

Honoring Our Veterans: A Century of Service

The American Legion in Alexandria

Exhibit at Gadsby's Tavern Museum as part of the WWI Commemoration: Summer 2018



*Image courtesy of
Library of Congress.*

"The willingness of America's veterans to sacrifice for our country has earned them our lasting gratitude."

– Retired Congressman Jeff Miller, an advocate for veterans who served as Chairman of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, 2010-2016

To mark the Centennial of World War I, this special exhibit highlights how the returning veterans served Alexandria in the 1920s and honors the ongoing contributions of veterans in Alexandria today. It is thanks to veterans, particularly the World War I and II veterans of Alexandria's American Legion Post 24, that Gadsby's Tavern Museum exists today, and the museum is proud to present this exhibit in their honor.

The Formation of the American Legion

More than half of those who served during World War I, then known as the Great War, were drafted into the U.S. military. This created a large number of "citizen-soldiers," over 2 million men, who returned to their communities and civilian roles after the war ended.

These citizen-soldiers used their community standing and political influence to improve the lives of veterans, banding together to form The American Legion in 1919. Congress officially chartered the organization as a patriotic, mutual-help, veteran's organization focused on those who served during the Great War. Through its lobbying efforts in 1919, the Legion increased government payments to disabled soldiers from \$30 per month to \$80, the equivalent of a living wage. Their national influence also led to the creation of the U.S. Veterans Bureau, the forerunner of the Veterans Administration.

The American Legion is founded on four pillars: Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation, National Security, Americanism, and Children and Youth. In support of these, the Legion offers a number of programs that began in the 1920s and '30s and continue today, including a baseball league, Boys State and Boys Nation, and financial assistance for veterans and their families. The Legion carries out its mission at three levels: National, Departments (the state level), and Posts (the local level). In 2018, The American Legion continues as a community service organization with nearly 2.5 million members.

Returning from WWI: Two Posts in Alexandria

Alexandria, once host to Revolutionary veterans George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette, became host to a new generation of veterans after World War I. Like these early veterans of the United States, those returning home from Europe continued to serve their country by dedicating time and

money to caring for and building up their home communities. Many of these returning veterans formed local Posts of The American Legion to pool their efforts and continue their camaraderie formed in war.

While The American Legion's charter opened membership to all who honorably served during the war, it allowed Departments and Posts to impose segregation by race. At this time, segregation was prevalent not only in civilian life but in the military as well. Segregated posts across the South opened, including the chartering of two Posts in Alexandria.

Alexandria's American Legion Post 24 was chartered in 1920, limiting membership to white males in military or naval service of the United States between April 6, 1917, and November 11, 1918. The Post met in the local Chamber of Commerce's office until purchasing Gadsby's Tavern in 1929 as their permanent home.

Local African American veterans, not permitted to join Post 24, formed their own post. Post 129 was chartered in 1931 and named after Private William Thomas, who was killed in action during WWI. After WWII, Post 129 began meeting in the building known as the Carver Nursery School.

Remembering Lieutenant Chaplin Eppes Evans & Private William Thomas



Captain George H. Evans, who served overseas with the 27th Infantry Division, was elected the first commander of Post 24 in part to honor the loss of his only child, Lieutenant Chaplin Eppes Evans, U.S. Navy. Lt. Evans graduated from the Naval Academy in 1916 and spent 15 months overseas. Less than two months after visiting his family during leave, he died stateside at the age of 24 from influenza. His life is one of over 600,000 lost in the U.S. alone to the influenza epidemic that swept the world.



The African American WWI veterans named their post *William Thomas Post 129* to honor the first African American from Alexandria to die in WWI. William Thomas was drafted at the age of 30 into the 369th Infantry Regiment in the 93rd Division, one of only two U.S. Army Divisions to arm and train African Americans. Pvt. Thomas was killed in action in the fall of 1918, only months before the armistice.

Images courtesy of American Legion Post 24 and the Alexandria Black History Museum.

Post 24: Caring For Their Community

A 1928 Alexandria Gazette article highlighted the many activities of Post 24: restoring the Old Presbyterian Church, supporting local Boy Scout Troops, taking local students on field trips to see the Cherry Blossoms, and sponsoring a clinic for infants.

Under the leadership of WWI veteran F. Clinton Knight, Post 24 determined to purchase and restore the buildings of Gadsby's Tavern. These buildings' connections to George Washington made them an ideal location for the Post and its civic activities. Gadsby's Tavern, they declared, "would be a lasting memorial to those who made the supreme sacrifice during the world war as well as a memorial to the living...far superior to one of marble or granite" (Alexandria Gazette, July 1, 1927).

