


MEET THE TEANECK ARMORY

If These Walls Could Talk

By Tim Adriance





No other building in Bergen County has played host over the years to such a wide range of activities and individuals, including the National Guard, John F. Kennedy, David Bowie, Tom Hanks, Mario Andretti and the Brooklyn Nets.

Situated along the north end of Teaneck Road, the Teaneck Armory is a huge Depression-era building that has served as—among other things—a home for our brave troops; an arena for concerts, sports, and other events; a movie soundstage; and even a racetrack. Join me as we explore what has been dubbed the Madison Square Garden of Bergen County.



Before the iconic building was erected, the location was the site of the local poor house and farm. As early as 1850, the indigent, elderly and even some orphans lived on the then-30-acre site as subsistence farmers. A 1902 smallpox outbreak brought people from the eastern half of the county to the site's "pest house" (a hospital for those



suffering from infectious diseases).

By 1916, the poor house was taken over by the county, and the inmates (as they were called) were moved to the larger county-run poor house in today's Paramus (in the large brick building that currently stands across Pascack Road from the county hospital). By 1927, some of the property was leased to a tenant farmer, and the local S.P.C.A. opened an animal shelter on the remainder. Soon after, the county tore down all the buildings on the site.

With the Great Depression affecting many local residents, in 1933 the old poor farm became a community garden sponsored by the Englewood Emergency Relief Administration. Approximately 300 needy and unemployed residents signed up to receive plots where they could grow food. The land was plowed, and seeds, fertilizer and gardening tools

were provided—and much food was produced.

Under pressure from Teaneck (which needed the ratables), the county attempted to sell the land. There were no takers. In 1935, the county decided to

subdivide off 13.66 acres and donate that land to the state for the construction of a New Jersey National Guard armory. The project was to be financed by the Public Works Administration (part of Roosevelt's New Deal) and, initially, called for the consolidation of troops from the Hackensack, Englewood and Dumont armories in this new location. The existence of so many armories in Bergen County may be surprising, as is the long history of the citizen soldier in our area (*see sidebar*).

Built in Two Years

The Teaneck Armory was designed by Louis S. Kaplan, who also designed the Trenton War Memorial building. Construction of the Armory began in October 1936, and a total of 175 men were employed. In order to employ as many men as possible, each man worked part-time (two days a week). The project took two years to complete and cost \$950,000. On February 25, 1938, the 104th Engineers Headquarters Company (and band) marched into the completed Armory from its former Englewood home, followed by a company that marched to Teaneck from Dumont.

The massive building's footprint is nearly 90,000 square feet, with a main open floor that is 242 feet long by 150 feet wide. The highest point in the ceiling is 67 feet above the floor. Seating capacity is 10,000 (3,500 permanent and 6,500 temporary). Doors are large enough to accommodate army trucks, and floors can support the weight of heavy equipment. Spotlights with 59,000 watts of power light up the main room.

Numerous offices, quarters, locker rooms, bathrooms and storerooms can meet the needs of ten military companies. The basement contains room to store 96 trucks as well as two rifle ranges with eight targets each.

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space in the county) burned to the ground in 1929 (see *Autumn Years*, Summer 2021), a new large arena was sorely needed.

Military operations at the Teaneck Armory can be easily isolated by closing just two doors, thus allowing full use of the large main space for civilian purposes.

Included in the construction were four ticket booths, a lobby, gathering rooms, a public address system, a portable stage, wiring for footlights, movie projection and sound control booths, dressing rooms for performers and kitchen facilities for caterers.

BERGEN COUNTY'S CITIZEN SOLDIERS OVER THE YEARS

What we know today as the National Guard has its roots in our country's early days as an English colony. Starting in the 1600s, all able-bodied men between 16 and 60 were to bear arms for protection. In Bergen County during the Revolutionary War, patriot men organized in the local militia. After the Revolution and before the Civil War, there was an explosive growth in the number of unofficial volunteer militia units. These groups were akin to our modern social clubs, fraternal organizations and organized amateur sports teams—only with guns.

So popular were these units that their memberships supplanted that of the actual enrolled militia.

