

FORT DEVENS MUSEUM NEWSLETTER



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FINDING A DIMENSION TO AYER'S MILITARY CONNECTION

October
2012

C. David Gordon, FDM President

Gone from the sidewalks of Ayer is the constant flow of soldiers in uniform stopping in at stores, dropping in to eat at restaurants. No longer do the children of soldiers form a large proportion of the students taught in the town's public schools or a great number of soldiers and their families live in the town. Such visible signs of the presence of a nearby Army installation are no longer evident, giving the sense that the town's image as a military town has faded away.

But silent reminders of Ayer's past military do exist in the town. Certain present-day buildings around town have their own military past. Their presence signifies a continuing existence indeed of a military connection for the town. Fort Devens Museum volunteers have

had the opportunity to explore the connection that a couple of these old buildings have with soldiers in training at Camp Devens during World War I. The Museum's first opportunity for such an exploration came as Devens resident and now member of the Museum's Board of Directors Regina Kim presented the Museum with a scrapbook she had found that had been put together by one of the 60 or so young telephone operators who ran the switchboards at Camp Devens. The young women had lived in a large house on Pleasant Street in Ayer that the telephone company leased (they named it Netatco Hall) and slept in a special officers'-type barracks building constructed on the property. Museum volunteers have sought more information about these women and located the house as it exists today.

More recent research explored the existence of a club at the corner of West Main Street and Mechanic Street in Ayer at which soldiers could find recreation, spiritual guidance, and friendship and where those visiting soldiers could find lodging and a sense of connection. The Federation House at what is now 50 West Main Street was constructed and

funded by a coalition of state-wide Protestant denominations – Methodist-Episcopal, Baptist, Congregational mainly – with support locally from local churches, including Unitarian, Presbyterian, and notably Ayer's Federated Church.

A glimpse of what Federation House offered soldiers and soldiers' visitors came from a large collection of correspondence, circulars, and bills showing business transactions and personnel matters connected with its operation. Ayer resident Edwin R. Swallow had acquired the collection and loaned it to the Museum.

On Federation House stationery the Board called attention to the place as "the gift of the churches to the soldiers." In their spare time, soldiers could come to this place to play billiards or pool, do bowling, sit in a quiet place to write a letter home or play cards or just plain converse with others, and enjoy motion pictures. In fact many of the materials in the collection had to do with renting films from the big movie distributors in Boston.

Also offered were speakers on religious and spiritual matters, occasional concerts, and a men's chorus for soldiers to join. Here too family or friends of soldiers could find overnight lodging, find a friendly voice to inform them about life at the camp



Federation House papers tell a story of community support of the many soldiers stationed at Devens during WWI

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PRESIDENT'S LETTER — A BRAVE NEW WORLD LIES AHEAD

Autumn seems to signal a picking up once again of the strands of work or school and social activities after the long and especially hot summer. Hopefully for individual people as well as organizations it involves a renewal, a vigorous re-dedication to daily routines rather than just a vow to “soldier on.”

At Fort Devens Museum our return to business and activities (following a summer spent welcoming a record number of visitors to the Museum in air-conditioned comfort) involves as a main goal re-dedication to securing a sustainable level of revenue. To meet our budget of \$25,000 to maintain services we provide, every one of our sources of revenue must bring in more of a financial return—our year-end appeal, donations from visitors and friends, new and renewal memberships, retail sales, and specific fundraising events.

Of special concern this year and in the future will be earning support from local businesses, professionals, and corporations. Corporate memberships start at \$250 a year. For companies interested in helping finance specific phases of museum work rather than contributing in a general way, the Museum offers sponsorship opportunities: underwriting newsletter publication at \$200 per issue; paying for a guest speaker at \$150; providing materials for mounting displays, delivering talks, and storing artifacts at \$350; and covering publication costs for

the stories about Devens and its people at \$250.

All that is raised ensures that a professional staff member is there to answer visitors' and callers' questions, create new exhibits and see to the evolution of present exhibits, and care for the collection of artifacts now counted at well over 5,000 items. It pays for the insurance and accounting fees necessary to do business as a non-profit educational enterprise and the expenses associated with daily operations and special events.

In Praise of Volunteers

In the last edition of our newsletter I put out a call for volunteers for various types of work at the Museum. At Fort Devens Museum volunteers can help keep exhibits clean or act as docents to guide visitors about. But they might help carry out research or interviewing of those who have trained, worked, or lived on Fort Devens. Or they might prefer to help in some phase of the recording or preparing of those stories to be used in publications, programs, or exhibits. And still others might like to lead those programs. There there is the further set of volunteers needed to help out with fundraising.

