

FORT SAULSBURY - SUSSEX COUNTY'S UNIQUE MEMORIAL

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1. Where Is Fort Saulsbury?

Ft. Saulsbury stands today as Sussex County's unique monument to our four great wars!

However, you will search in vain to find it on maps of the State of Delaware or even Sussex County.

It stands, shrouded in the memories of those still living among the thousands of men who served or were housed there. Located in the very northeast corner of Sussex County six miles east of Milford, it stands on the south side of Route 36 west of the drawbridge over the Cedar Creek Canal, adjoining the Town of Slaughter Beach.

Today it is the home of Mr. and Mrs. Gerald L. Kendzierski and their three children. When Mrs. Kendzierski, several years ago, took their youngest child to register in a Milford School and said they lived in Ft. Saulsbury, the teacher asked why they were coming all the way from Maryland to go to school in Milford!

It is not Salisbury but Saulsbury!

The area includes 161 acres, about one-third marsh, bought by the Kiendzierski family at government auction in 1948, after the Fort was declared surplus.

In its boundaries are two, thousand-foot-long man-made mounds or batteries, the heart of a remarkable U.S. Coastal Fort which was manned continuously from 1917 to the end of World War II.

At first it was a sub-post of Ft. DuPont. Early in 1941 the men of the 261st Coast Artillery Battery B, which had been activated in Georgetown in 1936 and federalized

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January 27, 1941, came to Ft. Saulsbury, making it look more like a fort. In 1942 the headquarters for the coast defenses of Delaware were transferred to Ft. Miles at Lewes.

Emanuel R. Lewis, Librarian of the U.S. House of Representatives, in his book "Seacoast Fortifications of the United States," describes Ft. Saulsbury as a classic example of the East Coast fort of the period and worthy of preservation. He wrote, "The only good surviving specimens within the continental limits are two 12-inch gun batteries near Slaughter Beach, Delaware."

2. Building Fort Saulsbury for World War I

In June 1917, after more than a year of study by various agencies within the War Department, the 161 acres were purchased from two neighboring farmers, David L. Shockley and Mark H. Shockley. The Fort's mission was coastal and Bay defense ~~against~~ against potential attack from the sea. Its four great guns, capable of twenty miles range, were designed to cover the Bay entrance and deep channel from the entrance to the anchorage by enemy surface and underwater vessels.

In World War I intelligence, largely British, had it that the Germans planned an attack up Delaware Bay to destroy the industrial Wilmington and Philadelphia area. With the coming of World War II this became a real threat and the larger installations of surface guns, including two from Ft. Saulsbury, were established at Cape May and Cape Henlopen.

When completed at the end of World War I, Ft. Saulsbury included two batteries or casemates, each with two 12-inch gun emplacements. These huge bunkers were constructed of steel reinforced concrete, fourteen feet thick, with six feet of earth on top for camouflage. On the top were concrete tren-

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ches, connecting observation posts at the end of each.

This monumental task of construction in 1917-18 defies imagination. How to deliver the thousands of tons of steel, concrete, rock, soil and building supplies to the isolated site! A dirt road, often virtually impassible in winter and spring, was the only way to the nearest railroad in Milford.

At first, studies were made about delivering these by water. But, the Mispillion River and Cedar Creek Canal, with a mean depth of less than five feet, could accommodate very small barges and boats. Also, there was a lack of labor locally. Where would imported laborers live and eat? Finally, a narrow ^{Gauge} gauge railroad, following the north side of today's Route 36, was built from Milford.

The railroad had two small steam engines and a string of small cars. A bridge for the railroad crossed the Cedar Creek Canal to the Beach hauling sand for the cement. Raymond Masten as a boy lived on South Washington Street in Milford, near where this spur connected with the mainline of the railroad. He remembers Mac McClarey, his neighbor, one of the engineers on this line. The other ^{ENGINEER} was Rollie Walls. In addition to the railroad, the contractor had ten trucks to haul the hundreds of loads of stone. The railroad trains and the trucks, passing just a few feet from the front of the Cedar ^{NECK} ~~Creek~~ School, caused so much interest among the boys and girls that ^{THE TEACHER} ~~they~~ painted the windows, according to Granville Shockley. ^{BUT,} Every boy had a penknife which ^{WAS} ~~were~~ used to make peepholes to enjoy the unusual ^A traffic.