Local groups included:

- Hackensack Continental Guards
- Bergen County Rifles
- Emmet Light Guards
- Bergen County Battalion
- Harrington Rifles
- Bergen Brigade
- Jersey Blues Company

Several of these groups built armories or drill halls; one was known to exist in Washington Township, and the Jersey Blues Company's drill hall is today's Players Guild of Leonia



theater. With the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, an armory sprung up in Englewood where the local men could drill and be instructed in military tactics. In April 1869, the New Jersey Adjutant General overhauled and consolidated both the official state militia and the unofficial volunteer militias into the New Jersey National Guard.

Prior to World War I, the New Jersey National Guard began its transition from a military-themed social and political club into a more professional force. And with that, the armories also became more professional. In June 1918, New Jersey's 104th Engineer Regiment went to France as a federalized U.S. unit, returning the following year. The unit was stationed in the Englewood Armory, and later one portion (Company C) relocated to an old schoolhouse in Dumont—where, in 1930, a new armory was built (today, it is a fitness and soccer venue).

It was primarily the 104th Engineer Regiment that the Teaneck Armory was built to house. The thought was that the Englewood, Dumont and Hackensack armories would be promptly decommissioned when the Teaneck Armory was built. However, that did not happen immediately. The Hackensack Armory closed in 1940, Englewood in 1965 and Dumont in 1972. Today, there are two armories in Bergen County: Teaneck and Lodi.

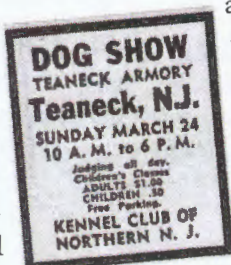


With the war over, events at the Armory started up again in 1947 with a track-and-field program, a dinner and dance and 2,000 boys participating in a Scout-O-Rama.

Non-Military Activities

The first non-military activity at the Armory was the Boy Scouts Circus in May 1938. Four thousand Scouts participated, and an estimated 6,000 spectators attended the two-day affair, which included everything from a chariot race to a mock Indian raid against covered wagons, to displays of rescues from telegraph poles and a mine disaster. The large space even allowed the boys to erect bridges, derrick towers and an entire camp.

The new Armory's first year was very busy. In June 1938, over 8,000 attended the Fireman's Ball, at which a Westwood fireman married the woman who warmed his heart. Later that month, 20,000 people packed the Armory to play charity bingo, and an almost equal number were turned away. In August, the annual



Diamond Gloves boxing event sponsored by the *Bergen Evening Record* was held. The first annual Home Show took place in October. The Armory space allowed for an entire two-story, five-bedroom house to be erected inside—complete with modern furnishings. Over 250,000 people attended the week-long show.

The first big-name performer to be booked at the Armory was Duke Ellington, slated to perform for the American Legion charity ball in June 1940. The war in Europe had escalated to such a degree, however, that all armories were immediately closed to civilians. By September, the federal government mobilized the National Guard, and 1,100 Bergen County guardsmen were sent to Fort Dix to be inducted into the regular Army.

In early 1941, with the guard away (preparing for war), the Armory hosted a few events. First there was the Fourth Annual Dog Show, featuring 975 canine entries. Then a charity dinner benefitting Holy Name Hospital's expansion was held. However, the big event of the year was in October, when

a crowd of over 10,000 attended a night of dancing and entertainment for the benefit of St. John's Church of Cliffside Park-Fairview. Headlined by Tommy Dorsey and his Orchestra, the event also featured baseball legend Joe DiMaggio, and movie stars George Raft and Betty Grable, among other luminaries. Down the list of those featured with the Dorsey band was then-relatively-



unknown Frank Sinatra, who reportedly performed a few numbers. By November, the Armory was back in war mode, with a blood bank and a recruiting station.

Post-War Events

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HOME SHOW 1938 FROM JAY LEVIN TEANECK PAGES 52 AND 53 ORIGINAL PHOTO PAUL COHEN

TEANECK, N. J. ARMORY
T. Q. MIDGET
AUTO RACES

JAN. 10-17-24
14-21-28
MARCH 7-14

ALL SEATS \$1.75 and \$2.00 Taxes Inc.