Already the Museum has attracted a small group of dedicated volunteers worthy of special praise. Andrew Tabak of Weston has not only presented a program at our last Open House on the subject of a book he has written about the construction

of barracks at Camp and Fort Devens, but he has brought in for display a delightful scale model of a World War II wooden barracks he himself put together.

Regina Kim of Devens organized a fundraising event at the Strand Theatre in Clinton during the summer and underwrote most of the cost of the fees for use of the theatre. She also contributed several items for the Museum to use as raffle prizes and to sell at the Museum as plans move ahead to open a small store.

Renee Fossey of Townsend has done a tremendous job of organizing our various storage spaces. In the process she has been helping place museum equipment and supplies in useful arrangement. To secure better use of space for boxed artifacts in the main storage room, she assembled and made use of a new shelving unit.

Tom Bartovics of Pepperell has organized and catalogued the books in the Museum's library. He is now busy entering this information into our Collections database.

These four demonstrate the wide range of tasks available at the museum for new volunteers. Each has contributed according to his or her own interests and talents. Their initiative and bustle helps make the Museum an exciting place to be.

The Museum does indeed look forward to the new year ahead!

- C. David Gordon
President, Fort Devens Museum
October 2012

DID YOU KNOW ?

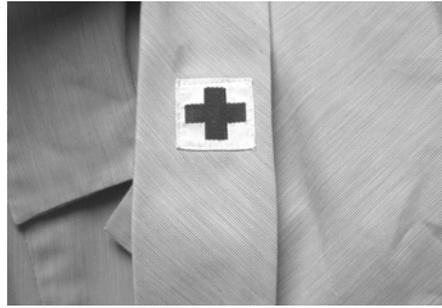
On October 7, 1932, Camp Devens was officially dedicated as Fort Devens and the formal dedication of the Garrison flagpole took place. Congresswoman Edith Nourse Rogers, who was instrumental in this name change and transition to a more permanent base, spoke on the “Development of Fort Devens.” Col. Albert Foreman of the 13th Infantry was master of ceremonies. Following the dedication, the celebration continued with potato races on mules, musical chairs, mounted tug-of-war, and a buglers' contest.

NEW ACQUISITIONS



WWII 150th Combat Engineer Battalion uniform belonging to Staff SGT John Ventura

Thanks to Alan Ventura & Family



1960s/70s Red Cross uniform worn by Julie Williams when she worked as a volunteer at the hospital at Fort Devens

Thanks to Julie Williams



1970s 39th Engineer Battalion uniform belonging to Jeffrey Geibel

Thanks to Jeffrey Geibel

Continued from page 1

and the town, and join in activities offered at the house. According to a description found in the "Bulletin of Organized Activities in Connection with Camp Devens" published by the War Camp Advisory Service, the house's aim was "intended to be, not another church added to those already in Ayer, but the joint agency of these churches ... to minister of the highest and best in life to the men of Camp Devens."

Federation House opened in January 1918 and remained in operation through mid 1919, as long as soldiers remained on post to attend. While many people assumed that this building had been constructed and run by the YMCA, this was not the case. The YMCA maintained its own Hostess House in a building on Camp Devens.

Research, though, has yet to reveal when the YMCA did move into Ayer. The one hint that such a move eventually took place comes in an advertisement in the November 15, 1919, *Turner's Public Spirit* weekly newspaper that a Sunday program for men was being offered at the West Main and Mechanic Streets, Ayer, premises of what was by then evidently known as the Army YMCA and that in addition to music by the 36th Infantry Orchestra,

speaker Arthur V. Dimock would address the topic "The Battle of Peace."

In World War II this same building became part of the USO service organization for soldiers. Present owner of the building and of the main business within it, Creative Kitchens & Baths, is Kevin D. Hardin. He showed the Museum volunteers highlights of the building, including a clear indication of the dimensions of the Federation House 1,000-seat auditorium at the rear of the building and, on the top floor, an outline where rooms had been set up for visitors to stay overnight. What a thrill to view these silent mementoes of the town's past.

The excitement over discovery of a building associated with the World War I war effort was lacking regarding Federation House's counterpart which had been constructed on West Street and financed privately. Heading up the Board of Soldiers' Club was the Rev. Dr. Endicott Peabody, founder and headmaster of Groton School. For years after Chandler Machine Company, manufacturer of fine sewing machines, had taken over the building, visitors could see the remains of a full proscenium arch and stage for presentation of programs and plays there. However, ear-

lier in the 21st century the company went out of business, the property was sold, and a set of residences was built on the land.

