

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

On 9-10 December 2023, Army Ground Forces Association (AGFA) and the National Park Service (NPS) presented a 1943 Christmas Celebration at "History House". Located at Fort Hancock's Historic Post and part of the Sandy Hook Unit of Gateway National Recreation Area. This area constitutes the Fort Hancock Sandy Hook Proving Ground National Historic Landmark District (the entire Sandy Hook Peninsula).

The members of AGFA who participated in the event were Tony Antonucci, Callum Bujdos, Donna Cusano, Paul Cusano, Joel Gonzalez, Richard King, Henry and Mary Komorowski, Joe McCoy, Tom Morrison, Anne Lutkenhouse, Paul Taylor, Wally Tunison, John Uhler, and Shawn Welch.

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

The photo below shows the participating membership and guests on Sunday 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 per Army standards as a "Lieutenant's House", the home is 4,500 square feet and was intended for one junior officer and 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. Our guest in the middle is Angelo Sciacca who served in the Army during WWII in a construction battalion in the Pacific. He repaired airfields, roads and bridges.



On Friday 8 December we began work on one of our newest projects - securing Battery McCook/Reynolds - known also as "Mortar Battery" and during WWII as the Harbor Defense Command Post for harbor defenses of New York. Below we are moving sand and debris to open the entrance area. Our goal is to fabricate and install a steel bar door to secure this section of the structure. Below CPL Bujdos is removing rotten wood from a five-year-old National Park Service wooden door that collapsed and was buried in the sand.



Below CPL Cusano and T-5 Antonucci take a break to eat lunch sandwiches.



Below CPL Bujdos and T-5 Antonucci continue moving sand from the entrance area.



Below CPL Cusano, CPL Bujdos, Pete McCarthy (NPS unit manager) and T-5 Antonucci pause after completion of the sandbag wall to hold the sand in place.



Saturday morning AGFA operated two locations - History House and Battery Gunnison/New Battery Peck. Below CPT(Chaplain) Uhler and a visitor are playing "Silent Night" on a US Army field organ.



Below in the kitchen 2LT Cusano chats with visitors. Other visitors help themselves to the Hot Cider we had for our visitors. The pots we made the hot cider in and the ladles we used were Army issue from the 1940s.



The Christmas Tree was a great attraction for all. Below several children enjoy the vintage toys and ornaments.



Below CPT(CH) Uhler and 2LT Cusano stand next to the field organ and (right). 1LT Lutkenhouse is with the grandson of the parlor furniture's donors.



Below 2LT Cusano ensures the US Flag is securely fastened to its flag holder. The wind on Saturday was stiff - on Sunday it was not only windy but rainy most of the day. In the distance to the right can be seen the Fort Hancock Chapel.



There were many 1940s period toys on display. To the left in the photo below is a sled that is in reasonably good condition.



A metal fire engine is seen below - a very popular toy of the time.



Below is the Baldwin Manufacturing Company's "Coast Artillery Game" "large cannon" and ship target. This rare game was manufactured in Brooklyn NY and retailed for about \$20 in 1941 - equal to about \$300 in 2023 dollars.



Below is a common soldier's gift of the 1940s - a pillow cover. This one is for a soldier's sister and features Fort Hancock.



In the parlor is a large fire place and the mantel of the fire place supports the photos and items below. There is a large oval mirror on the mantel and the Christmas Tree is very visible in the background.



Below are visitors examining the photographs and other items from the 1940s on the mantal.



The photo below was taken from the stair landing between the first and second floors looking into the foyer.



Over at Battery Gunnison/New Battery Peck, our visitors were able to traverse Gun #2 - an M1900 6-inch seacoast rifle. Below one visitor looks through the M1904 telescopic sight and tracks a ship.



Below T-5 Morrison chats with a visitor about the powder magazine.



Below T-3 Komorowski, the machine shop manager, explains the different machines to our visitors in the Battery's machine shop. This shop is critical to AGFA's restoration projects. The two "fluorescent" (LED) lights are critical for good lighting when working on the machines. We have found that even 100 watt incandescent bulbs lack the brightness required.