Inside the batteries were emergency living quarters including showers, latrines, fireplaces, a kitchen, water and sewage, as well as working areas and storage rooms for the

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975-pound four-foot-long projectiles and the powder for firing. It took 275 pounds of powder to fire each projectile. Heavy steel doors sealed off the various areas of the casemates.

~~There was also a sophisticated, for that period, plotting room for range data, connected by lead cables under the Bay to towers at Bigstone Beach, Fowlers Beach and near the Mispillion Lighthouse. Only the tower at Bigstone Beach remains today.~~

The four guns sat on concrete pads at each end of the two batteries. They were ground level on Barbette carriages and could turn 360 degrees on brass circles for aiming. The men kept the brass so highly polished they could shave in its reflection.

The guns were of twelve inch bore and forty feet long. Since the tiny railroad from Milford could not bear their weight, when they arrived for installation they were brought down the Mispillion River and to the site by barge, said to have been a major operation.

The Fort was and is today entirely circled by a high dirt mound, making the guns and buildings invisible from the Bay and surrounding land.

3. The Naming of Fort Saulsbury

The Saulsbury name is prominent in Delaware history, Willard Sr., for whom the Fort was named, was a United States Senator from Delaware from 1859 through 1871. A southern sympathizer in the Civil War, Harold B. Hancock describes him as "Lincoln's most bitter foe in the Senate."

Eli, his brother, followed in the Senate serving until 1889. A brother, Gove, was Governor of Delaware from 1865 through 1871. His son, Willard S., was in the United States Senate

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from 1913 until 1919, during the time Ft. Saulsbury was built.

"Delaware's Role in World War II", published by the Public Archives Commission in 1955, describes the naming of the Fort for Willard Sr., who also had served as Attorney General of Delaware from 1850 to 1855.

In this account we find that the War Department's proposal in 1916 for a fort on the Bay was going to be very costly, almost a million dollars. The Senator's support was critical. Finally, he is said to have offered this in exchange for naming the proposed installation for his father and the deal was made.

4. Life at the Fort Between the Wars.

Following World War I, the Fort manned by a small detachment of six to eight men under the command of a sergeant, was the home of well-known Milford area families. The first commander was Staff Sergeant Dorphin C. Wigley who lived there with his wife and children. Mrs. Wigley died in 1988, having made her home on Slaughter Beach in the latter years.

Wigley's first assistant for many years was Sergeant Robert I. Hayes, who later became the commanding officer. His widow, Serena, who died in 1989, would recount life at the Fort with her three sons, ^{DURING} ~~their~~ fifteen years there.

The Wigley and Hayes families lived in government houses across the road from the Fort, an area now known as Bald Eagle Farm. The dirt road into Milford was often impassible during the winter and spring. Mrs. Hayes regularly would ride one of the mules used at the Fort into Milford for groceries and medicines.

Another commander was Sergeant Major Robert Fields. His son, Sergeant Major Robert H. Fields, now living near Bowers Beach,

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remembers growing up as an Army brat at the Fort and being interested in the big guns. He tells how the grounds were kept like a park and doing his homework as a schoolboy by the two-mantle Coleman lanterns since there was only electricity inside the batteries provided by an electric generator. The extensive gardens in the Fort were plowed by mules and all they wanted of rabbits, quail and pheasants were in the marshes and fields.

The great guns, never fired in anger, were kept in prime condition. From time to time they were fired at large orange targets, probably fifty-five gallon drums, anchored in the Bay.

Many are the stories of hearing these go off after the soldiers would go up and down the Beach warning residents to open their doors and windows to avoid the concussions. The final announcement was sounding a huge siren cranked by the soldiers.

Claims for cracked windows following the firings came from as far as Lewes. Farmers as distant as Greenwood reported turkey eggs cracked, although it is said no claims were ever proved or paid. It is commonly reported that the men of Ft. Saulsbury maintained the top accuracy record on the East Coast for such firings.

