

Search NLM

**CIRCULATING NOW**

From the Historical Collections of the National Library of Medicine



The Forgotten Naval General Hospital: USNH Corona, Part II

 Posted on July 10, 2025

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 two of the story: Roosevelt buys the Norconian, Polio, the “showplace of the west coast,” and McIntire builds his dream team. [Read Part I.](#)

On November 11, 1941, Admiral Ross McIntire, who served as both the Navy Surgeon General and the President’s personal physician, brokered a deal at the White House to

purchase the massive Norconian Hot Springs Resort from owner Rex Clark. President Roosevelt directed that the asking price of two million dollars be immediately taken from his Wartime Emergency Fund. This funding source enabled immediate purchase and conversion of the resort to a Naval Hospital and allowed McIntire to avoid the “legal restrictions requiring Congressional approval.”



The First Navy Corpsmen to Arrive at the Newly Purchased Norconian, 1941

On December 22, 1941, Captain Chester Conklin, the first Commanding Officer, arrived at the newly christened Navy Hospital with 70 Corpsmen and began the duty of readying the long-shuttered resort for immediate occupancy with a capacity of 360 beds. Conklin stated, “The Navy hopes to prevent the institution from looking like a hospital. It is to be a place for convalescent Navy officers and men to rest and recuperate amid beautiful surroundings.” In the top left of this image is Jack Britton, a highly decorated Corpsman who survived “without a scratch” the Battles of Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, Tarawa, and Okinawa.

Courtesy City of Norco Historical Resources Commission

Unfortunately, the President's use of this funding would stir "political termites in high places," which nearly ended the service of US Naval Hospital Corona before it began. Congressional opponents would question the President's use of his emergency fund to purchase the former resort, object to the cost, fail to authorize payment for the Norconian, and push the deal into Federal condemnation court, forcing the Navy to simply "take" the property under emergency circumstances. Resort owner Rex Clark would counter-sue. Though he was eventually paid, this embarrassing legal drama would drag out through the courts for the entire duration of the war.



Warm Springs Georgia Administrative Building

Prior to the war, Roosevelt's Warm Springs Georgia complex was home to the Navy's specialized program for the treatment of poliomyelitis. However, by October 1943, overcrowding at Warm Springs forced a reassessment of facilities. In February 1944, the U.S. Naval Hospital Corona was designated as the west coast center for the treatment of

Politics were dramatically pushed aside though following the attack at Pearl Harbor, and a new world war began to flood casualties into the continental United States. As America entered into our nation's first World War fought from both coasts, additional Navy hospitals were desperately needed. President Roosevelt, by executive order, immediately took the Norconian on December 9, 1941 for use as convalescent facility for 500 ambulatory Sailors and Marines.

Though Admiral McIntire still feared that he would have to return the Norconian to its former owner for non-payment, by early 1942 he was already working behind the scenes to make the hospital much

poliomyelitis, as it was capable of addressing all classes of cases.

[National Library of Medicine #101403508](#)

more than just a convalescent facility for ambulatory patients. Instead, the Admiral had a very different vision for the former resort, one that was pioneering,

revolutionary, historic, and, until recently, completely forgotten. As he told his trusted old friend Captain Harold Jensen, he planned to make the hospital nothing less than the “show place of the West coast.”

On January 13, 1942, Admiral McIntire sat before a congressional appropriations committee and stated, “it is the intention of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery to make this into a convalescent hospital for all classes of cases.” He further recommended that “pavilions for the treatment of the tuberculous should be added,” and revealed that it was his intention to increase patient capacity to “1,500.” By the war’s end, Corona would be serving 5000 casualties.



Former USNH Corona and Surrounding City of Norco, 2022

To fulfill his architectural vision for USNH Corona, McIntire turned to famed California architect Claud Beelman. Beelman was in the midst of designing the new and problematic Long Beach Naval Hospital, and he was also the pre-war designer of the magnificent Cedar's Sinai General Hospital and adjacent Tuberculosis Sanitarium. Though initially hired to simply draw up plans to convert the Norconian Resort

into a convalescent hospital suitable for ambulatory patients, this approach was quickly abandoned and Beelman was directed to design and expand the resort into a massive and permanent Navy General Hospital. This complex would include the first neurosurgical unit in the Navy, a seven-story hospital ward annex, Corpsmen and Nurse's quarters, a chapel, and the only ground-up, modern, self-contained tuberculosis sanitarium built by the Navy during WWII. Remarkably, given the wartime restrictions regarding building materials and the shortage of labor, Beelman was directed to produce permanent buildings that mirrored the Norconian's Spanish Mediterranean architecture. The result was a stunning complex that still stands almost entirely intact to this day.