Below T-3 Komorowski shows our visitors how the "shaping" machine works to cut metal. This Atlas Shaper was manufactured around 1940.



TSG King has many visitors gathered around him as he explains how he is creating platform light fixtures from modern materials. Of the 12 platform lights he is restoring, at least four will have modern fixtures as the vintage fixtures were either totally missing or broken.



Below CPL Bujdos explains various chemical agents in the Chemical Warfare room. The chart he is holding is from 1944 and is an overview of all the various chemical agents US soldiers would have to face if Chemical Warfare was initiated.



Below CPL Cusano explains components of the Chemical Warfare system that provided clean air overpressure to the Plotting Room in the event of a chemical attack.



Throughout the afternoon small groups of visitors would arrive and the first place they headed was Gun #2. Below two visitors elevate and traverse the gun.



Below T-5 Morrison explains the M1903 Springfield Rifle to our visitors. To the right PFC McCoy has just finished a short demonstration with the M1903.



Throughout the afternoon visitors would arrive at Gun #2.



Below is LTC Welch, PFC McCoy, CPL Bujdos and T-5 Morrison on Gun #2.



Below T-5 Morrison is identifying a visitor who will be operating the elevation setter's position on the gun (elevating the gun tube).



In December the sun sets early and below the team has minimal light for a photo.



Once History House and Battery Gunnison/New Battery Peck were closed for the day, the majority of the team arrived at the Mule Barn Tavern (www.mulebarntavern.com) for dinner on the second floor. Saturday was a great day with wonderful weather and over 400 visitors between History House and Battery Gunnison/New Battery Peck.



Sunday morning opened rainy, wet and windy. The photo below is of the Sunday team including our NPS partners and NPS volunteers. On Sunday, AGFA supported both the History House and the Guard House locations.



Below 2LT Cusano and 1LT Lutkenhouse discuss the kitchen area with visitors.



Over at the Guard House (Post Museum and presentation room), NPS Ranger Tom Hoffman, an NPS Volunteer and PFC McCoy chat about the Guard House and its mission.



Inside the Guard House are many information panels and below is a model of Battery Potter as it was constructed in the 1890s.



The Guard House had holding cells in the back rooms. These cells were for soldiers that had misbehaved (often involving alcohol) or otherwise required a "sobering up" period before their leadership got them. Soldiers sentenced to "confinement" would be sent to Castle William on Governor's Island in NY Harbor.



There were spartan hygiene facilities inside the holding cell area.



Back at History House, 2LT Cusano greets visitors at the entrance area. To the left, CPT(Doctor) Cusano heads back to the kitchen area.



Below 2LT Gonzales discusses some of the historic documents with our visitors. The NPS Team pulled together many excellent historic documents to support lively discussion and they formed the backdrop for this conversation.



Below Angelo Sciacca, a WWII veteran aged 99, is looking at many of the historic items in the "office" of the Officer's home. Given this was a "work area", much of the materials an officer would use and reference were on the desk and shelves.



Below Ranger Hoffman and CPT(CH) Uhler and Angelo Sciacca look through Angelo's photo albums from World War II. Many of the photos help to bring to life a soldier's experiences roughly 80 years ago.



Below PFC McCoy stands with Angelo Sciacca in front of the Christmas Tree. Angelo noted that he also trained and used the M1903 Springfield rifle during his time in the Army.



The picture on the left has PFC McCoy, CPT(Dr) Cusano and Jeff Hansen - a fellow historian - with his daughter. On the right, PFC McCoy and CPT(Dr) Cusano are in the kitchen preparing to go to the Guard House.



The inside of History House is decorated to the 1940s. The photo below shows the second floor area from the main stair case.



Below is an infant's room on the second floor.



Below is another view of the Infant's room on the second floor.



The room below is next to the infant's room and is furnished for two children.



