The Museum

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At its founding by Major General William Duncan and others, the Foundation was made the caretaker of the historical archives and collections of the Delaware National Guard. The Foundation set about to catalog and preserve these relics and materials. It was granted a long-term lease for a building at Fort DuPont to house these materials known as the former gymnasium and post exchange. The Foundation attempted to restore and renovate this structure, but the task grew too great as engineering studies revealed problems that escalated the price, and fundraising became very difficult during the 2008 recession. Lowering their sights, the Foundation successfully renovated a smaller building at Fort Dupont. When the State of Delaware granted Fort Dupont to the Fort Dupont

Redevelopment Corporation we were forced to move out by the new landlord.

The Foundation found a new home at the Delaware National Guard Wilmington Readiness Center, a former elementary school dating from the 1960’s that now houses the Mid-County Senior Center, a portion of the National Guard, and the Delaware Military Museum, which opened its doors in 2017. In pursuing its vision, the Foundation has been actively accumulating records, documents and artifacts of Delaware military history. Although its origins are in the Delaware National Guard, it seeks to represent all uniformed military services. Its focus however is on Delaware military organizations. The Delaware Military Museum was established in its new location in 2017. The museum houses a 5000-volume library of military history, an archive of about 20,000 documents and photographs, a collection of over 300 uniforms as well as hundreds of military artifacts donated and collected over the years. The first exhibit was themed on Delaware’s role in World War I and was built in the centennial year of 2017. This was followed by various rooms themed on:

Delaware’s Colonial Era Militia and the Revolutionary War

War of 1812, the Barbary Pirates and Quasi-War with France

Delaware’s role in World War II

Delawareans in Vietnam

The Korean War

The Persian Gulf War, Afghanistan and Iraq Wars

A Kiddie Corner room where children can “please touch”

We have also added exhibits on:

The Delaware Army and Air National Guard

The Commander in Chief, a Presidential resource

A library

Our next major project is to build out a Civil War room

A Brief History of the Delaware Military Heritage and

Education Foundation and Museum

The Delaware Military Museum can be said to have its origins from just after World War II. Returning veterans of the 198th Coast Artillery re-joined the peacetime Delaware National Guard. The veterans of Bora Bora and the South Pacific held annual reunions. They assembled simple displays of their service during the war with lots of photos, and a few artifacts and souvenirs of their time there. These displays were housed in the local armory, probably the Wilmington Armory at 10 th and DuPont Streets. These objects still form the core of our collections at the Delaware Military Museum. Major General Joseph J. Scannell, himself a veteran of World War II, was appointed by Governor Carvel as Adjutant General in 1950 and served for almost twenty years in that post. Scannell had a great love for books and art. By 1958 the Delaware National Guard had established a military library in its headquarters at 10th and Dupont Streets in Wilmington. Major General Joseph Scannell appointed a board to manage the library including the following officers: Colonel Walter Tindall, Colonel Ramon Dugan, LTC Jerome Niles, LTC Kenneth Madden, and recorder 1LT Donn Devine. The library had an estimated 2000 volumes and was steadily adding more each month, as well as accepting appropriate gifts of related military subjects. In addition, Scannell fostered a collection of color plates of military uniforms for the reference collection. He also acquired a series of paintings of World War I subjects by Brandywine School artists including Frank Schoonover and Gale Hoskins. The library, artifacts and these paintings remain under the curatorship of the Delaware Military Heritage and Education Foundation Museum. In 1918, Frank Schoonover was commissioned as one of 13 studio artists to bring the scenes of World War I to the readership of The Ladies Home Journal through a series called “Souvenir Pictures of the Great War.” He painted fifteen of the total 36 pictures published. Others were painted by Gayle Hoskins. In 1958 Scannell purchased eight paintings from the widow of Gayle Hoskins for $2500. A year later he acquired nine paintings by Frank Schoonover for $2700. These are now the property of the Delaware National Guard in the custody of the Delaware Military Heritage and Education Foundation which financed their cleaning and restoration. Currently, these paintings are on loan to the Delaware Archives for a special exhibition.  The Delaware Military Heritage and Education Foundation also undertook the cleaning and restoration of several works of military-related art by Jamie Wyeth, another Brandywine school artist of more recent vintage.

