

Museum History

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At the height of the Vietnam War in the winter of 1967-68, a museum dedicated to the citizen-soldiers of the Commonwealth was being constructed in Boalsburg, Centre County. Situated on the grounds of the Pennsylvania National Guard's 28th Infantry Division Shrine, this construction project was the final goal in a 48-year quest.

The location of the Shrine and future museum was part of the Theodore Davis Boal estate. Boal, a wealthy landowner and prominent citizen of the Centre Region established a privately funded machine gun company on his land for service with the Pennsylvania National Guard in World War One. Shortly after the return of the division in 1919, at an officer's club reunion at his estate, Boal dedicated a memorial to the fallen troopers in the machine gun company. This simple ceremony during the first reunion of the men of the Society of the 28th Division American Expeditionary Force (A.E.F.) established what was to be known as the 28th Infantry Division National Shrine. It was also in this same year that Boal was reported to have shipped back from war-torn France a number of relics removed from the battlefield for eventual display in a museum to be located on his property.

Relics, weapons and souvenirs were brought back from the Great War for display in the Society Officers Club that was built on the land. The site was sold to the Commonwealth in 1931 and remained an active military cavalry post within the Department of Military Affairs up through the twenties. Reunions of the Society A.E.F. were still held each year and monuments continued to be dedicated.

By 1936 the needs of the U.S. Army and Pennsylvania National Guard dictated that the Boalsburg post was no longer viable. The troop was disbanded in May of that year. However, the Shrine continued to grow as the annual reunions were still held and the Society Officers Club facilities hosted the attendees. Yet, by April 1938, the continuing economic depression and passing away of the "old guard" of officers from the Great War forced the dissolution of the Officers Club. Theodore Davis Boal passed away four months later at the age of 71. Even though the presence of the club on the property was no more, the Society continued to exist as a fraternal veteran's organization with statewide posts in every region.

Interestingly enough, discussion on the construction of a military museum has been recorded in the Society's convention meetings throughout the 1920's, 30's and 40's. It had remained very much on the minds of veterans yet the Depression and World War Two postponed any serious lobbying for funding. It wasn't until the late 1950's that the political climate in Harrisburg was favorable to the idea. On July 8, 1957 custody of the Shrine and its grounds was given to the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC). This initiative resulted from the interest within the Society of the 28th Division, A.E.F. led by its Director William A. Miller. Two important figures in state service collaborated on the project. Camp Hill native Major General Henry K. Fluck, commander of the 28th Infantry Division and former State College resident, and Executive Director of the PHMC, S.K. Stevens joined together to follow through on an agenda that included the long-term goal of constructing a museum at the site of the Shrine.

Despite some false starts with highly publicized ground breaking ceremonies in 1963, 1964, and 1965, actual construction began in the fall of 1967. The structure was placed on a hill overlooking the parade grounds of the Shrine. The building itself was "meant to convey the impression of a defensive military position" and that look was certainly captured by the architectural design firm of Heyl, Treby Associates of Allentown. The exhibits retained the WWI focus then exemplified by the 28th Division Shrine.

The first site administrator for the new Pennsylvania Military Museum was Mr. Donald Morrison of Mechanicsburg. A trench scene included in this first interpretation of Pennsylvania military history consisted of an 80 ft. section of a WWI trench that was fabricated complete with dugouts, bunkers, barbed wire and vehicles. Although not historically accurate, this "environmental exhibit" as it was called at that time was billed as one of the first in the country and offered visitors the opportunity to immerse themselves in a life size diorama complete with battle sounds. The military museum was completed at a cost of \$252,695 and officially opened to the public on Sunday May 25, 1969.

Throughout the 1970's and 80's, the museum told the story of our nation's conflicts through the eyes of the citizen soldiers of the National Guard. Tens of thousands of school children and adults toured the "trench", viewed the exhibits and attended special events. Don Morrison retired in 1990 and administration of the site was given to Mr. William J. Leech of Pittsburgh. Under this new stewardship the museum experienced a public revival. A museum advocacy support group, The Friends of the Pennsylvania Military Museum, was organized in 1991 and the interpretive theme of the service veteran was renewed to include all service branches and more current conflicts up to and including Desert Storm.

In 1999, former Lt. Governor, Mark Schweiker announced the authorization of state funding to completely renovate the museum. The original 1967-68 structure did not allow for the proper storage of collections or administrative growth. A number of studies and focus groups convened in the 1990's supported this need for an architectural, landscape, and interpretive theme makeover. A floor to ceiling and wall-to-wall re-design more in accordance with accepted museum standards began in the fall of 2003. One of the more striking changes is the front façade. Whereas the old "bunker" design was an imposing feature, the new front invites people to come for a closer look. The innovative military ribbon design by Purdy O'Gwynn Barnhart Architects, Inc., has won an award by the American Institute of Architects. Interpretive planning to better tell the story of the Commonwealth citizen soldier, sailor, airman, and Marine in the 20th and 21st centuries is currently underway.

The Pennsylvania Military Museum and 28th Division Shrine is located on Business 322 in Boalsburg; three miles east of State College. It is one of 26 historic sites and museums on the Pennsylvania Trail of History, administered by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC). For more information on this and other historic attractions, visit www.phmc.state.pa.us.

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