

Fort Miles Museum and Historical Area Lewes, Delaware

By Terrance McGovern, Board Member, Fort Miles Historical Association

Delaware Bay has long been strategically important to the United States for its access to the Delaware River. Given the importance of the military-industrial complex along the banks of the river, including the large Philadelphia Naval Shipyard, it has been defended and fought over since colonial times. In the years leading up to World War II, the river's defenses were either obsolete or lacking. Starting in the 1930s the U.S. Army and Navy developed plans for new defenses at the entrance to Delaware Bay centered on the construction of Fort Miles, which primarily took place from 1941 to 1944. Fort Miles boasted several coast artillery batteries to defend the Delaware coast and access to the Delaware River. As World War

II ended and the Delaware Bay was no longer threatened by German warships, the Army largely abandoned Fort Miles in 1946. Subsequently, however, the Navy resumed operations at Fort Miles during the Cold War era. Today, Fort Miles is known as Cape Henlopen State Park, which has over a million visitors each year.

Delaware State Parks, a division of the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control, operates and maintains most of the remaining Fort Miles buildings at Cape Henlopen State Park. In 2004, the combined efforts of Delaware State Parks and the Fort Miles Historical Association led to the creation of the Fort Miles Museum within the former Battery 519 (two casemated 12-inch guns). It features a variety of exhibits, including a 12-inch gun remounted in one of the gun casemates, and an outdoor Historic Area with large artifacts related to the wartime history of Fort Miles and the Delaware Bay. In 2021, a new nonprofit corporation, Fort Miles Museum and Historical Area, Inc. d/b/a Fort Miles Museum, was formed to expand and enhance the Museum's buildings and exhibits.

Lying amidst rolling sand dunes on a high point overlooking the Atlantic Ocean is the Fort Miles Historic Area, home of the Fort Miles Museum. The central features of the museum include




Battery 519, six barracks buildings, a fire control tower, an orientation building, and the Fort Miles Artillery Park. The museum tells the story of Fort Miles, a key piece of our nation's coastal defense from World War II through the early 1980s.

Museum exhibits and artifacts within Battery 519, a 15,000-square-foot fortified underground bunker, bring to life Delaware's wartime stories of submarine encounters and surrenders, daring actions of civilian pilots, and hometown heroes and their wartime sacrifices. Several of the former shell and powder rooms are used to demonstrate the functioning of the 12-inch coast artillery battery, from warship spotting and targeting to the firing of the battery's guns. The Museum's collection of armaments provides visitors a unique opportunity to experience firsthand how state-of-the-art technology from an earlier day was used to defend the homeland.

The *Oil Still Bleeds* exhibit is a tribute to Delaware's servicemen who were at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. This exhibit is designed around a 650-pound relic from the superstructure of the battleship USS *Arizona*, which was sunk during the Japanese attack and still "bleeds" oil to the surface at Pearl Harbor. The exhibit features two touchscreen monitors with information about the attack, Delawareans who were at Pearl Harbor during the attack, and the sinking of the *Arizona*.

Outside the main entrance to the museum is a 16-inch gun barrel from the forward turret of the battleship USS *Missouri*, under which the Japanese delegation formally surrendered to the Allies in Tokyo Bay on 2 September 1945. The barrel is mounted on a test-stand girder with its slide, yoke, and breach intact. The *Missouri* gun barrel and the *Oil Still Bleeds* exhibit are two bookends that signify the United States entry into World War II and the Japanese surrender to end the war.

Fort Miles provides a unique experience for history enthusiasts, veterans, educators, families, and visitors interested in exploring Delaware's stories, heroes, and role in World War II. Take a guided tour, enjoy an interpretive program, visit the art gallery, witness artillery demonstrations and reenactments, take in a special event, and celebrate the "Greatest Generation." 



Making a Visit

Cape Henlopen State Park is located at 15099 Cape Henlopen Drive, Lewes, Delaware. The Fort Miles Museum and Historical Area is in Cape Henlopen State Park, due east of the Cape May-Lewes Ferry Terminal and the city of Lewes. The grounds of the Museum are open 0800 to sunset daily. The Museum is open 1 January to Memorial Day, Fridays and Saturday, 1000-1600; Memorial Day to Labor Day, Tuesday-Saturday, 1000-1600 and Sundays, 1000-1430; and Labor Day to 31 October, Wednesday-Saturday, 1000-1600. These dates can vary month-to-month, so visitors are encouraged to check one of the websites noted below for the most up-to-date hours of operation. Admission and parking are free, donations are gratefully accepted. Guided tours of Battery 519 are given at specified times when the Museum is open. Information regarding these tours, other programs and special events are also available on the websites. For more information, call (302) 644-5007 or visit www.destateparks.com, www.fortmilesha.org, and www.fortmilesmuseum.org.