Courtesy City of Norco Historical Resources Commission

Within weeks of purchase, the Navy Surgeon General quietly revealed his expensive and revolutionary plans to turn the former resort into a standalone, full service, and permanent west coast Navy general hospital, while also still maintaining its fundamental purpose of treating and rehabilitating acute to ambulatory patients. This would be the only instance in which the Navy purchased a property and converted it into a Navy General Hospital during WWII. All other such resort properties were utilized as convalescent "Special Hospitals" for ambulatory patients and returned to the private sector following the end of the war.

To assist with his effort to overcome bureaucratic and Congressional opposition, McIntire began building a new Corona team in late December of 1941. He started by appointing Captain Jensen as commanding officer of the hospital.



New USNH Corona Commanding Officer Oversees Resort to Hospital Conversion, 1942

Shown here in early 1942 is new commanding officer Captain Harold Jensen (right) during the conversion of the former Norconian into a Navy hospital. Jensen had extensive experience navigating Navy bureaucracy to oversee the construction and development of Naval Medical facilities both on land and at sea. The career Navy physician had been the Chief Medical Officer in charge of outfitting the famed USS Solace hospital ship and was highly respected and decorated for his heroic rescue efforts during the attack on Pearl Harbor. Captain Leslie Marshall (left), equally respected for his construction expertise, was selected as the Executive Officer. Marshall "was instrumental in establishing no fewer than four Naval Hospitals in his 36-year career."

Courtesy City of Norco Historical Resources Commission

Within days of his arrival to take command of Corona on January 2, 1942, Captain Jensen was at odds with the Navy's Bureau of Docks and Yards, particularly their proposal to rapidly and inexpensively convert the resort into a functioning 360-bed convalescent

hospital. In a January 11, 1942 letter to Admiral McIntire, Jensen wrote, “We have a gorgeous plant here, one that probably will be used for many years, and the problem of bed space should be considered on a basis of permanency and proper utility.”



U.S. Naval Hospital, Corona, CA: Main Surgery, ca. 1950

The main Corona surgical unit was located on the third floor of the former Norconian Hotel. Several guest rooms were converted into state-of-the-art operating rooms. The original intention for Corona was to outfit the hospital with “equipment for convalescent and domiciliary cases.” However, once the decision was made to elevate the facility to a full-service Navy General Hospital, a much higher grade and more expensive set of medical equipment was purchased to “handle all types of work.” The three major and two minor operating suites were designed to the specifications of famed neurosurgeon and Senior Medical Officer Winchell Craig and Surgeon Howard Gray. This was the site of the Navy's first neurosurgical unit.

[National Library of Medicine #101402932](#)

In a series of private letters, McIntire revealed his faith in Captain Jensen, stating that the development of Corona would “require vision and considered judgment when you start to make alterations.” He also addressed his new commanding officer’s complaints regarding the Bureau of Docks and Yards’ conversion plans, stating that Jensen would have a “lump sum” and “a great deal of latitude” with regards to the remodeling, and that he had confidence he would “be able to handle the Public Works Officer and the architect without any difficulty.”

To complete his vision of creating the “showplace of the west coast,” McIntire turned to the famed Mayo Clinic, and in doing so sought to establish Corona as not only a pioneering Navy Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation center, but also as a model hospital based on “the concept of integrated, multispecialty group practice of medicine.”

Stay tuned for part two from Norco, California: Here come the Mayo Boys, PM&R, Specialized Treatment Units, the Rolling Devils, and the final curtain falls.



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.

Posted in: [Collections](#), [Guests](#), [Prints & Photographs](#)

Tagged: [1930s](#) [1940s](#) [California](#) [military](#) [neuroscience](#) [President Franklin D. Roosevelt](#)
[World War II](#)

Previous: The Forgotten Naval General Hospital: USNH Corona, Part I

Next: The Forgotten Naval General Hospital: USNH Corona, Part III

One thought on “The Forgotten Naval General Hospital: USNH Corona, Part II”



carlos báezlecourt

July 14, 2025 at 4:43 PM

Felicitaciones por estos artículos que permiten mostrar a las generaciones presentes y futuras cómo se construyó el mundo, así como los esfuerzos y costos que demandó.

[Like](#)

[Reply](#)

Leave a Reply

Write a comment...

Comment

Search Circulating Now

Search Circulating Now

Search