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The Forgotten Naval General Hospital: USNH Corona, Part I

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.Circulating Now welcomes Kevin Bash, Mayor of [Norco, California](#), to share a story from the medical and military history of his city. Drawing on photographs in the collection of the National Library of Medicine, this post covers part one of the story: *The Norconian Resort Supreme*.

In the center of tiny Norco, California, behind the high wire fencing surrounding the California Rehabilitation Center and the neighboring Naval Weapons Station Seal Beach Detachment, sits an enormous complex of buildings that once served as the U.S. Naval



U.S. Naval Hospital Corona Administrative Building, 1951. Prior to its purchase by the Navy, this beautiful building served as the Norconian Resort clubhouse. Designed by the influential but forgotten architect Dwight Gibbs, the Mediterranean-style clubhouse was an architectural wonder that is now on the National Register of Historic Places. Gibbs' designs inspired and influenced the subsequent building additions to the Navy Hospital.

[National Library of Medicine #101402887](#)

[WAVES](#), and civilian volunteers to save lives on the home front.

Hospital (USNH) Corona, a massive 700-acre Navy General Hospital built during WWII. Until recently, it was thought by several historians to have been demolished long ago.

During WWII, USNH Corona rapidly grew into a complex of three independent hospitals overseen by a single Administrative Command. The buildings retain remarkable architectural integrity and look very much as they did when construction was completed in 1947.

Though they were re-tasked to serve as a state prison and Navy weapons assessment laboratory, they are nevertheless a time capsule revealing a one-of-a-kind glimpse into the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery's WWII construction methods. These buildings tell the remarkable story of some of the finest physicians in America as they fought alongside [Navy nurses](#), Corpsmen,



The Entrance to the Norconian "Clubhouse," 1951.

This image depicts the former Norconian clubhouse and USNH Corona Administration Building, which housed the hydrotherapy, x-ray, and surgical units, as well as staff quarters and hospital rooms. Today, this beautiful building complex is located within the California Rehabilitation Center, a state prison established in 1963. Following the closure of the Naval Hospital in 1957 and after decades of service as the prison administration office and prisoner housing, this stunning and historic building was abandoned in 2002.

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USNH Corona began life on February 2, 1929, debuting as a magnificent 700-acre paradise for the rich and famous known as the Norconian Resort Supreme. Built by entrepreneur Rex Clark and his reluctant wife Grace Scripps, heiress to the Scripps newspaper empire, the resort featured a remarkable, Mediterranean-style "clubhouse," complete with a luxurious hotel, dining facilities, ballroom, theater, and lounge. The public interior spaces of

the resort were adorned with stunning murals, art-deco-styled wrought iron chandeliers, and colorful terra cotta tiled floors.



The Norconian Clubhouse, April 30, 1929.

Standing in front of the car are builder Rex B. Clark, finance manager Emma "Jimmie" Snyder, reluctant investor and wife Grace Scripps-Clark, and architect Dwight Gibbs.

Courtesy City of Norco Historical Resources Commission



USNH Corona Unit I Commissary, ca. 1951.

First used by the Navy as a general mess hall for patients and later as an officers commissary, the beautiful Norconian dining room was decorated by famed interior designer A.B. Heinsbergen with art deco walls, wrought iron chandeliers, black and white marble floors, and a massive open-beamed arched ceiling.

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In the center of the Norconian Clubhouse were two separate men's and women's hydrotherapy facilities. These modern facilities were fed by natural springs featuring "sweet Sulphur water," a unique mineral water that did not smell like rotten eggs yet retained all the alleged health benefits of Sulphur intact. Equally impressive were the two outdoor competition swimming and diving pools.

The Clubhouse stood like a “white palace” atop a hill overlooking a manmade 60-acre lake, an 18-hole all-grass golf course, a beautiful lakeside casino, acres of landscaped grounds, a modern airfield, a “Tea Room” restaurant, chauffeurs’ quarters, a garage, and laundry facilities. The grounds also featured what was claimed at the time to be the most modern, privately owned power house on the west coast.



The Lake Norconian, 1950s.

Looking northeast, we see upper mid-left the southwest face of the former Norconian Clubhouse, to the right the Lake side Pavilion/Casino and in the foreground the Lake Norconian.

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Following its Grand Opening, the resort hosted a number of illustrious guests. Olympic athletes competed in its fabulous pools, Hollywood’s biggest studios used the resort as a movie location, and the airfield was regularly used by the famous American vaudeville actor

Will Rogers. Additionally, the modern spa facilities drew thousands seeking relief from physical ailments in the “super endowed” mineral waters, which were believed to be “superior to those found in Europe.”

Unfortunately, success was short lived as the Great Depression hit with unprecedented force and few could afford the necessary disposable income to bask in luxury. Accordingly, the Norconian limped through the 1930’s, sinking from high-end luxury resort to a seasonal, cut-rate vacation spot. However, there was a brief resurgence in the late 1930’s, when the resort began hosting massive company picnics for Hollywood studios such as MGM and Fox, as well as a famously-scandalous Disney party that became the stuff of legends.

Despite this brief success, for most of the 1930s the best room in the house could usually be had for just three bucks. Finally, in 1938, the fabulous Norconian was quietly put up for sale. The Catholic Church expressed interest in buying the resort, but the \$2,000,000 asking price was too high and the deal fell through. The Army took a look, but passed. So with no other prospects, the resort closed seemingly for good in May of 1940 and the Norconian became known as “Rex’s Folly.”

Enter the Navy on October 7, 1941.

