

Site History

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In the winter of 1967-68, a museum dedicated to the citizen-soldiers of the Commonwealth was 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 land owner and prominent citizen of the Centre Region, funded a privately raised mounted machine gun company on his land for service with the Pennsylvania National Guard prior to America's entry into World War One. This group eventually became Company A of the 107th Machine Gun Battalion, 28th Infantry Division, A.E.F. Shortly after the return of the division in 1919, at an officer's club reunion on 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 from the division 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 planned 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 also functioned as an active military cavalry post leased by Boal to the Commonwealth within the Department of Military Affairs throughout the twenties. Reunions of the Society A.E.F. were held each year with memorials being dedicated to units or individuals of the division who had served in the Great War.

By 1936 the needs of the U.S. Army and Pennsylvania National Guard dictated that the Boalsburg training camp was no longer viable. The troop was disbanded in May of that year. However, the Shrine continued to grow as the Society Officers Club facilities remained. 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 organizations organized on a national and statewide basis with local posts in every region.

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 surrounding 67 acres 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.

Institutional History

Museum circa 1980's

Construction of a military museum honoring the Commonwealth's "citizen-soldiers" began in November 1967. It officially opened on Sunday May 25, 1969 at a cost of \$252,695. An additional \$69,000 was used to construct the parking facilities, access roads, night illumination and landscaping. Fulltime staffing quotas included one professional, the administrator, and four non-Civil Service positions: groundskeeper, maintenance repairman and two custodial guides.

The interpretation and storyline closely followed the history of the Pennsylvania National Guard. A substantial exhibit included in this first interpretation 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 site existed more so as a visitor's center with minimal office space and no facilities for the adequate care and storage of historic artifacts. While the building was not designed to function as a true museum, historic artifacts were collected from the public as donations. Many collections accepted by the military museums' administrative staffs were removed to the State Museum of Pennsylvania for safekeeping. Curatorial staff from the State Museum performed site inventories in 1986 and 1989 in an attempt to reconcile the collections records.

In 1990, the immediate administration of the museum changed and the interpretive mission of the museum became inclusive of all Pennsylvanians who had served in the armed forces. Staffing patterns remained unchanged. In 1991, the Friends of the Pennsylvania Military Museum was established as an adjunct support group with a fiduciary Board of Directors. This support group provided the opportunity for the museum to raise money through donations independent of normal budgeting processes by the Bureau of Historic Sites and Museums. The reconciliation of collections and acceptance of donations resumed under the supervision of a curatorial assistant from Collections Management section of the PHMC who traveled to the site one day per week to work on the military collections.

In 1999, state funding was authorized to completely renovate the museum. It was generally accepted that 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 throughout the 1990's supported this need for an architectural, landscape, and interpretive theme makeover. The Philadelphia firm of Purdy O'Gwynn Barnhart Architects, Inc. designed a floor to ceiling and wall-to-wall re-design more in accordance with accepted museum standards.

The Museum in 2007

Construction on the building started in the Fall of 2003 and was completed in the Winter of 2005. Temporary exhibits interpreting the tactics and logistics of warfare opened the museum in July of 2005. Outdoor kiosks and signage interpreting the history of the site, museum and static displays, designed the previous year, were constructed at this time. By the end of the year, the museum would feature a new interior/exterior structure design, new interior/exterior exhibits, re-designed landscape terrain, new pedestrian bridge and renovated access roadway/walking paths offering a better physical connection from the parking lot to the museum and Shrine. New educational interpretive tools such as a professionally mastered DVD and guidebook continue to offer a vision of the museum as interpreting the 20th century history of all Commonwealth citizens who had served in the armed forces. A \$4.2 million Capital Project for permanent exhibits is currently awaiting release.

In 1995 funding was released to completely renovate the Shrine area around the World War One Officers Memory Wall. A second memorial wall listing all known division casualties in World War Two was planned into the landscaped terrain of the existing memorial wall. In January 1997, sixty years after the first monuments were laid out on the grounds, the major components of the 28th Infantry Division Shrine were renovated. More than \$800,000 was allotted to rebuild the Shrine proper and add a memory wall with the division's World War Two casualties. The professional staff

expanded as well. A Civil Service position of museum educator was filled in March of that year. This position was expanded to include collections management duties as a curator under the supervision of the Regional Curator. The addition of the World War Two wall firmly placed the interpretive emphasis of the Shrine Complex within the 20th century.