

## History House Coast Artillery Christmas Celebration Ft. Hancock, NJ

On Saturday 18 December 2010, the National Park Service (NPS), in conjunction with the Army Ground Forces Association (AGFA), conducted a 1943 Christmas Celebration at "History House.". On Sunday 19 December, the Army Ground Forces Association attended a Christmas performance by SOAR Productions at the newly refurbished Ft. Hancock Theatre, which was built in the early 1930s.

The members of AGFA that participated in the event were Richard Hill, Anne Lutkenhouse, Eric Meiselman, Tom Minton, Paul Taylor, Gary Weaver, and Shawn Welch. The educational objective was to provide interpretation of the 245<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery Regiment celebrating Christmas of 1943.

The photo below shows the participating membership and other guests on Saturday, 18 December in the parlor room of History House. The home was built in 1896, and completed just in time for the outbreak of the Spanish American War in 1898. Designated originally as a "Lieutenant's house" per army regulations, 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 and architecturally stunning features of Fort Hancock.



The event began at 1 pm. Below, 2LT Lutkenhouse and PVT Meiselman prepare to welcome the public.



No celebration of Christmas would be appropriate without Santa Claus. Santa made his annual appearance at History House courtesy of the NPS and the Sandy Hook Foundation. St. Nick was visited by nearly a hundred young children as PVT Meiselman provided an honor guard.



This annual event has been gaining popularity within the local living history community, and more than two dozen visitors arrived in period 1943-era attire throughout the day.



Below, PVT Meiselman stands guard in front of History House, greeting visitors as they prepare to go back in time, or “enter” December 18<sup>th</sup>, 1943.



Below SSG Weaver and Henry Komorowski review Henry's work on the traverse azimuth device (lower left on table) he is building for the M1900 6-inch rifles at Battery Gunnison/New Peck. This is a remarkable addition to the restoration work already accomplished on the guns of the battery. Our thanks go out to Henry for his work!



This annual party is one of the most anticipated events of the year for the NPS, drawing well over 300 people annually. This view of Kessler Road – the one-time private rear access road for the military occupants of Officers Row – shows a small example of the popularity of this event.



The magnitude of visitors is again apparent in the photo below.



SSG Chris Moore, of the 102<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Regiment reenacting group, based out of nearby Middletown, NJ, brought his 1949 Plymouth (same body as 1941 Plymouth) which is beautifully restored as a World War II Staff Car. It was a real big hit with the public and living historians alike.



As the event drew to a close, AGFA members and visiting historians went into formation outside for Evening Colors. Formally known as "Retreat", this evening ceremony marks the end of the military working day. The United States Coast Guard still maintains an active station at Sandy Hook. 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. AGFA members 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 18<sup>th</sup> 1943. To hear the tune for yourself, please visit: <http://bands.army.mil/music/bugle/retreat.asp>.



After the public departed, AGFA members and guests sat down to a period dinner in the dining room of History House – just as members of traditional Coast Artillery Regiments would have done for Christmas in 1943.



History House has also a very significant collection of period furniture and items from the early 1940s. The home, open year round for tours, is one of the NPS' oldest running programs at Sandy Hook, with the home being restored by Fort Hancock veterans and volunteers in the late 1970's. Below, the master bedroom is displayed.



Below is the baby's room, or "nursery".



Sunday, 19 December, began with work and training at Battery Gunnison/New Peck. Below, PVT Meiselman and PVT Hill practice close order drill on the battery parade.



At the same time, 2LT Taylor places new desiccant packets (moisture preventative) into each of the EE-91 fire control telephones to help prevent corrosion. The battle against moisture damage within the coast artillery gun batteries still rages over a century after these structures were built.



Below SSG Weaver consults his technical drawings of the battery as he takes measurements for a new AGFA restoration project.



The amount of ice at the battery is apparent in the photo of SSG Weaver below. One of AGFA's goals is to refurbish the original concrete gutter drainage system at the battery, thereby preventing such dangerous overflows and buildups of ice on level surfaces.



Below, LTC Welch leaves the plotting room, on his way to undertaking yet another new project.



SSG Weaver, PVT Meiselman and 2LT Taylor confer before undertaking the next task.- there's never a lack of work to be done in the Coast Artillery, especially during the harsh winters at Sandy Hook.



After working at Battery Gunnison/New Peck on Sunday morning, members went back to the barracks, changed into Class A uniforms and proceeded to the Post Theatre for a presentation by SOAR Productions of "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever".



The members took their seats in the audience inside the beautifully restored 1933 Fort Hancock Post Theater. This was perhaps the first time that these types of uniforms had been inside this theater since the 1940's. Prior to the show, the production company kindly invited AGFA members to speak to the audience about living history and our role in preserving Battery Gunnison/New Peck, and for the public to come and ask questions after the performance. Many theater goers did, indeed, interact with AGFA members, and many more came back to History House afterwards.



The play was a lot of fun, as can be seen in the photo below.



After the play, the membership posed for this picture at the base of the stage.



As members departed Fort Hancock for the last time in 2010, we took the photo below of the New York City skyline silhouetted against the two 6-inch M1900 guns of Battery Gunnison/New Peck.



Gun #1 of Battery Gunnison/New Peck points ominously towards the Atlantic Ocean under a cloudy night sky on eternal vigilance to protect the citizens of the United States and the garrison of Fort Hancock, New Jersey.



The battery will be closed during the winter except for special occasional tours. The grounds of the Battery and the gun platforms will remain open for self-guided tours. Association workdays at the battery that are open to the public will be listed in the Park's Spring 2011 seasonal activities guide. The battery will open again for the public beginning on Coastal Defense Days on 22-23 May 2011 and weekends during the summer of 2011. For additional information please call the Sandy Hook Visitor Center at (732) 872-5970 or consult the seasonal activity guide available at the NPS website <http://www.nps.gov/gate/planyourvisit/thingstodosandyhook.htm> as well as <http://www.nps.gov/gate/planyourvisit/this-week-at-shu.htm>

For more information, visit the Army Ground Forces Association Website <http://armygroundforces.org>