This act was designed to administer aid to sick and disabled seamen, and was the forerunner of the U.S. Public Health Service. The first hospital in this area resulting from this act, however, was not in Memphis, but in Napoleon, Arkansas. This town, mentioned prominently in Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*, was washed away

completely when the river made one of its unpredictable course changes in the late 1870s. Since the nearest remaining hospital for Memphis rivermen was in New Orleans, the bricks from the hospital were



*Future plans for the eastern part of the U.S. Marine Hospital are uncertain now that the 330th Army Reserve has vacated the historic building.*

reportedly brought to Memphis for the construction of the new hospital. This new hospital, the United States Marine Hospital, was opened by the government in 1884 through the U.S. Public Health Service. The Marine Hospital became the first government health facility in the city, and the only government hospital in the area until construction of the Veteran's Administration Hospital after World War I. The hospital was intended to serve the large number of citizens, employees of the government, and others who were identified with river and marine activities. Remember that this was the era in which the Mississippi levee system was built and the Delta was made habitable. *This taming of the river was the greatest public works project the government had ever undertaken up to that time.*

The site of the Marine Hospital was selected in 1881 out of what was then known as Fort Pickering, a separate town eighteen years older and, at one time, larger than Memphis. Legend has it that Hernando DeSoto first saw the "Father of Waters" in May of 1541 from this vicinity. Six buildings comprised the original hospital district: the surgeon's house, a stable, the executive building, two wards and a laundry-dining room, connected by covered porches to the executive build-

ing. The wards and stable, all frame structures, were demolished in the 1930s. The surgeon's quarters survived until 1964. The two surviving buildings from 1884 are known in the National Register Nomination for the Hospital as the laundry-dining room and the executive building.

Although the hospital was originally intended to serve the needs of seamen, it was used at various times by the Coast Guard, cadets of the state maritime academies, members of the Coast and Geodetic Survey, Public Health fieldmen, the Army Corps of Engineers, and employees and federal workers injured on duty. It has recently been used to house soldiers during Desert Storm. In 1951, this expanded program was reflected in the change of the official name of the facility to the United States Public Service Hospital. The hospital was closed in 1965.

In 1970, the property was divided: The Federal government retained the eastern end of the site, and the City of Memphis acquired the western end, which it has leased to the Ornamental Metal Museum. The 330th Army Reserve, a hospital unit, has been leasing the eastern end until just recently. They are presently moving out and securing the buildings. Future plans for the Marine Hospital are uncertain. Conversations with representatives of the Reserve unit indicate that the procedure by which the Federal government disposes of property is about to be initiated. The property must be offered to a succession of governmental units before it is sold to a private buyer. The two 1884 buildings are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and so have some protection, and the 1936 buildings are eligible for listing. Whatever their eventual use, we can hope that the beauty and character of the site will be preserved, and that the public's use and appreciation of it will increase.

*This feature was contributed by Memphis Heritage, Memphis's private, non-profit preservation organization. For information on how you can support preservation in Memphis, please call 529-9820.*



# PICKERING:

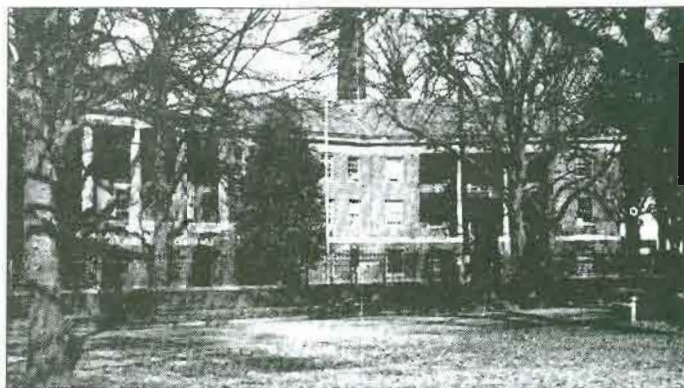


While most people know the Fort Pickering neighborhood was named for a fort of some sort, most don't realize how far back the area's history reaches, nor the size of the fort that once stood there.

The first European structure built there was a cabin put up by French explorers looking for a lost crew member in 1682, although records exist of Spanish and French explorers visiting the area in the 16th century. In 1739, the French governor of the Louisiana Territory built Fort Assumption there, but it was hardly manned. The

area, Fort Adams was mostly earthworks surrounded by heavy posts and stakes, and is thought to have been located where the Exxon plant now stands. But that site was too close to the river, too susceptible to flood and malaria, and in 1801 the fort was moved to just above the Indian mounds in what is now DeSoto Park.

That site was named for Thomas Pickering, George Washington's Secretary of War. It became less significant after the U.S. purchased the Louisiana Territory from France, which pushed the American frontier hundreds of miles west of here. The fort



*The U.S. Army Reserve Center, on West California Avenue across from DeSoto Park, is carrying on the fort's military heritage. The wooden structures were built in the 1860s and the brick buildings in the 1930s. The National Ornamental Metal Museum also occupies one of the buildings.*

Spanish also built in the area, erecting Fort Fernandina at the mouth of the Wolf River, but they, too, barely stuck around.

Zebulon Pike, for whom Pikes Peak in Colorado is named, built the first American fort in what is now the Memphis

area, mostly abandoned in 1806, though Meriweather Lewis, of Lewis and Clark fame, passed by in 1809 and said a few soldiers still remained.

Another traveler that year, one Fortescue Cuming of England, said there were 120 log steps leading from the river to the fort, and reported seeing a crowd of some 40 Chickasaw warriors lounging about on the front green of the fort, apparently enjoying a happy relationship with the soldiers. (He also reports that a party at the garrison that night lasted well past 1 a.m. and left several folks sleeping under the tables.) The commandant of Fort Pickering at that time was Zachary Taylor, who went on to become the 12th President of the United States.

As the 19th century progressed, the fort weathered away, but in 1862 Union troops captured Memphis after a brief naval battle, and a new Fort Pickering was erected—a new and much bigger Fort Pickering. Among the materials they used were the walls of a home being built by F. M. White that had been planned to include some 100 rooms.