

**Excerpted from:**

# **Havenwoods Old Prison Site**

## **Photos Then and Now on**

## **Waymarking.com**

The German immigrants who cleared the land of large trees and drained the swampy areas had built a few farmhouses and barns, but mostly the area was level farm fields. In 1904, that all started to change. That year, Milwaukee County began purchasing farmland in the Town of Granville in order to build a new prison here. In 1917, the Milwaukee County House of Correction opened. The building shown in the photograph is the main administrative building of the prison. You are standing on the flagpole foundation shown in the foreground of the photo.



The prison was self-sustaining, providing employment for all inmates able to work. Prisoners manufactured tables and chairs that were sold under the trade name of the Granville Furniture Company. Almost half of the 420-acre prison was cultivated, providing produce for the prison kitchen and other county institutions. The prisoners tended crops, cared for livestock, and milked cows. The inspector's report from 1939 indicates the prison kitchen canned 5534 gallons of tomatoes, 1100 gallons of catsup, 1350 gallons of corn, 172 gallons of rhubarb, and much more!

In 1941, the United States government held German-Americans in the House of Correction. Within hours of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States government rounded up thousands of persons of 'enemy' birth or descent, including at least forty-nine German-Americans residing in the greater Milwaukee area. A handful of those luckless Milwaukeeans found themselves detained in the House of Correction, unable to contact friends and family members or to petition for release.

The Chief Inspector's 1941 Annual Report of the House of Correction confirms the presence of these 'enemies' but doesn't reveal much about their livelihoods, circumstances, or dispositions: "As a means of cooperating with the United States Government in the present war emergency, the Board of Supervisors, on December 30th, 1941, adopted a resolution by which the County of Milwaukee entered into a contract with the United States of America, represented by the Department of Justice and the Immigration Service, leasing that part of the institution known as the "women's quarters" for the sum of \$500 per month, which includes furnishing said quarters with light, heat, water, bedding and necessary laundry and cleaning materials."

You can find out more about German American internment by visiting the [Traces web site](#). Also at this Web site is Guenther Greis's story of his father's internment at Havenwoods (referred to in the story as the Milwaukee Municipal Barracks). Here is an excerpt of his story:

"The FBI took my father, Peter Joseph Greis, from our home on the night of Dec. 9, 1941 about 3 in the morning. Everyone in the house was asleep when the FBI agents pounded on our door. My father went to the door, half-asleep. The FBI agents demanded that he come with them. He was not allowed to bring anything. My mother was horrified and begged them not to take him. That was the last we knew of Dad for 6 weeks. The FBI took him away and he never returned home. We had absolutely no idea why or where he was taken.

"My older brother, Siegfried, made numerous attempts via letters, as well as local inquiries, trying to find him. Rumors flew and he tried to trace every one. No one would help us. Incredibly, after a month and a half we located him right in north Milwaukee at the Milwaukee Municipal Barracks. He had not even been allowed to tell his family where he was! Once we found my father, we were permitted to visit him for short periods of time on certain days."

In 1945, the United States Army seized the prison buildings from Milwaukee County. The Army operated the United States Disciplinary Barracks (Little Leavenworth) from 1945 to 1950. American soldiers served time here for absence without leave, desertion, and disobedience.

The USDB also held prisoners of war. You can read more about prisoners of war in Wisconsin in the book *Stalag Wisconsin* by Betty Cowley. This excerpt recounts one boy's memories: "Here they come again!! What excitement for a small boy! Military Jeeps with mounted machine guns racing across the open field headed to the little woods. We lived at the end of a long dead end road out near the woods not far from the U.S. Disciplinary Barracks and Hospital. Escapees from the disciplinary station always headed for the woods since it was the only cover around. And, of course, that is where the MP's would recapture them. My father occasionally wandered over to that compound to visit through the fence with German speaking prisoners."

With the start of the Cold War in the 1950s, the military developed defenses to prepare for possible attacks by the USSR. In 1956, the Army established a Nike-Ajax Missile Site here. You can find out more about the Nike site at Havenwoods by visiting [WM57WR](#) and [CG1N93P](#).

By 1950, the Army no longer needed the prison buildings for use as disciplinary barracks. So, the old USDB became a training facility operated by the United States Army Reserve – 84th Division.

In 1969, the federal government decided it no longer needed all of the land that had once been the USDB. They declared the area that would someday become Havenwoods surplus. The buildings were abandoned. By the time they were demolished in 1974, the old cellblocks had become dangerous eyesores!

About the time the buildings were being dismantled, another major change was happening. The land had been acquired by the City of Milwaukee as an Environmental and Recreational Area, and it had a new name—Havenwoods! Over the next decade, people would clean up the site, plant trees, and make plans for opening the education center at Havenwoods State Forest.