

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

On 17-18 December 2011, the National Park Service (NPS), supported by the Sandy Hook Foundation and the Army Ground Forces Association (AGFA), presented a 1943 Christmas Celebration at "History House" located at Main Post Fort Hancock, part of the Sandy Hook Unit, Fort Hancock - Sandy Hook Proving Ground National Historic Landmark.

The members of AGFA that participated in the event were Donna Cusano, Paul Cusano, Chris Egan, Kathleen Kluxen, Henry Komorowski and Mary Komorowski, Eric Meiselman, Tom Minton, Anne Lutkenhouse, Kyle Schafer, Gary Weaver and Deanna Weaver, and Shawn Welch. Our guests included Bill Winslow, Joe Di Giovanni, Alan Palm, Kevin Titus, Megan Pigg, Phil Hillman and the ladies of the Sheboygan Woman's Army Navy Club (SWANC), whose members Anna and Titania Tomic, and Amy Mountain, traveled from Wisconsin and Pennsylvania respectively to participate in the event. The educational objective was to provide an interpretation of the Harbor Defense soldiers of Fort Hancock, specifically the 245th Coast Artillery Regiment, as they would have celebrated Christmas of 1943.

The photo below shows the participating membership and 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 main post Fort Hancock. History House has been magnificently restored to the WWII-era.



AGFA members stayed in Barracks Bldg 119, one of two remaining WWII-era 'temporary' barracks at Ft. Hancock. On Saturday morning, the members began to assemble for the day. Below, PVT Meiselman, PVT Schafer, PVT Egan, 2LT Lutkenhouse and SSG Weaver prepare to move to History House, attired in their very sharp Class-A, or dress uniforms.



On Saturday morning, the NPS hosted their annual 'thank-you' breakfast for the "Volunteers-In-Parks" (VIP's), who support the NPS mission at Fort Hancock. Below 2LT Lutkenhouse, Mrs. Weaver, SSG Weaver, NPS Ranger Jen Cox and Bill Jackson of the "Fort Hancock Nike Site NY-56 Volunteers Association" enjoy breakfast. Mr. Jackson served in the US Army Air Defense Artillery at Fort Hancock's Nike Battery (NY-56) from 1968-72.



Many different volunteers joined the NPS for the annual Volunteer Breakfast recognition in History House. The NPS relies upon volunteers such as these to fulfill its mission at every National Park.



Following the conclusion of the breakfast, the house was opened to visitation from the public. Here, Kevin Titus, portraying President Warren G. Harding, along with Mrs. Harding and a Secret Service Agent, pose with AGFA members in the main hallway of History House.



As expected, the historic 1940's Kitchen always draws the members - good food and good times. All of the appliances are correct to the time period, and are in full working order.



In the living room, "Mrs. Harding", seated, and her secret service escort join AGFA and NPS volunteers for a picture.



As Saturday's portion of the event drew to a close, AGFA members and visiting historians went into formation for Evening Colors as conducted by the US Coast Guard at the adjacent USCG Station 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 the tune for yourself, please visit: <http://bands.army.mil/music/bugle/retreat.asp>.



During the Retreat ceremony, our 1940s-attired young ladies discovered how cold the legendary Fort Hancock December winds can be outside History House. Here Megan Pigg and Anna Tomic shield each other from the wind.



Following the end of visiting hours on Saturday evening, AGFA hosted its own dinner for WWII living historians at History house. Below Mrs. Komorowski, 2LT Lutkenhouse and WWII Navy Veteran LT(jg) Bob Krause enjoy each other's company in the dining room. On the table is a Coast Artillery "Wind Component Indicator" (large brass disk) which awaits restoration. It was recently purchased for AGFA use interpreting fire control at seacoast gun batteries.



SSG Weaver and T5 Komorowski enjoy the displays within History House. These displays consist of vintage 1940s housewares and articles, most in near new condition.



Over 25 AGFA members and visiting historians ate in the History House dining room and living room. Below T5 Cusano, LT(jg) Krause, CPT Cusano, guest T5 Hillman and 2LT Lutkenhouse enjoy the dinner and conversation. The meal was eaten from original WWII US Army mess plates dated from 1938 to 1940.



