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Norfolk History Museum

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The
NORFOLK
HISTORICAL
Society

Courier

The German Village at the Norfolk Navy Yard U.S. DECLARES WAR!

This headline greeted Virginian-Pilot subscribers from their doorsteps on the morning of 6 April 1917. Congress had passed a resolution declaring war on Germany, heralding the entry of the United States into what would in time be known as the First World War.

German warships were already in Hampton Roads, and had been for more than two years. In March and April 1915, German auxiliary cruisers *Prinze Eitel Friedrich* and *Kronprinz Wilhelm* steamed into the harbor, eluding British and French naval vessels patrolling for the enemy outside the three-mile limit. They pulled into Newport News, asking for coal, supplies and the time to undergo repairs. The *Wilhelm* was especially

desperate for rations for her men, many of whom had developed beriberi during eight months at sea without fresh fruits and vegetables.

Neither ship had been built to fight. Both entered the world as passenger liners on the North German Lloyd Line in the early 1900s. They were among the fleet of former civilian vessels that were armed and

converted into warships for the German Navy at the beginning of the war.

After finding sanctuary in Hampton Roads, the German officers weighed their options — to return to sea or to remain in Hampton Roads as internees. The enemy ships offshore and the illness of the *Wilhelm's* crew argued for the latter option. The Norfolk Chamber of Commerce weighed in on April 27, asking that the ships be interned at the Norfolk Navy Yard, citing the desirability "to the commercial . . . interests of this port." By the end of April the ships and their crew of some 600 men were at the Navy Yard, docked at a little-used section known as "Rotten Row," where scrap materials were discarded.

The German sailors enjoyed liberal leave and became familiar sights in the community, visiting with local families and attending social functions. This liberty came to a halt in October 1915 after a daring escape by six officers from the *Wilhelm*. The officers had been allowed to purchase the 60-foot yacht *Eclipse* from Norfolk architect Benjamin F. Mitchell for recreational sailing in local waters. They anchored the boat at the Norfolk Boat Club at the end of West Freemason Street and spent a month fitting it out with new sails, fresh paint and a more powerful engine. They enjoyed several day sails on the Elizabeth River until October 10, when they were given permission for an overnight outing. They sailed away, never to be heard from again. This followed on the heels of the September 29 departure of three officers from the *Eitel Friedrich*,



who had been given two weeks' leave to visit New York City and Niagara Falls, promising to return by mid October. They, too, had vanished.

Future leave privileges for the remaining crew members were curtailed

and the homesick sailors occupied their time building a little German town out of scrap materials on hand. They named their village *Eitel Wilhelm*, combining the names of the two ships. The farm animals and small zoo, vegetable garden, weekly newspaper and nearly 50 miniature buildings attracted thousands of visitors from the local community. Proceeds from the 10¢ entry fee and sale of



baked goods, postcard views of the village and hand-crafted toys were sent to the German Red Cross.

In August 1916, Congress doubled its appropriation for new warships for the United States Navy, and officials at the

Navy Yard hurried to find space for the new shops and dry docks that would be needed for the additional work. The German Village had to come down. The ships were sent to Philadelphia in September, where they were converted to American troop ships after the U.S. entered the war. The internees would become prisoners of war and would spend the remainder of the war in POW camps in Georgia.

Treasures from the Norfolk History Museum



Trade figures were a common way for 19th century merchants to advertise their merchandise in the day when some customers were still illiterate and there was a growing immigrant population new to the English language. The Norfolk History Museum has several trade figures on exhibit, including this jolly figure of "Punch," which stood outside Isaac Moritz' Main Street cigar store for many years. Who could resist the invitation of this part-clown, part-imp, who holds out a sampling of the wares for sale at Moritz & Company and points the way inside? Although the American Indian is most traditionally associated with the cigar store, other trade figures, including that of Punch, were also popular.

"Punch" Cigar Store Show Figure, ca. 1865

*American, perhaps made by William Demuth & Co., New York City
Painted wood*

*Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA, Gift from the City of Norfolk,
Norfolk Police Museum 2005.9*



The Norfolk History Museum is in need of volunteer greeters.

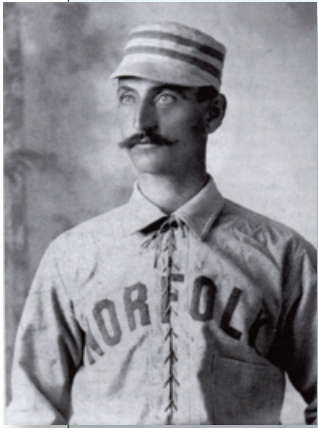
Volunteer hours are Wednesday through Sunday (especially Saturday and Sunday). No special skills are required, just a smile.
For more information, please contact Jeanne Bollendorf at 333-1086 or jbollendorf@chrysler.org.

Calendar of Events

September

Wednesday, September 12, 7:00 PM – Norfolk History Museum Program Series: "Baseball in Norfolk, Virginia"

Local authors Clay Champoe and Tom Garrett will present the first in a three-part series on the history of semi-professional baseball in Norfolk, tracing the sport from its early days to 1934. It will be an evening full of Fun Facts and Surprising Stories about America's favorite pastime and the Boys of Summer who played the game in Norfolk, many of them going on to the big leagues. Location: Kaufman Theatre, Chrysler Museum. Free and open to the public. Book signing and light refreshments.