Admiral D.C. Cather, the Navy’s Pacific Coast Chief Medical Inspecting Officer, had been directed by the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery command to have a look at the long-shuttered resort. This was an unusual request, as the Norconian was nowhere near any Navy base. Before the war, Navy hospitals on both coasts had generally been situated “to support operating bases, Navy yards, the training program, and Fleet activities.” For example, the most recent west coast addition to the Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery (BUMED), the still-unfinished USNH Long Beach, was established in the City of Long Beach because its harbor was home to the Navy Fleet.



U.S. Naval Hospital, Long Beach, CA, ca. 1943.

The Long Beach Naval Hospital was designed in what has been described as a WWII diminished modern style. The famed and versatile architect Claud Beelman would also be charged with designing the Spanish Mediterranean-styled U.S. Naval Hospital Corona. Long Beach was chosen after a very protracted battle with the City of Los Angeles, who wanted the job-producing hospital to be placed near San Pedro Harbor.

[National Library of Medicine #101402970](#)

Civilian hotels and resorts across the nation, regardless of proximity to a Navy base, were of particular pre-war interest to the Navy. Such facilities could easily be converted during a time of emergency into convalescent hospitals and adapted to the needs of ambulatory patients. Economically, conversion of a hotel cost far less than building a temporary hospital from scratch and could easily be returned to civilian use after the war. The owners of these private properties, reeling from the Great Depression, were very willing give a lease to the military in an effort to survive the war years.

Cather spent three hours inspecting the Norconian with Clark and subsequently sent a positive summation to Navy Surgeon General, Admiral Ross McIntire, closing with: "Personally, I could not imagine a more ideal spot for a convalescent hospital." Cather's recommendation would lead to the purchase of the Norconian, soon to be known

unofficially as “U.S. Naval Convalescent Hospital No. 1.” BUMED historians would write at the war’s end that the Norconian’s conversion from resort to Naval Hospital was:

“...an innovation which conclusively proved its worth in expanding the naval hospitalization facilities to cope with an urgent need. It inaugurated a pattern of expansion which was to be implemented by the establishment of many convalescent and special hospitals.”



Norconian Resort Supreme, ca. 1938.

The fabulous Norconian Resort Supreme sits in the middle of Norco Township, a rural community better known for chickens and watermelons, which is miles from the nearest Naval station.

Courtesy City of Norco Historical Resources Commission

However, the Norconian's service as a converted wartime convalescent hospital just for ambulatory patients was destined to be brief. With the backing of his boss and patient President Franklin D. Roosevelt, McIntire had bigger plans. He intended to make the former resort a Navy General Hospital and "the showplace of the west coast."

Beginning in January of 1941, McIntire would successfully navigate both Navy and Congressional politics to begin the transformation of the former Norconian into not only an

architectural “masterpiece” but also a permanent, full-service, and multi-departmental Navy General Hospital, with “rehabilitation as its most important function.” The facility would be capable of treating all “classes of cases,” from acute to ambulatory. USNH Corona would also become home to the Navy’s WWII Pacific Theater Specialized Tuberculosis, Polio and Cord Bladder Paraplegia Treatment Units, as well as the National Rheumatic Fever center. To establish and oversee the hospital and treatment methodologies, McIntire brought in two back-to-back wartime units comprised of famed Mayo Clinic specialists versed in “integrated multispecialty group practice.”

The former Norconian would soon cease to be known as “Rex’s Folly” as USNH Corona became recognized nationally as a place of healing where “Heroes man a Ship that never sails.” Singer Francis Langford, during her 1945 Purple Heart Diary radio program broadcast from the USNH Corona, famously stated:



Admiral Ross T. McIntire, 1946.

McIntire served both as the Navy Surgeon General (1938–1946) and as President Franklin Roosevelt's personal physician (1933–1945). McIntire's pre-war plans and efforts to expand the BUMED use of physical therapy “where surgeons leave off,” particularly at USNH Corona, has until now been largely forgotten.

[National Library of Medicine #101422330](#)

“Today we’re in a place the men call the most beautiful hospital in America. One man told me, if you’ve got to get it, this is the spot to get over it. Really it’s lovely, you see this used to be the Norconian Club an expensive spot where people who could afford anything relaxed in the most beautiful and luxurious surroundings and Corona is still a luxurious haven for these men who could take it and did.”

Stay tuned for part two from Norco, California: Roosevelt buys the Norconian, Polio, the “showplace of the west coast,” and McIntire builds his dream team.



Historian and elected official Kevin Bash received his BA from UC Riverside and Masters Degree from UC San Diego. Mr. Bash has penned five books and several articles about Norco, the Norconian Resort, the US Naval Hospital Corona and local military history, as well as multiple fictional novels and screenplays. He is regarded as the community’s ex officio City Historian,

possessing an encyclopedic knowledge of local history. An ardent preservationist, he has an enduring commitment to the future restoration of the Lake Norconian Club Hotel, the former US Naval Hospital Corona, and other local landmarks.

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fortunatelysublime2c503b6fe4

July 9, 2025 at 3:47 PM

idyllic and impressive

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Mary Houser

July 18, 2025 at 1:19 PM

My mother was stationed here as a navy nurse during WW II. This is where she met my father who was an injured marine. That is their live story. I have recently all these years later been interested in researching it. She spoke of it often.

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July 21, 2025 at 11:06 AM

Thank you for sharing this part of your family's history!

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Carol Bailey

September 22, 2025 at 3:51 PM

My uncle was in this hospital in the 1940's. He mailed home a small book titled, Picture Book of US Naval Hospital, Corona, California. It was very interesting.

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Hillary Moldovan

April 27, 2026 at 8:32 PM

My mother was stationed here as a WAVE during WWII. I have just come across a photo that she took of the front of the building. She had many stories of her time here. She didn't end up becoming a doctor as planned, but married one and had one son who became a doctor as well. She went into teaching and the other three of us children followed in those footsteps.

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April 29, 2026 at 9:25 AM

Thanks for sharing your mother's story!

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