Given the size of the dinner contingent, we served "buffet style" in the 1940's kitchen of History House. The main course, a delicious chicken stew made by SGT Minton, is served from the stove to LT(jg) Krause by Mrs. Weaver, as T5 Komorowski and visiting historian MSG Palm serve themselves.



As we prepared for dinner, our visiting ladies from SWANC enjoyed hot spiced apple cider and good conversation. Hot apple cider and cocoa are a staple of the History House Christmas displays, and are prepared for visitors by NPS Rangers and volunteers.



Following dinner, PVT Schafer, CPT Cusano and PVT Meiselman enjoy a short break.



Sunday dawned bright, clear - and cold. Here, PVT Meiselman performs "guard duty" with his vintage M1903 Springfield rifle outside History House as would have been done for a senior officer's house during a major meeting or social function in the 1940s. Below PVT Meiselman salutes incoming visitors.



2LT Lutkenhouse speaks with Park Ranger Steve Schiffer in the 1940's kitchen as other NPS VIP's helped us prepare for Sunday's visitors.



With the hot spiced cider and coffee, the kitchen of History House was constantly busy. Below AGFA members Miss Kluxen, CPT Cusano, and T5 Cusano speak with visitors and guest historians.



Upstairs, our visiting 1940s lady historians from SWANC provided interpretation and context to the nicely restored and furnished bedrooms of History House. Visitors were very interested in the areas of the home which are not normally open for tours and the SWANC team provided critical “home front” interpretation that greatly improved the visitor’s experience.



One of the highlights of the weekend was three of the “Manhattan Dolls,” who provided lively period-correct Christmas Music throughout the Sunday afternoon. (<http://www.themanhattandolls.com/girls.html>).



Below the Manhattan Dolls perform in the entrance hallway of History House as the public and AGFA members listen and enjoy the season’s music.



Trimmed from top to bottom in period-correct and vintage ornaments, and with a Lionel train chugging around its base, the 1943 Christmas tree is always a favorite with visitors. Many visitors to History House fondly recall such decorations and furnishings from their own childhood days.



Early in the afternoon Santa arrived and established his place in the living room of History House, ready to receive the eager children who had come to see him. Notice the “blackout” curtains in the windows behind the Christmas Tree. From December 1941 to sometime in mid-1944 (location dependent) the entire east coast of the United States spent its nights in blackout conditions to avoid drawing the attention of German forces.



Below, T5 Cusano on far left and 2LT Lutkenhouse greet Mrs. Weaver as she arrives for the day. Mrs. Weaver's interpretation here was that of a holiday traveler, having just arrived at Fort Hancock.



Below 2LT Lutkenhouse, Mrs. Weaver and T5 Cusano pose for a picture in the dining room of History House.



Meanwhile, upstairs in the sewing room, our guest Titania Lyn provides an overview of how women of the 1940s would make their own clothing. The 1930's Singer sewing machine behind her was a key component of her interpretation.



Below, she answers questions from two of our younger visitors, who were absolutely enthralled with the concept of hand-made clothing. It is interpretation such as this that ensures that the stories and sacrifices of the "Greatest Generation" will not soon be forgotten.



As the day wound down, we prepared to perform another evening colors Ceremony. Just before the appointed time, we gather in the hallway and entrance way to prepare to head outside for the formation.



Moments prior to the bugle call, the members of AGFA and living historian guests formed up in front of History House for Retreat.



Below, these gentlemen render respect to the Flag of the United States of America.



Immediately following Retreat, they headed back into History House to secure the home, clean up and bid farewell to their guests.



As the evening ends, some members of AGFA pose for a final picture inside History House in celebration of a 1943 Christmas at Fort Hancock. The 1943 Christmas events at History House are some of our most enjoyable events for both AGFA and our visitors. We always look forward to them as a "capstone" to a year of very busy restoration and interpretation efforts.



During the winter, Battery Gunnison/New Peck's gun platforms will be open for self-guided tours. Workdays will be conducted January through April and will be listed in the Gateway program guide. For additional information call the visitor center at Sandy Hook Unit, the Fort Hancock Sandy Hook Proving Ground National Historic Landmark, at (732) 872-5970 or consult the seasonal activity guide by visiting the NPS website <http://www.nps.gov/gate/planyourvisit/thingstodosandyhook.htm> For more information, visit the Army Ground Forces Association at <http://armygroundforces.org>