5. Ft. Saulsbury and World War II

In 1939, with the approach of World War II, Ft. Saulsbury was quickly expanded. A \$60,000 contract was let for eight new wooden buildings. Included were a mess hall, recreation hall, storehouse, infirmary, administration building and three two-story barracks, two for the enlisted men and one for officers. ~~On November 25, 1941, Governor Walter W. Bacon inspected the Fort and the then 200 officers and enlisted men, as preparations for World War II swept Delaware.~~

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During this period three huge steel frame towers were erected. These stood at Bigstone Beach to the north, Fowlers Beach to the south, and just south of the Mispillion Lighthouse. From these manned towers information on every vessel entering the Bay was sent to the plotting room located just inside the north entrance of Battery Hall.

William L. Ryan, now living in Millsboro, was the Sergeant in charge of what was for that time a quite sophisticated operation. This information came via connecting lead cables under the Bay. ^{Only} The Bigstone Beach tower is ~~still~~ ^{WITH ITS} standing ~~and the~~ cable into the Bay ^{is} ~~is~~ visible.

Sightings also came into the plotting room from the top of the bunker to judge the accuracy of the firing of the guns, which word was given the gun crews for their settings.

The tower on Fowlers Beach was the last to be erected. V. George Carey tells that on October 7, 1941 his father, Vinal H. Carey, sold .52 acres of his property to the Government for \$75. for this purpose. Incidentally, after the war, on December 1, 1947, the Government sold the land back to Carey, minus the steel tower, but then the price was \$290.!

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James F. Saulsbury, not related to the political Saulsbury's and now living on Canterbury Road, Milford, was the Sergeant in command of the north gun crew on Battery Hall. He has provided a roster of thirty-six of the men stationed at the Fort at this time who had completed the Record Rifle Practice Course "C" with their qualifying scores. This had been saved by the late William K. Kenton and follows:

Taylor, William R., Private
Townsend, John G., Private
Schrimer, Charles F., Sergeant
Saulsbury, James F., Corporal
West, Joseph F., Corporal
O'dell, Robert G., Corporal
Ryan, William L., Sergeant
Gray, James E., Pvt. 1 cl.
Adkins, Oliver, Private
Davis, Glenn V., Private
Ryan, Patrick F., Sergeant
Kenton, William K., Private
Moore, George A., Corporal
Parsons, Edward, Pvt. 1 cl.
Bradley, Alton B., Sergeant
Hall, Charles L., Corporal
Kiamio, Edward, Corporal
Wharton, Mervin L., Corporal
Dorman, John A., Private
Moran, Gordon H., Sergeant
Niemeier, Frederick W., Corporal
Coulbourne, Alonzo O., Private
Jerman, Harold E., Pvt. 1 cl.
Lindale, Augustus H., Private
Smith, Raymond O., Private
Fisher, David R., Pvt. 1 cl.
Ellis, Gordon E., Sergeant
Beidman, Samuel S., Pvt. 1 cl.
McCaslin, Charles O., Pvt. 1 cl.
Mitchell, Charles E., Private
Stayton, Everett L., Private
Legg, Reynolds W. Jr., Private
Zeigler, George J., Sergeant
Short, Everett A., Private
Carmean, Carlton D., Private
Hall, Chester L., Pvt. 1 cl.

Charles J. Rocco of Milford was the Sergeant on the south gun crew on Battery Hall. Describing the firing of his gun, sometimes observed by dignitaries from Fort DuPont, he notes "We had to load, turn around, open our mouths and fire!" The

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concussion for men at the gun controls was very great.

Pearl Harbor Sunday, less than two weeks after the Governor's inspection, found the Fort alive. Saulsbury tells of the excitement when word of the Japanese attack came and the emotional reaction of the late Lt. William Craig, just out of OCS at the University of Delaware. Craig was sure Ft. Saulsbury would be next!

Saulsbury and several others of Battery B were chosen early in 1942 to install the gun emplacements at Cape May and then to duplicate the Ft. Saulsbury batteries in Greenland and later in France. Their Ft. Saulsbury experience was tops.

Air power and the fear of German dirigible attacks on the East Coast early in 1942 made Ft. Saulsbury obsolete since the guns could not be hidden from the air. Thus, the guns were dismantled, two going to Ft. Miles at Cape Henlopen, which now became the Headquarters of the Coast Defenses for Delaware Bay. One gun went to a fort in Virginia and the record of the fourth has been lost.

That this fear of air strikes was real at this time is attested by an event on the farm of V. George Carey's father, located just south of Slaughter Beach. The tower at Fowlers Beach had been built on his property.