In 1929, Post 24 finished fundraising and purchased the buildings, restoring them and opening them as a museum. Low attendance and the Great Depression made it difficult to raise additional funds to complete restoration and pay off the mortgage by 1932. Members, including Mr. Knight, mortgaged their homes in order to continue the project and provide Post 24 with a home. Post 24 hosted carnivals, special exhibits, and other community events in the buildings. In 1972, under the leadership of WWII veteran William (Bill) McNamara, Post 24 deeded the buildings to the City of Alexandria with the understanding they would be fully restored and opened to the public as a museum.

Founding Members of the American Legion
Post 24

George H. Evans
Gilbert J. Cox, Jr.
Elliott T. Hoffman
J.K. Kitchenson
Gilbert J. Priest
O. Ashby Reardon
W.E. Spofford
T.W. Robinson, Jr.
Alden W. Chesser
Gardner L. Boothe, II
A. Lenox Uhler
W. Milton Glasgow
Carroll W. Ashby



*The two museum buildings ca. 1933 with restoration underway on the larger building.
Courtesy of Library of Congress. Photograph by J. O. Brostrup.*

Post 129: Caring for Their Community



*Post 129 met in the Carver Nursery School, 224 N. Fayette Street. While the building still stands, it is now a dentist office.
Courtesy of Alexandria Library Special Collections*

Alexandria was deeply segregated along racial lines for much of the 20th century, leaving few public places for African Americans to go for social gatherings. So, when Post 129 moved into the former Carver Nursery School in the late 1940s, it opened its doors to the local African American community. Local residents remember Post 129 as the place to go for any community function—weddings, funerals, cookouts, etc. On Friday and Saturday nights, they regularly hosted socials that brought together African Americans from across Alexandria.

Members of Post 129 were leaders in their community, working to improve the lives of African American residents. As veterans who had honorably served in the U.S. military despite segregation and racial attacks, these returning young men returned to become active proponents of Civil Rights. In addition to their efforts in the community, they took state and national action. In 1946, to protest not being seated with the other delegates at the Legion’s District Convention, the entire African American delegation walked out of the convention. At the forefront of the battle for equality, Post 129 became the first organization in Alexandria to take out a NAACP life membership in 1958.

Post 129 influenced the community through their programs as well. Joseph Jennings, who joined Post 129's Legion Baseball League and later became a Post 129 member as a Vietnam veteran, wrote "the members were widely regarded as a positive force in the community, and young African Americans like myself looked up to them as role models."

Founding Members of the American Legion
Post 129

L. O. Broadneck
Sherman Majors
James McCallant
Richard Hollinger
George Wilson
William Dixon
William Tibbs



*A Post 129 meeting in the early 1960s.
Courtesy of Alexandria Library Special Collections.*

World War I Veterans Serving Alexandria

F. Clinton Knight, "Mr. Legionnaire"

F. Clinton Knight served as second Lieutenant on the Mexico border in 1916-17 and went overseas with the 29th Division during WWI. After the war he played an active role in Alexandria's community while also running a hardware business on King Street with his family. He served as Postmaster for twelve years and spent two terms on City Council. He was also president of two local school PTAs and active in a variety of other civic organizations.

Through the Legion, he was part of the committee that drafted the WWII "GI Bill" and lobbied successfully for its passage. At the local level, in addition to being Commander of Post 24 during the purchase of Gadsby's Tavern, he also mortgaged his house to help pay the loan on buildings and was one of the men who hand-dug the basement that now serves as Post 24's club room.



*Courtesy of American
Legion Post 24*

Mae E. Cavanaugh Bowman, First Female Bacteriologist in Virginia

As a young graduate of the Alexandria Hospital School of Nursing, Mae Cavanaugh enlisted in the U.S. Navy Nurse Corps in 1917. Here, she served as the Alexandria Medical Corps' Chief Nurse. During the 1920s, fellow Legionnaires described her as the one-woman Alexandria Health Department. After her marriage, she continued her career, becoming the first female bacteriologist in Virginia with the Alexandria City Health Department.

Charles Hamilton Houston, “The Man Who Killed Jim Crow”

Although Charles Houston lived in Washington, DC, his impact on the lives of Alexandria school children led to the naming of a city school and later the city’s Charles Houston Recreation Center after him.

During WWI, Charles Houston served as a Second Lieutenant in the field artillery of the 92nd Division. His wartime experience made him keenly aware of the pervasive racism he faced:

The hate and scorn showered on us Negro officers by our fellow Americans convinced me that there was no sense in my dying for a world ruled by them. I made up my mind that if I got through this war I would study law and use my time fighting for men who could not strike back.



Courtesy of the NAACP

When he returned from war, he earned his law degree and worked with the NAACP to bring lawsuits that attacked segregated schools as “separate but equal.” While Mr. Houston didn’t live to see the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, he laid the groundwork for its success.