Monday, September 17, 11:30 AM – Hampton Roads Naval Museum Speakers Luncheon Series: "Theodore Roosevelt: Selling Sea Power"

An American Fleet Navy is an idea we take for granted now. But at the turn of the century, it took the political skill of a U.S. President to sell this idea to the American people. Dr. Lori Bogle will discuss how Theodore Roosevelt used the 1907 Jamestown Exposition and the Great White Fleet to market a Fleet Navy to America. Location: Third floor of Nauticus. Lecture and luncheon: \$15 per person. After the luncheon, guests are invited to tour the new Steel Navy exhibit. **Reservations required, call 322-3109.**

Sponsored courtesy of Lockheed Martin

October

Wednesday, October 10, 7:00 PM – Norfolk History Museum Program Series "Prelude to Freedom: The Contraband Slave Story"

Composer Gerri Hollins will present selections from her original folk opera, first performed at Thomas Nelson Community College in 2005. The opera is based on the thousands of slaves who sought and found freedom at Fort Monroe, before the Emancipation Proclamation. Ms. Hollins will perform several of the various roles, accompanied by piano. Location: Kaufman Theatre, Chrysler Museum. Free and open to the public. Light refreshments.

November

Wednesday, November 14, 7:00 PM – Norfolk History Museum Program Series: "An Audience With His Excellency, George Washington"

He was a farmer, a soldier and a president. Spend an evening with the man known as The Father of His Country as Virginia Patriots interpreter Kevin Grantz brings George Washington to life. What was America's First President's connection to Norfolk? Did he really sleep here? Learn what it was like to help shape the destiny of this fledgling country as one of its Founding Fathers. Location: Kaufman Theatre, Chrysler Museum. Free and open to the public. Light refreshments.



Norfolk in Autumns Past

September 12, 1930 – Norfolk Division of the College of William and Mary opens

September 13, 1926 – Daily passenger plane service begins between Philadelphia, Washington DC and Norfolk

September 15, 1736 – Town of Norfolk is made a Borough by Royal charter

September 18, 1935 – Norfolk Unit of Virginia Union University (now Norfolk State University) opens

September 21, 1923 – Virginia's first radio station, WTAR, goes on the air in Norfolk

September 22, 1904 – John McNerney is the first Norfolk policeman killed in line of duty

October 1, 1849 – Norfolk Gas Light Company turns on city's first gas lights

October 3, 1936 – Foreman Field is dedicated

October 13, 1894 – First electric trolley begins operations

October 19, 1749 – Hurricane washes up 800 acre sandspit at what is now Willoughby

November 1, 1957 – Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel opens

November 8, 1919 – Norfolk's first dial telephones go into effect at midnight

November 14, 1910 – At Willoughby, Eugene Ely launches first plane to take off from a ship

November 18, 1939 – Norfolk's first underpass opens at N&W Railroad tracks on Hampton Boulevard

November 24, 1852 – Commodore Matthew C Perry leaves from Norfolk on naval tour that will open Japan to world trade

November 29, 1789 – Thomas Jefferson visits

Historical Opportunities

It is time to review our progress and revise/refine our work plan for next year. We have done this annually, guided by professional planner Bill Miner, since we developed a new Strategic Plan two years ago. In that effort, the NHS Board defined our **Mission** as to:

"serve as a catalyst for the collection, interpretation, preservation, and dissemination of Norfolk area history and as an advocate for broader understanding, education, and preservation of our history to both citizens and visitors."

This is ambitious but very worthwhile, and we are chipping away. As a "catalyst" we welcome partnering opportunities with organizations, institutions or individuals wherever there may be a common interest. Recent partners include Friends of Historic Houses of the Chrysler Museum; Hampton Roads Naval Museum; U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Norfolk District; Harbor's Edge Retirement Community; 2nd Va. Regiment, War of 1812; Junior League of Norfolk & Virginia Beach; Norfolk Public Library; Contraband Historical Society; Citizens for a Fort Monroe National Park; and the National Council of State Historic Preservation Officers. We appreciate all of this help to relate Norfolk's rich history.

Sharing the fascinating stories about this region is central to our Mission. Our Norfolk History Museum Series, the second

Wednesday of every month at the Chrysler Museum's Kaufman Theatre, is a success. We have attracted a core audience this year, now ranging reliably from 50 to 100 every month. This nucleus of people interested in local history will grow. Plans are underway for the 2008 programs, including sequels to some of this year's most successful, such as Dr. Robert Wojtowicz's presentation on Norfolk architect Clarence Neff. In 2007 we have already hosted ten free events, including eight evening NHM programs and two afternoon programs at Fort Norfolk during weekend encampments of re-enactors.

On November 14, the brief joint Annual Membership Meeting of NHS and Friends of Historic Houses will precede our NHM Series event. Featured will be George Washington, who visited here in 1763. Later, his Administration built Fort Norfolk and in 2007 NHS is the fort's custodian! Although somehow he is coming to us AFTER we heard from Abraham Lincoln in early August, his appearance means that we are covering all four centuries of Norfolk's history. Don't miss it.

We badly need your feedback. NHS has a limited supply of funds, and an even more limited supply of volunteer hours to organize and support each project or program. We are faced with "insurmountable opportunities," as Pogo would say, and it is important that they are prioritized to your liking. Let us hear from you.

— **Louis Guy**, *President*

Visit our website for membership benefits and news of upcoming events.

www.NorfolkHistorical.Org

The
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