George Carey was just a boy when a delegation of high military brass appeared at the farm asking for his father. For a long period his father was questioned about seeming to help the Germans. Their problem was the planting of a field on the Carey farm in the form of a triangle with the corners pointing west to Washington, south to Ft. Miles and north to Ft. Saulsbury. The long-time innocent coincidence of the shape of the field had raised the possibility that it was to guide the enemy aircraft to these critical locations!

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6. Ft. Saulsbury and Prisoners of War

Removal of the guns in 1942 did not finish the World War II mission of the Fort. It was assigned a task which old-timers in Sussex County remember well when it became a Prisoner-of-War Camp for thousands of German and a lesser number of Italian prisoners.

Some of these men became the only persons to actually have lived within the batteries, where security was no problem. They left the walls covered with beautiful paintings, dim remains of which are visible still. Many Milford area girls were guests at social affairs for the guard company and prisoners at the Fort during this time. Prisoners were a familiar sight on Milford streets when they were given passes to come into town.

Many prisoners worked in area canneries, poultry processing, orchards and in harvesting field crops. Stories abound from area families who were impressed by their hard work and honesty. Employers could not pay the prisoners, reimbursing the Federal Government for their work, but there were many occasions when giving cigarettes and other friendly gestures occurred.

Granville Skockley, whose father's farm was nearby, was impressed that the prisoners had no Army guard there and one of their own men was "boss." Noon meals were brought to them in the fields from the Fort.

Stories continue to surface that some of these men returned to this area after the war, having been well-treated and being in love with Sussex County. The writer has sought in vain to verify this.

Lt. Col. John J. Harris, who was in charge of the Delaware Prisoner-of-War Unit, reported that this program brought the Federal Government \$2,400,000 from the work of these men in Delaware.

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On January 11, 1946 Ft. Saulsbury was deactivated with the departure of the last of the POW's from Delaware. It had been an active Army Fort for almost thirty years. The Federal Government placed the land and buildings in the surplus category on March 13, 1946. In March 1948 the Kendzierski family purchased it all at a Federal Government auction for \$12,700.

For a time the Liebowitz Pickle Co. rented the area within the bunkers for pickle processing and storage. Later it became a center for collecting and selling old metal. The bunkers are now unused with Hall Battery having been cleaned out and easily available for inspection and the grounds beautifully restored and kept by the Kendzierskis. Visitation may be made only upon arrangement with the family.

7. Fort Saulsbury as a Unique Memorial

In large letters embossed over the entrance of the north bunker is the word "Hall" and over the south bunker the word "Haslet." Their naming is significant.

"Delaware, a Guide to the First State" tells that these were named in honor of Sussex County's two most famous Revolutionary War heroes - Col. David Hall and Col. John Haslet. Col. Hall of Lewes was commander of the famous Delaware Line in the Continental Army.

Col. Haslet of Milford recruited 800 Revolutionary War volunteers, mustered into the State's service in Sussex County, and was chosen their colonel. He was a close friend of Casear Rodney, his counter-part in Kent County, who correspond^{ED}~~ing~~ daily with Hall from the meetings of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia.

When the enlistment of his Delaware Regiment ran out late in 1776, Haslet remained with General Washington. Probably crossing the

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the Delaware on Christmas Eve 1776 with Washington, he took prominent part in the attack on Trenton and in the Battle of Princeton. ^{IN THE LATTER} There a bullet struck him in the head and killed him instantly on January 3, 1777.

Haslet was ordained a Presbyterian minister by Derry Presbytery in Ireland and also trained in medicine at the University of Glasgow in Scotland. The records of Lewes Presbytery show its holding meetings in his home which was near the present Milford Airport. His son, Joseph, was Governor of Delaware 1811-1814 and lived in the Lincoln area near Cedar Creek.

In 1941, the distinguished Delaware historian Christopher Ward wrote, "Who has heard of John Haslet?" Odd today that Haslet's only monument in Sussex County is the huge south bunker at Ft. Saulsbury, for who has heard of Ft. Saulsbury as well?

Here, just outside of Milford, the names of the two bunkers, the name of the Fort, the building of the Fort in World War I, and its expansion and use in World War II, combine to make Ft. Saulsbury the unique memorial to Sussex County's participation in the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and the two World Wars.