This organization began its existence in the late 1990s as the Delaware National Guard Heritage Committee chartered under the auspices of the Adjutant General of Delaware Major General Francis Vavala. Led by MG William Duncan (DE ARNG Ret.) this committee was formed to raise money to clean and restore the Brandywine School paintings of Gaye Hoskins and Frank Schoonover in the possession of the Delaware National Guard. During this time General Vavala surveyed the resources of the Delaware National Guard and asked that all archival material, photographs, and artifacts be collected in one place, originally the Newport Gap Armory facility.

Around 2003 the Committee was re-named the Delaware Military Heritage and Education Foundation to reflect a change in its focus. At its founding by Major General William Duncan and others, the Foundation was made the caretaker of the historical archives and collections of the Delaware National Guard. Kennard Wiggins was asked to be Curator by General Duncan in 2005. The Foundation set about to catalog and preserve these relics and materials. Under General Duncan’s leadership they began an effort to find a permanent home for the assembled collections. The former gymnasium/post exchange building at historic Fort DuPont seemed to offer great possibilities. It was structurally sound, about the right size, and in a prominent position at the head of the parade ground behind the flagpole for the post. The Foundation began a drive to raise money to design, engineer and renovate this facility estimated originally to cost about $3 million. It would be a museum that would include all the uniformed services hence the name-change. It was a state- owned building and we were given a 99-year lease for free if we could renovate the structure. The Foundation hired Peg Tigue as Development Director around 2008. It was an ambitious goal and it was made even more ambitious by two significant factors. The original estimate grew as complications arose. It became a $5 million and then a $7 million challenge. In the meantime, the economy crashed in 2008, and public giving began to dry up. It began to look like a forlorn hope receding in front of our eyes. Stephanie Przybylek was asked to be Executive Director in 2009. Meanwhile, a nearby building, the former NCO quarters, a two-story duplex brick house was available and the Foundation trained its attentions on this facility. It was smaller in scale and the renovations were on the order of $100,000 to $150,00 with a great deal of “sweat equity” from loyal volunteers. The Foundation gave up its lease on the Gymnasium building and made an agreement to restore the NCO quarters instead, a much more achievable goal. This they were able to do, converting it to a mini-museum of a couple of rooms, some offices and a “clubhouse” for the membership. Tigue and Przybylek opened a foundation business office in Wilmington. By 2015 the foundation had nearly exhausted its funding and was losing financial ground. Tigue had resigned in 2012. The Wilmington office was closed. With regret, the foundation, could no longer afford paid staff and Przbylek was released around 2015.

General Duncan stepped down as chairman and BG Terry Wiley assumed the leadership in 2015. Historic Fort DuPont was a DNREC facility and a state park, but there never seemed to be money for improvements and it was a low-priority facility off the beaten track. It was, in short, a “red-headed stepchild”. DNREC reached an agreement to have the site re-developed and turned it over to a redevelopment corporation who became our new landlord. We were asked to pay rent. We responded that we had equity in the building as a result of our investments. It was decided that we would vacate and the redevelopment corporation would offer at least partial repayment for our efforts. General Vavala as Adjutant General made it possible to move the collections, after a false start, to the present facility in 2017. The Foundation found a new home at the Delaware National Guard Wilmington Readiness Center, a former elementary school dating from the 1960’s that houses the Mid-County Senior Center, a portion of the National Guard, and the Delaware Military Museum, which opened its doors in 2017. In pursuing its vision, the Foundation has been actively accumulating records, documents and artifacts of Delaware military history. Although its origins are in the Delaware National Guard, it seeks to represent all uniformed military services. Its focus

is on historic Delaware military organizations, facilities, and people. Here, we have brought to realization our vision of a military museum open to the public. It too is a state building and in need of maintenance. So, while we are enjoying some stability in the moment, our future will always remain somewhat uncertain as circumstances change.

The Delaware Military Museum is the most visible manifestation of the Foundation efforts, but certainly not the only one. Under the leadership of BG Terry Wiley since 2015, the Foundation has continued to participate in educational programs throughout the state, including the annual History Day competitions, various other museum and historical events such as “Wings and Wheels”, youth programs and a speaker series. The foundation has funded prizes and scholarships, as well as restoration efforts for other artworks over the years. Today (2024) the museum houses a 5000-volume library of military history, an archive of about 20,000 documents and photographs, a collection of over 300 uniforms as well as hundreds of military artifacts donated and collected over the years. In June 2023 Joshua Loper was hired as the new Executive Director. With this step, we hope to increase attendance, membership, and formalize our fundraising efforts into the future.

Kennard Wiggins, BG Ret

Curator