The room below is the master bed room.



Another view of the Master Bed room with the door to a very large walk-in closet visible to the right.



A small sewing room is situated between the children's bed room and the infant's bed room.



Many of the shelves and cabinets have vintage items to include cans of foodstuff. The visitor below has just discovered "Davis Baking Powder" - an early 1940s brand - still made today and still using the same label artwork.



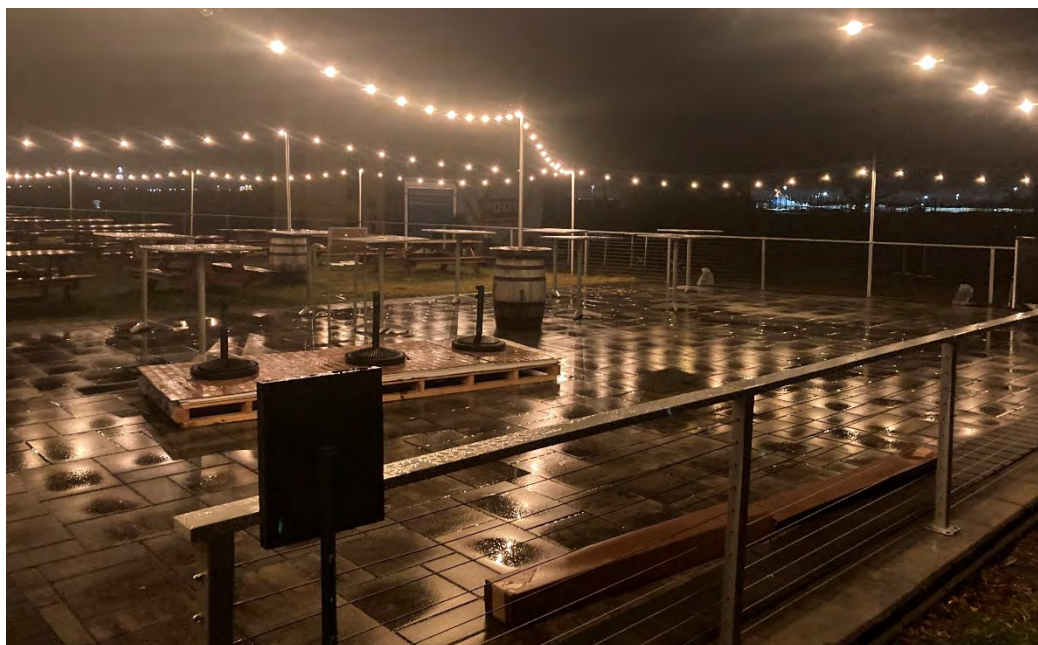
Below CPT(Dr) Cusano discusses the Officer's office with a visitor. Notice the door in the background. This enables the officer to conduct business without impacting the rest of the house's activities.



Below PFC McCoy chats with NPS Volunteer Serena and NPS Ranger Cox in the kitchen. The large refrigerator is modern but has a strong retro look.



After we closed History House, we moved over to the Mule Barn Tavern (www.mulebarntavern.com) for dinner. The wetness of the day is very visible on the back deck of the restaurant.



While awaiting our seating, 1LT Lutkenhouse and 2LT Cusano stand next to the Christmas decorations inside the Tavern. 1LT Lutkenhouse is wearing the pre- and early WWII Army nurse blue overcoat and blue first pattern service cap.



For Sunday evening, the team ate downstairs. The staff of the Tavern is superior and we had a most wonderful meal and excellent conversation.



Below part of our team takes the obligatory picture with the “Christmas Mule”!



During the winter Battery Gunnison/New Battery Peck’s exterior will be open for self-guided tours. For information call the Sandy Hook Unit, Fort Hancock & Sandy Hook Proving Ground National Historic Landmark Visitor Center (732) 872-5970, <https://www.nps.gov/gate/planyourvisit/index.htm> or visit <http://armygroundforces.org> to learn of restoration days when the battery will be open.