

History House Coast 1943 Artillery Christmas Celebration Ft. Hancock, New Jersey

On 16-17 December 2017, the National Park Service (NPS), supported by the Sandy Hook Foundation and Army Ground Forces Association (AGFA) presented a 1943 Christmas Celebration at "History House" located at Fort Hancock's Historic Post, part of the Sandy Hook Unit of Gateway National Recreation Area, which is located within the Fort Hancock Sandy Hook Proving Ground National Historic Landmark District (the entire Sandy Hook Peninsula).

The members of AGFA that participated in the event were Paul Casalese, Doug Ciemniecki, Donna Cusano, Paul Cusano, Chris Egan, Anne Lutkenhouse, Kim and Tom Minton, Chris Moore, Steve Rossi, Paul Taylor, Wally Tunison, Gary and Deanna Weaver, Bill Winslow, Shawn Welch, and special guests John Uhler, Kimberly Uhler, and Joe Rosamilia.

The educational objective was to provide an interpretation of the Harbor Defense soldiers of Fort Hancock as they would have celebrated Christmas of 1943.

The photo below shows the participating membership and guests on Saturday, 16 December in the parlor room of History House. The home was built in 1897, and completed just in time for the outbreak of the Spanish American War in 1898. Designated originally as a "Lieutenant's House" per Army standards, the home is 4,500 square feet and was intended for one junior officer and his family. History House is known formally as "Quarters 1," and is one of 18 homes which comprise "Officers Row," one of the most visually appealing features of Fort Hancock's Historic Post.



Friday evening was a special treat, as seven of us attended the Glenn Miller Orchestra (<http://glennmillerorchestra.com/>) concert at the South Orange Performing Arts Center. This is THE Glenn Miller Orchestra - the one authorized by the Glenn Miller estate to play original Glenn Miller music. What a wonderful concert it was! After the concert, SGT Egan and 1LT Lutkenhouse spoke with members of the band.



Below are SSG & Mrs. Minton and SGT Egan. While we were in the lobby, many people stopped and chatted with our membership, asking many questions about AGFA.



Part of the AGFA team was billeted in Bldg #21, a restored Officer's Row two-unit duplex built in 1939. Anyone can rent one or both sides. For more information, please visit www.sandyhookrentals.com.



The accommodations are quite nice, and the dining room will comfortably seat eight people. There are four bedrooms in each unit, and a maximum of 10 people can comfortably reside in each unit.



On Saturday morning we had to visit Battery Gunnison/New Peck to retrieve some of our mess (food preparation) equipment. Notice in the photo below the wonderful new addition of the stairs to the Battery Commander's station. AGFA members will have these stairs painted and ready for the May Coast Defense/Ocean Fun Days weekend. The stairs were an NPS contract project for the battery interpretation.



History House is seen in the photo below, decorated for the holidays for the first time in 6 years!



We began preparations at about 1030 in the morning. Below SSG Minton greets CPT (Dr) Cusano in the kitchen of History House.



Below 2LT Cusano and Mrs. Weaver share a drink of hot cider and a smile. Behind them is the new "Big Chill" retro refrigerator purchased by the Sandy Hook Foundation (www.Sandyhookfoundation.org).



During the day we had a large number of visitors. Below LTC Welch, 2LT Cusano, and 1LT Lutkenhouse greet a visiting WWII veteran and his family, whom we met the night before at the Glenn Miller Orchestra concert.



Below we took time to chat in the living room with our special guest. SGT Egan chats with our special guest's son about various facets of WWII at Fort Hancock.



Below is the AGFA team with our special guest on the stairs to the 2nd floor.



SGT Egan, CPT Cusano, 2LT Rosamilia, SSG Minton and our guest pose for a photo in the living room. Notice the “Blackout Curtains” in the background. Like all buildings in the USA during WWII, all windows had to be equipped with light blocking curtains. A very real part of life on the Jersey Shore in 1943, these curtains were to prevent light being seen offshore by German ships and submarines.



The World War II Christmas remains as one of the most anticipated events of the year at Fort Hancock. Below, the view from the back porch shows the long line of visitors' cars who came to join us for the day.



The house was crowded most of the day as shown below in the entrance foyer. This was the first Holiday at History House since 2011 due to Hurricane Sandy, and many visitors were just as happy as we were to be back.



CPT (Chaplain) Uhler plays "Silent Night" on a WWII vintage "field organ" that actually works! We sung several Christmas songs with him to organ accompaniment.



In the dining room, AGFA member Kim Minton informed visitors about AGFA, and sold a very special button commemorating History House (see inset below).



T-Sgt Weaver stands next to the dining room entrance as discussions continue.



AGFA members were very busy on both floors of History House. Here, Sgt Egan talks to visitors in one of the upstairs bedrooms, restored to how it might have looked for a child living on Officers Row in 1943.



Below 2LT Cusano and 1LT Lutkenhouse chat with an interested visitor as Mrs. Minton discusses the "1940s Ladies Tea" event that she is planning for the spring in History House.



Below 2LT Cusano and SSG Minton chat with a visitor about an item related to his father's service at Fort Hancock during World War II.



As the planning continued for the 1940s Ladies Tea, LTC Welch and Mrs. Minton discuss the workings of donation funds related to this new fund raising event.



Many historic documents were available on the table where Mrs. Minton was working. Below, visitors review those documents and materials with great interest.



Later in the afternoon the Coast Artillerymen of AGFA gathered in the living room. Below LTC Welch, CPT(Dr) Cusano, T-4 Ciemniecki and SSG Minton chat.



Each December AGFA members gather for a Christmas Dinner. This year's dinner was catered by Francesco's Restaurant (<http://www.francescositalianrestaurant.com/>). Georgio, the owner, delivered a wonderful dinner as usual! Below, T-Sgt Weaver and Mrs. Minton go through the buffet line.



