

U.S. war history, told by the locals who fought them



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Ernest Kaufman was freed from a Nazi concentration camp in 1938, came to America, signed up to fight after Pearl Harbor was bombed and, speaking fluent German, saved the town of Einbach and its 32,000 citizens from destruction and death by Allied Forces in World War II by talking the commander of the occupying German forces to surrender.

After World War II, Kaufman returned home, bought a poultry farm in Burlington, and lived quietly, dying at the age of 100 in 2020. His brief obit posted by the Philadelphia Inquirer stated that he was the husband of the late Mina, and was survived by his daughter, Renee.

"Maybe what makes the Greatest Generation great is they tended toward modesty," said Roy Plummer, a Vietnam-era vet.

But how do you gather, appropriately preserve and retell the experiences of locals who fought in the nation's wars? Once they're gone, so are the vivid first-person accounts of what they saw, heard and thought.

"That's where the museum comes in," said Plummer, the director of the Armed Forces Heritage Museum of Burlington.

A dozen years ago, as the World War II generation was quickly fading, Plummer's organization saw a need to preserve the stories of people like Ernest Kaufman.

"It was suggested by a colonel at the Joint Base," Plummer said.

Gather the war stories that mostly, but not exclusively, of Burlington County residents, and preserve them for posterity in written words, photographs and video.

"These guys weren't gonna be around forever," Plummer said. "We needed their stories. There are a lot of them. I mean, do you know that about 100 New Jerseyans are Medal of Honor winners?"

I didn't. But I imagined each is a life story worthy of a book, or at least a local opinion column.

After the colonel's suggestion, space was set aside for a museum at the Joint Base, but the deal fell through.

Meanwhile, interviews were conducted and professionally photographed and edited. They were posted to the Armed Forces Heritage Museum's web site, a museum that existed solely in cyberspace.

When Plummer became exec director three years ago, he thought the museum needed a physical presence, not just bits of data floating online.

"Putting things online is fine, but it seems kind of passive," he said.

They acquired a rolling display.

"Really, it's a portable stage that folds out, that we take from place to place," Plummer said.

It was popular.

"Even during COVID, we did 20 events with that thing," he said.

There was a bigger need. Diaries, letters, uniforms, memoirs and other rare and precious and personal wartime artifacts that local families had stowed away in trunks and closets, needed to be gathered and preserved, or they could be misplaced, forgotten or lost forever.

He went to the campus of the Burlington County Historical Society in Burlington City.

"I figured they'd be able to help us find something for our needs," he said. "I said, 'Can you give us some space over here to house these things, and do presentations?'"

He was astonished by the response.

"They said, 'We can do better than giving you a space here. We can get you a whole house.'"

The Lawrence House at 459 High Street, in fact, it's the birthplace of U.S. Naval Capt. James Lawrence



Colin Zimmerman, right, with Roy Plummer, stand in the front room of the Lawrence House on High Street in Burlington City. Zimmerman is a direct descendant of U.S. Naval Capt. James Lawrence, whose portrait is behind them. The Lawrence House is the new center for the Armed Forces Heritage Museum, chronicling the experiences of Burlington Countians in the nation's wars. "I couldn't think of a better place for a museum," Zimmerman said. PHOTOS BY JD MULLANE/STAFF PHOTOJOURNALIST



Ernest Kaufman's memoirs, part of the display still under construction at the Lawrence House in Burlington City, home of the Armed Forces Heritage Museum. The museum aims to chronicle and honor the war experiences of locals in Burlington County and the surrounding region.

who, mortally wounded by the British during the War of 1812, delivered his final order, "Don't give up the ship."

The Lawrence House is owned by the state of New Jersey, but has been largely unused for at least a decade.

"Somehow the state came into possession of this place," said Plummer, standing in the house's sun washed front room, "but they really have no use for it. So they lease it to the Historical Society for a dollar a year.

"It fits us," Plummer said. "James Lawrence, from a military family. A naval war hero. New Jersey."

The museum will have its grand public opening on June 12, a Sunday. Plans are ambitious. Plummer intends an "immersive experience" to give visitors a sense of what local people went through, like the late Howard Brooks of Mount Laurel.

Brooks was a Navy electrician who in 1942 had his ship, the USS Houston, sunk by the Japanese. After two days in open sea, he drifted to an island, but was

captured as a POW, and forced to build the Burma Railway.

"You've heard of the Bridge on the River Kwai? Howard Brooks was the slave labor who built it," Plummer said.

Monitors will screen interviews of Brooks and others.

"Just local, everyday people in our area and their experiences in war, and how their lives changed having served our country with distinction," Plummer said.

Their uniforms will be displayed. There will be dioramas, too.

All wars will be highlighted, including the Revolution. The focus will be on what happened in Burlington between 1776-78. Colin Zimmerman, a descendant of Capt. Lawrence, whose family has lived in Burlington City since pre-Revolution, has a special interest in gleaning stories of how local people fought during the War of Independence.

"We had no big battles here, no Monmouth. The biggest was probably Crosswicks, with 800 Americans against 2,000 of the enemy," he said. (The Quaker Meetinghouse at Crosswicks still has an enemy cannon ball lodged in its side from that battle).

There will be stories of Burlington County during the Civil War, perhaps including the story of how Ulysses S. Grant, who lived on Wood Street in Burlington City, challenged President-elect Abraham Lincoln to arm wrestle in a local saloon. (Lincoln won, but it's wise to let your future boss win).

Plummer looked around the museum's new digs.

"This place needs a lot of work. It still doesn't have heat. You're here on a good day. The boiler busted maybe three years ago," he said.

"I couldn't think of a better place for a museum," said Zimmerman, standing near a portrait of Capt. Lawrence. "I mean, this place could have become a yoga studio or something. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but still."

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