Museum volunteers, though, have found two other buildings located still along the main street in Ayer with tie-ins to serving soldiers or their visitors in World War I. Future research will focus on finding more about what was called the Suffrage Coffee House on West Main Street. Here a large duplex house had been purchased and remodeled. Another building on East Main Street believed still intact and the structure that housed what was called the White Ribbon Home in World War I may also be a next subject of the Museum's research. This home too, established "for the purpose of contributing to the welfare and comfort of the soldiers and their friends" operated under the auspices of the Women's Christian Temperance Union.

Discovering the story of how these present-day structures once housed facilities for those training at Camp Devens and their friends and families adds further dimension to the town's heritage and added importance to its local history. Ayer remains a military town.

MUSEUM HONORS TWO AT ANNUAL MEETING: A LONGTIME BOARD MEMBER, ITS FIRST SAILOR

C. David Gordon, FDM President

The Fort Devens Museum launched two new exhibits at its annual meeting, held the late afternoon of June 16, 2012, at the 94 Jackson Road complex. The displays called to remembrance the accomplishments of two individuals, both involved in World War II yet each unique in the form their contributions to war and peace took.

Frank C. Belitsky (28 July 1919 to 23 July 2011), served in the US Army for 21 years, retiring in 1963 as a lieutenant colonel. Drafted in June 1942 after graduating from Temple University and working at Frankfort Arsenal, the Philadelphia native received his commission as a second lieutenant that December. He served with the 71st Infantry Division as it fought the Nazis across part of France, into Belgium and Germany. After the war he saw duty assignments to Puerto Rico and several United States places before coming to Fort Devens. Among awards he received were the Combat Infantry Badge, Bronze Star Medal, European Theater Service Medal, Armed Forces Reserve Medal, and the Army Commendation Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster.

Starting in 1963 he and his wife Mitzi lived almost the remainder of their lives in Groton. Frank retired from Mass. Civil Defense in 1987. He had been a past commander of the Groton American Legion post and the Pepperell VFW post, a member of the Disabled American Veterans, and a tireless advocate for veteran and elder affairs in the area. He had also served dedicatedly for many years on the Board of Directors of the Fort Devens Museum.

At the open house his daughter Ingrid Belitsky and a few Board members added interesting details to round out a picture of the man. Ingrid had donated to the Museum most items placed on exhibit from her father's time of serving his country.

Museum's First Sailor Recognized

The Museum's second exhibit commemorates Captain Dimitri Polistock (3 November 1917 to 6 January 1996). His career indicates that he could be considered something of an honorary US Army man. During World War II, ships on which he served as an officer brought troops as well as munitions and equipment for US soldiers to the Normandy beachhead and to other Atlantic and Pacific posts. A German submarine torpedoed his vessel off Wales and, after being one of eight crewmen among 36 in board to be rescued, he spent eight months recovering from wounds in a British hospital. He served on troop ships bringing American fighters to battle in both the Korean and Vietnam Wars as well.

Before WWII he had got his start as a seaman at the age of 14 as a cabin boy on a sail-driven whaling vessel. He fought in the Seamen's Brigade of the Lincoln Division in the Spanish Civil War. Before retirement in 1979, he had been assistant master and master for 15 years on large dredges deepening harbors, bays, and canals along the Atlantic coast under the direction of the Army Corps of Engineers. As Museum Board member Walter Petreyko, a relative of Polistock, indicated in his talk about the man, Polistock needed no such designation for honors related to the Army; his record as a seaman speaks

eloquently on its own about him. Petreyko donated items for the exhibit in memory of Polistock.

Museum Business Undertaken

Museum members present at this annual meeting approved a slate of four officers and a 15-member Board of Directors. Named to serve for a third year as president was C. David Gordon of Groton. New to the Executive Committee is Dale Martin, also of Groton, named second vice president. Continuing for a second year as Clerk is Duane Barber of Harvard and Steve Sugar of Pepperell as Treasurer serving his first full-year term.

Three newcomers became members of the Board. Attorney Thomas Gibbons of Ayer has his law office also in Ayer and is a graduate of Suffolk University Law School. Regina Kim is a Devens resident who is active in community affairs and a volunteer. Leonard Willette of Shirley had served in the National Guard at Devens and for eight years worked for FEMA before recently becoming head of telecommunications at the Veterans' Administration Center in Bedford.

They join three other Board members who were named during the course of the previous fiscal year. Jodi Deuger of Groton is a former Army nurse with service at Fort Devens, now a real estate agent. Robert Hargraves of Groton is a former Massachusetts state representative, former Groton selectman and former mathematics teacher and school administrator currently serving on his town's Finance Committee. Walter Petreyko of Pepperell has actually returned to the Board after some years' absence.

