



COUNCIL ON AMERICA'S MILITARY PAST - U.S.A.

PRESERVING, INTERPRETING AND SHARING OUR MILITARY HERITAGE

presents

The Persistent Pandemic Preservationist August, 2020

Editor's Note:

Welcome! This is Volume 1, Number 1 of a monthly newsletter featuring historic sites across the country responding to the challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic. The intent is to stay in touch with old and new members, and share information that is interesting and useful, in the hope that we will create a community of practice among those preserving the nation's military past. Each issue will focus on one or more sites. The original Persistent Preservationist was a newsletter produced by CAMP member Col. Hal Youmans, USA (Ret) that was a more general roundup of news. We salute Col. Youmans for taking the first step!

This issue features Fort Ontario, a New York State Historic Site in Oswego, New York, courtesy of the fort's Historic Site Manager. The fourth and current fort was built during the Patriot War of 1837-8 on the ruins of three earlier fortifications dating to the French and Indian War, Revolutionary War, and War of 1812. It was occupied by the U.S. Army through World War II and, from 1944 to 1946, was the only refugee camp in the United States for mostly Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Closed at the start of the pandemic, the fort recently reopened with some changes in its routine. This is the story of those changes. — Nick Reynolds, Editor.

Fort Ontario, Miasmas, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Paul A. Lear

Fort Ontario State Historic Site in Oswego, NY is no stranger to pandemics. During the Great War it served as U.S.A. General Hospital No.5. Because it received infected recruits from army camps near eastern seaports where the virus arrived on ships returning from Europe, it was one of the first military posts in the country impacted by the influenza pandemic in 1918. No fort staff or volunteers have contracted COVID-19 during the present pandemic.

Classified as essential after the quarantine began on March 16, 2020, three managers were allowed to work on site following social distancing rules. Consequently, basic site maintenance, COVID-19 sanitizing, correspondence, cataloging, and research continued while the site was closed to the public. All events and gatherings, including spring school groups, were cancelled. Because of its history, sense of permanence, and scenic location, not to mention being the site of many first dates, the fort is a popular wedding destination. Unfortunately, there are a few unhappy brides and bridegrooms this year.

As Friends of Fort Ontario membership was bound to be affected by closure, Americorps staffer Corey King, working from home, focused on boosting membership and publishing extra issues of the newsletter. During quarantine, families were looking for outdoor activities so we developed a self-guided walking tour of the post during WWI using photographs. The tour is downloaded on phones. It enables patrons to stand in the footsteps of the 1917-1919 photographer and observe changes in buildings and landscapes. We also improved and increased our social media presence by taking artifact images and descriptions from our exhibits and put them on the Friends facebook page. Still, cancellation of a large community festival resulted in a one-third reduction in membership.

As required by NYS Parks Administration, a detailed plan for opening the fort to the public was submitted for review and accepted. Under the plan, patrons are required to wear masks in buildings and observe social distancing rules. There is one-way only traffic through the exhibits and buildings. Due to confined hallways and stairs there is no admittance to the second and third stories of the officers quarters. Public hours have been reduced from seven to five days a week to allow for deep cleaning and sanitizing on Monday-Tuesday. Although the two artillery casemates

are open, access to the rifle-galleries with narrow stairways is limited to days with low public attendance to ensure social distancing. Temporary interpretive panels replaced laminated self-guided tour binders, allowing the tour to go paperless. The Friends Museum Shop is not open, nor is it anticipated it will open soon. This represents a significant loss of revenue which will likely be reflected in programming next year.

On July 18, 2020 Fort Ontario opened. The last seasonal staffer returned, a new employee was hired, and our cadre of young uniformed volunteers began reporting for duty. Wearing masks, they are taking their stations at the gate, barracks, company office, and guardhouse. Volunteer Dave Maclean (shown below in straw hat with masked volunteers) produced Atomizers to sanitize surfaces in furnished rooms and Oilers for hand sanitizer based on late 1860s designs. Although noting that masks were only used for dust until the early 1900s, Maclean prepared an interpretive scenario for historical interpreters to use and possibly explain their masks based on the centuries' old belief that diseases were caused by Miasmas, or bad smells.

The fort has reopened quietly, without press coverage, in part to observe how families and individuals reacted to mandatory mask wearing and generally determining if our COVID measures work. So far there has been complete public cooperation with mask use, and, we are making adjustments to signage and the tour route as needed. Staff have noted an even higher than usual level of respect for the facility, staff, and volunteers. I speculate that this is partly due to the absence of special events and the sometimes unrealistic expectations that come with them, and the fort's being seen and experienced for what it is, for why it has been valued and preserved.

