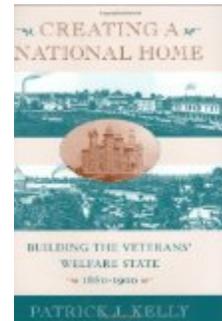




Patrick J. Kelly. *Creating a National Home: Building the Veterans' Welfare State, 1860-1900*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997. viii + 250 pp. \$37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-17560-0.

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## Taking Care of Civil War Veterans

The work of scholars such as Theda Skocpol on the Civil War pension system has recently centered historical attention on the emergence of a nascent American welfare state in the late nineteenth century. In this well-written and well-argued book, Patrick Kelly focuses on a somewhat less well known legacy of the Civil War: the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers (NHDVS), the direct predecessor of today's Veterans' Administration. Founded at the conclusion of the war in 1865, the NHDVS offered a refuge and institutionalized care to thousands of injured or debilitated former Union soldiers unable to reintegrate themselves into civilian life. By 1900, the Home had grown into a network of eight homes located in various sections of the country and had offered shelter to almost 100,000 soldiers. Kelly argues that the creation of the Home occurred at a crucial juncture in the development of what he terms "martial citizenship": the notion that soldiers could, through their service for the state, lay claim to a specific set of welfare provisions and benefits.

Building on pre-Civil War examples, the NHDVS was created to cope with the unprecedented number of disabled veterans unable to return to the former civilian lives. Already during the conflict, a number of interested parties discussed the problem of reintegrating these individuals back into society. Women volunteer groups in several cities founded homes for disabled soldiers, but the resistance of the United States Sanitary Commission, which was hostile to institutionalized care for returning soldiers, prevented a comprehensive approach

to the growing problem. But in March of 1865, the U.S. Congress founded the NHDVS, at first called the National Asylum for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, as a means to offer assistance to disabled veterans. Seizing the issue of returning soldiers as a means to shore up their political support base, Northern Republicans offered strong support to welfare provisions for veterans. Carefully employing a language that focused on the "homelike" character of the new institutions, thus shunning the stigma traditionally attached to asylums and poorhouses, the

managers of the NHDVS had, by the early 1870s, constructed three homes in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Dayton, Ohio, and Augusta, Maine. Later, more installations were added to cope with the increasing number of applicants. While never as expensive as the system of Civil War pensions, the NHDVS had expended over fifty million dollars by 1900, an indication of the continued commitment of the federal government to take care of its veterans.

The demographic profile of the veterans entering the Home explains their difficulties in reentering a normal civilian existence. About 60 percent were single, widowed, or divorced, and thus without the kind of stable domestic setting that would have facilitated their reintegration. About an equal percentage had been born outside the United States. Many of them had enlisted in the army shortly after their arrival in America and had never had the chance to settle down. Somewhat surprisingly, only a small minority of the veterans conformed to the image of soldiers without arms or legs. Over half

of the veterans had been debilitated by disease and not by wounds sustained on the battlefield. Over time, the administrators of the Home loosened the criteria for admission, and the NHDVS became somewhat of a general welfare agency for aging veterans. It was also marked by constant turnover. Many veterans moved in and out of the system depending on economic circumstances and the time of year. The homes were never a closed system. They offered their residents a number of cultural amenities, and the residents spent a considerable amount of time in nearby towns. Many residents worked in the homes and contributed to their upkeep. Compared to asylums and poorhouses of the period, the NHDVS was marked by decent living conditions and humane treatment of the residents.

Kelly's book is filled with interesting and often moving examples of veterans unable to pick up their former lives. He pays close attention to the gender and racial dynamics at work in the NHDVS. African-Americans were readily admitted to the various homes but resided in separate quarters. But maybe the most fascinating element of his story can be found in the relations between the Home and the American public. In late nineteenth-century America, some of the homes became veritable tourist attractions. In 1886, the home located in Dayton reported that more than 186,000 visitors had been welcomed to the institution. With their pretty gardens and imposing buildings, the homes offered pleasant settings for outings. In addition to the economic ties between the homes and their communities—the homes were often surrounded by bars and other less than reputable institutions catering to the needs of the residents—their role as tourist attractions forged friendly relations between the veter-

ans and townspeople. The managers of the Home consciously adopted a strategy of fully integrating the institutions into the civic life of the surrounding areas. Their parklike settings were also designed to soften criticism of a wasteful central government at a time when most Americans were not inclined to support generous government welfare programs. With public celebrations on the Fourth of July and other days dedicated to the memory of the Civil War, the homes tapped into patriotic sentiments and reminded the public of the debt owed to the veterans residing inside their walls. Veterans did indeed belong into a special category, and the public acceptance of the NHDVS makes it clear why the first massive governmental welfare programs were directed at this group.

In exploring the gendered nature of early federal welfare policies and the evolution of the concept of a "martial citizenship," Kelly adds a new dimension to the work on the Civil War pension system. He offers a well written and coherently argued analysis of a pioneering welfare institution that had hitherto received scant attention. One would at times like to know more about the living experiences of the residents themselves, but that does hardly detract from the value of the book. Kelly's work presents a welcome addition to the growing body of literature on the emergence of an American welfare state in demonstrating both the accomplishments and the shortcomings of a novel set of policy initiatives designed to cope with the legacy of the Civil War.

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