ANNUAL MEETING *CONTINUED*

He is a Korean War veteran, an artisan, and retired businessman.

Continuing Board membership are Doug Culver of New Hampshire, Marcia Synnott of Groton, Bill Blankenburg of Pepperell, Ruth Rhonemus of Ayer, and Bert Tompkins of Groton in addition to Museum officers Barber, Gordon, Martin, and Sugar.

For Fiscal Year 2013, John H. Ott of Groton left the Board to become one of the Museum advisors. The others are Pierce B. Browne of Concord, Robert Delia of Pepperell, and Ian Meisner of Ayer.

As for the future, Museum President Gordon looks forward to the Executive Committee's taking an active role in guiding the Museum. He

spoke of the need for many more volunteers to get involved in collection sorting, research, and interviewing; a concerted effort to raise funds for meeting the Museum's operating expenses and moving forward within its current premises; and the development of new programs on various subjects to be presented at the Museum and outside it; and continued work to attract outside speakers of interest to bring their talks to the Museum.

Gordon concluded his year-summary talk suggesting that those connected with the Museum vow to follow the charge he made at last year's annual meeting: "This year more than the last, I charge you to remember the commitment the Museum has. We owe it to the soldiers

Who have trained or instructed here, these soldiers' families who lived here or nearby, the corps of civilians who have helped keep things running even as those in the Army have come and left on new duty assignments, to residents in the surrounding towns and cities whose lives were touched by those on the base, and indeed to our region itself, and our country too -- we owe it to all of them and to this 95-year-old institution and the timeless plot of land called Devens -- to continue the work of making the Museum grow and prosper" toward its mission of preserving the Devens Story and sharing it with others.



FACE OF DEVENS

PRISCILLA F. THAYER
GRAY LADY



Priscilla F. Thayer, of Lancaster, MA was a volunteer with the American Red Cross during World War II. Her husband, Duncan, served in the Marine Corps during WWI and WWII, contributing to her desire to help soldiers during WWII. She worked at Lovell General Hospital and, occasionally, patients would attend outings at her Lancaster home for fresh country air!

Each newsletter will feature a "face" of Devens—a man or woman who lived here, worked here, or trained here. Visit the museum for our larger "Faces of Devens" exhibit. If you, or a family member or friend, would like to tell your story please contact us at the museum. Everyone's story is a piece of our history!

SEARCHING FOR.....

CHARLES WASHINGTON

Born around 1942, he was assigned to Fort Devens around 1962 and probably came from California and/or Oklahoma. If anyone has any information, please contact the museum at 978-772-1286 or info@fortdevensmuseum.org. Thank you!

NEEDING....

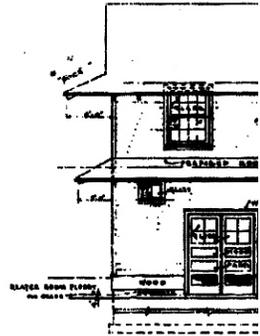
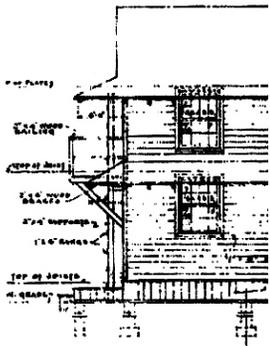
DISPLAY MATERIALS

In order to continue to expand and produce new exhibits at the museum, we are constantly in need of additional display materials. In anticipation of our November 10th Open House, we need the following items to complete our exhibits:

- Torso Mannequins:** six at \$59 each (for uniforms featured on page 3)
- Frames:** one hundred at \$2 each
- Bookcase:** \$139

If you would like to sponsor, or contribute to a specific purchase, please contact us at 978-772-1286 or info@fortdevensmuseum.org. Thank you!

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Leonard Willette

MUSEUM ADVISORS

Pierce Browne
CSM (Ret.) Robert Delia
Ian Meisner
John H. Ott

STAFF

Kara Fossey—Executive Director

UPCOMING EVENTS

Veterans Day Open House

Join us on **Saturday November 10th**
from 10 AM to 4 PM

to celebrate and honor those who have served
Guest speakers throughout the day
Refreshments will be served

Free and Open to the Public



Saturday October 20: German and Italian Prisoner of War

Wreath Laying Ceremony, Fort Devens Cemetery, Patton Road, 11 AM

The museum will also be open this day from 10 AM to 3PM

FORT DEVENS MUSEUM

Open: Tuesdays & Fridays 10-3; 3rd Saturday of each month 10-3

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