

Perry Point Veterans Museum to open Veterans Day

By DARA MCBRIDE
Special to the Whig

PERRY POINT — As an intern charged with chronicling Perry Point VA Medical Center's past, David Edwards appreciated the area's history, but he didn't expect that history would one day be on display in a three-story museum.

"I never would have guessed that we would be doing this," said Edwards, now chief of public and community relations for the VA Maryland Health Care System.

During his intern days, Edwards was in awe of the work Perry Point employees and local volunteers had put into saving and archiving information. Others were too. In 2006, the Perry Point Veterans Museum opened, and for a time Perry Point's history was on display in a small museum in one of the houses in The Village, a residential community on the Perry Point campus.

Now, however, the history of Perry Point — from the time of the Susquehannock people and first settlers, to the Atlas Powder Company in World War I and, finally, the introduction of VA system as we know it today after World War II — will be on display at the historic Grist Mill on the campus. A ribbon cutting on Nov. 9, will precede the official opening to the public on Veterans Day.

Built around 1750, the Grist Mill is one of the oldest known structures in the entire VA system, and visitors to the new museum will travel through history as they walk each floor of the mill. Establishing this larger museum has brought out more stories, and a few artifacts, from the community

and Perry Point staff. One Baltimore County woman got in touch with Perry Point officials to share two blankets she inherited from a relative, both used at Perry Point and featuring the VA seal from the 1930s, Edwards said.

"This isn't a health care project, so it's not something that you're funded to do, but we got a lot of goodwill support," Edwards said.

Perry Point once hosted a thriving town of more than 5,000 residents, built around the Atlas Powder Company ammunition plant, which produced ammonium nitrate for the ammunition used in World War I. The introduction of the VA further changed the area — as well as Cecil and Harford counties.

"I don't think a lot of the community really has a true appreciation of Perry Point," said Edwards, whose own father, a WWII veteran, received care at Perry Point when the VA medical center in Richmond, Va., was too full to take him. "They may have had an uncle, a grandfather that may have gotten some of their care there, or was there for a little bit, but I don't think they realize how impactful Perry Point has been to the local area."

Before working as Perry Point's community outreach coordinator, Margaret Hornberger, now retired, was a girl growing up in the Perry Point village. She worked with Perry Point librarians on the museum that opened in 2006, and found herself revisiting her own memories of attending community carnivals while going through old photos. Some negatives, she recalled, had been saved in coffee cans.

"Thankfully, our former photographers had saved

all that, because that's really what helped us establish the museum, the work of all those people before us," Hornberger said, adding that local Susan Stinnett and her "Pictorial History of Perry" were great aids in the process.

Now in Hornberger's old role is Ming Vincenti, who called working on the museum "a tremendous learning experience." For guidance, she looked to the nearby Railway Museum and Rodgers Tavern, both in Perryville, for inspiration in telling local history. Memorable finds for Vincenti include arrowheads, research on George Washington's visits to the area, copies of *old Perry Point newsletters* written by patients, and military clothing with names of local service members still attached.

Perry Point officials expect the museum to be open Thursdays, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., as well as the first and third Saturdays of the month, and by appointment. Veterans, locals and school groups are encouraged to come in and Vincenti hopes to eventually connect with Perryville's two museums to create a loop for tourists.

"It can appeal to anyone," Vincenti said. "It can appeal to someone who is a veteran themselves, who maybe is getting care here, and it's interesting for them to see that the campus where they're receiving care has so much history that goes back hundred of years."





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The Perry Point Veterans Museum is located in the historic Grist Mill, which was meticulously preserved for this project, on the Susquehanna River banks of the property.



Patients at the Perry Point VA Medical Center once built toys for the facility's children as a work therapy — families lived there for years — and the museum has retained many examples of their work.

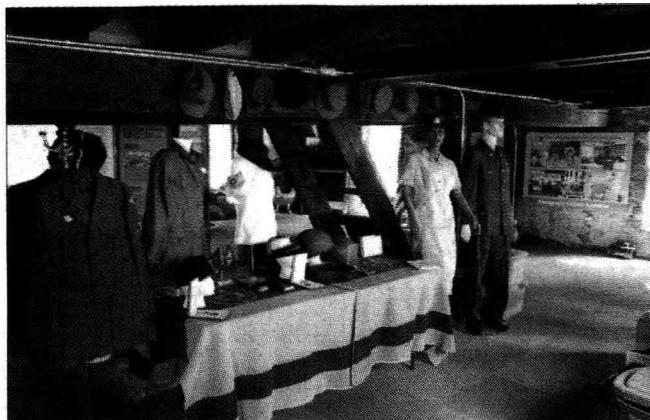
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The bottom floor of the Perry Point Veterans Museum is dedicated to the property's history through the Civil War.



The middle floor of the Perry Point Veterans Museum is dedicated to the property's history during the World War I era.



The top floor of the Perry Point Veterans Museum is dedicated to the property's use as a VA facility after World War I, with numerous uniforms through the years on display.

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