SGT Egan serves himself dinner as Mrs. Weaver and SSG Minton chat.



We assembled several folding tables in the living room to have our dinner. 1LT Lutkenhouse, Mrs. Tunsion, PFC Tunison, and 2LT Cusano prepare the tables.



The last time we had dinner in the house was 2011 - before Hurricane Sandy's damage to the house. This was a special time for us and we had 14 members attend.



Below T-Sgt Weaver, T-3 Moore, LTC Welch, and 1LT Lutkenhouse prepare for a wonderful meal.



The ambiance of the house is fantastic and made for a great dining experience.



After the dinner we held a short business meeting to discuss by-laws changes and upcoming preservation projects for 2018.



Sunday morning dawned bright and early and we gathered in the dining room of Building #21B for breakfast.



By 1100 on Sunday we were hard at work in History House. This was the big day as we would have Santa and a singing trio in the afternoon. Sunday was jointly sponsored by Sandy Hook Foundation (<http://sandyhookfoundation.com/>), AGFA, and NPS.



Below Mr. Brian Samuelson (leases Bldg #21) and Mrs. Betsy Barrett (president of the Sandy Hook Foundation) chat with LTC Welch. Much of the great work being done at Fort Hancock would not be possible without the Sandy Hook Foundation. And Brian is leading the way in the leasing program with the first success rental lease operation at Fort Hancock (www.sandyhookrentals.com).



Below LTC Welch and 1LT Lutkenhouse chat in the dining room as our visitors look at the many historic items in the house.



Mrs. Minton chats with guests about the "1940s Ladies Tea" she is planning at History House in April.



2LT Cusano and SSG Minton chat with visitors in the dining room.



CPT Cusano chats with a visitor regarding the items on the Officer's Desk. Each of the officer's homes had an office with its own outside entrance.



SSG Minton chats with a visitor in the Office of the house.



SGT Egan, his Aunt, and Grandmother chat on the 2nd floor foyer outside one of the restored bedrooms.



SSG Minton also chats with a visitor on the 2nd floor foyer.



Everything changed at 2pm when Santa (portrayed by Pete McCarthy, the Sandy Hook Unit Manager) arrived via an NPS Fire Engine!



Santa and his elves were quickly engaged by young visitors.



Below is the Sunday AGFA team with Santa in the living room. Note the blackout curtains. Failure to maintain them during wartime could result in a serious monetary fine for the homeowner.



After we took the picture, Santa and his elves began preparing for visitors.



The singing trio was outstanding. They provided a very nice 1940s Christmas atmosphere for the afternoon, singing in the dining room.



The trio poses on the stairs for a quick photo, before continuing on to the dining room. On the right, 1LT Lutkenhouse welcomes people into the dining room.



We had a large number of visitors throughout the day. On the left CPT Cusano greets visitors and on the right 1LT Taylor discusses historic items in the pantry with visitors.



Below, Sgt Egan talks to visitors on the wide, sweeping front porch, a trademark of all of the Officer's Row homes.



At about 1615 hours the AGFA team gathered on the front porch of History House in preparation for Retreat at 1630.



The beauty of the house is very apparent in these photos.



As Sunday's portion of the event drew to a close, AGFA members and visiting historians went into formation for Evening Colors as conducted at the adjacent the US Coast Guard Station here at Sandy Hook. Formally known as "Retreat", this evening ceremony marks the end of the military working day. Each night, the bugle call of Retreat echoes out over the grounds of Fort Hancock. With History House barely 500 yards from the Coast Guard flag pole, the ceremony is easily heard and seen each evening. Historians formed up, and at 4:30 PM, came to the position of "Present Arms" as the American Flag came down, and "Retreat" was played, precisely as would have been done on December 18th 1943. To hear it visit:

<http://www.music.army.mil/music/buglecalls/retreat.asp> .



Once in position, the team stood by for Retreat to be sounded.



As the bugle sounded, the team saluted our flag as it was lowered for the day.



Below is another view of the team as seen through the historic window in the front door to History House.



After Retreat, the house started to empty of visitors. Below, 1LT Taylor, Mrs. Minton and SGT Egan prepare to open the new Donation Powder Can. This is one of five new donation receptacles crafted by SGT Egan over the past month.



As the day came to a close we stepped outside for a photograph of History House.



After we left the house, we returned our mess materials and other items to storage in Battery Gunnison/New Battery Peck. The new lights on the side of Gun #1 service area are very evident below. We have gone from four to seven exterior lights on 14 December. When complete, there will be twenty-three exterior lights.



Below CPT (Dr) Cusano stands on the powder delivery stairs to the Gun #1 platform. The two nearest lights had only been installed four days prior to this photograph. The ammunition bridge railings were installed about three weeks prior to this photograph.



Another view of the new exterior lights as CPT (Dr.) Cusano stands in the center of the photo. The one light on the gun platform illuminates the underside of the 6-inch M1900 rifle and the light of the two niches reflect light on the underside of the new ammunition bridges.



Below to the left is a view of the service area and to the right a view looking up from the powder passage door area to the underside of Gun #1 pointing north.



During the winter Battery Gunnison/New Battery Peck's exterior will be open for self-guided tours. Workdays will be conducted January through April and will be listed in the Gateway Recreation Area program guide. For additional information please call the Sandy Hook Unit, Fort Hancock Sandy Hook Proving Ground National Historic Landmark Visitor Center at (732) 872-5970 or consult the seasonal activity guide available at the NPS website <https://www.nps.gov/gate/planyourvisit/index.htm> For more information, visit <http://armygroundforces.org>