AMERICAN MIDGET RACING ASSOCIATION
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TEANECK, NJ ARMORY
 1799 TEANECK ROAD, TEANECK, NJ
HOME OF
59 SATURDAY NIGHTS OF EXCITING 3/4 MIDGET RACING
 1952 - 1954 AND 1958 - 1962

Len Duncan
 Norm Smizer Crosley #1
 15-time winner at Teaneck
 including 2 100-lappers

 Tony Bonadies Opening race winner 1-12-52 Also won final event 3-17-62	 Russ Klar Dick Ledford Crosley #16 FEATURE WINNER 1-26-62 & 4-19-62	 Jiggs Peters Gary Dillendorfer Crosley FEATURE WINNER 3-8-52
 Lou Fray Herb Swensen Crosley FEATURE WINNER 2-15-58	 Dick Peterman Jilly Chilly's Crosley FEATURE WINNER 2-23-61	 Bobby Marshman Jack Dowdy Triumph FEATURE WINNER 2-27-60
 Bruno Brackey own Crosley #71 FEATURE WINNER 2-3-62	 Mario Andretti own Triumph #2 First open-cockpit FEATURE WIN 3-3-62	 Ells Cause own Crosley #23 FEATURE WINNER 3-10-62

lasting only 18 seconds with a knockout. A rodeo came to the Armory in 1948, and local residents were none-too-happy when a reported 30-foot pile of manure was dumped on a nearby vacant lot. Professional sports came to the Armory for the first time in May 1948, when over 2,000 witnessed the first of many wrestling extravaganzas.

The ever-popular annual Home Show returned after the war and continued to draw thousands to the Armory until 1966. Another annual show, the Bergen County Industrial and Business Exposition, featured a walking and talking 12-foot-tall robot in 1954. For years, an annual boat show featured over 100 boats, and the nine-day event in 1967

included a 21-foot sailboat. Car, hobby, hunting, fishing and RV shows were held repeatedly. A 1967 motorcycle show was viewed with concern since motorcycle gangs were known to be active in the New York area.

Unique sporting events took place at the Armory, and in 1949, the Roller Derby arrived. Playing 19 games in the first year to over 50,000 fans, the likes of Midge "Toughie" Brasuhn of the Jersey Jolters went skate-to-skate in hard contact against Annabelle "Slugger" Kealey of the Brooklyn Red Devils. The Armory became the permanent home of the Jersey Jolters, and games were televised. The World Series of Roller Derby was held at the Armory in 1953,

and the Jersey Jolters won the series, beating the New York Chiefs.

Midget auto racing was introduced to the Armory in 1952. The cars dubbed "three-quarter midgets" were about eight feet long and could produce up to 700 horsepower. These little speed demons competed in 30-lap races before capacity crowds of more than 3,000. It was at a March 3, 1962, Teaneck Armory race that a 22-year-old recent Italian immigrant won what he later described as his "first victory of any consequence." That driver was none other than Mario Andretti, who would go on to win the Indianapolis 500 in 1969, the Formula 1 World Championship in 1978 and four Indycar series championships.

Religion and Politics

The Armory has been the venue for a number of significant gatherings over the years. After filling New York's Madison Square Garden for 16 weeks, and speaking to 2.3 million people, evangelist Billy Graham came to the Armory on September 27, 1957, where nearly 10,000 heard him preach the good news. The *Bergen Evening Record* described the crowd as "very orderly" and that it "resembled a Sunday congregation." Unlike many other Armory events where traffic afterwards was often tangled until 2am, the Teaneck Police reported no traffic tie-ups.



John F. Kennedy using the Teaneck Armory for a campaign stop during his run for the White House in 1960.

In contrast, John F. Kennedy's November 6, 1960, rally at the Teaneck Armory was described as a "hysterical mob." One man had his brand-new car damaged when reporters jumped on it to get better pictures. Waiting two hours as Kennedy was delayed, the crowd was entertained by numerous celebrities including Tony Bennett, Anthony Quinn, Tony Randall, Peter Lawford and Cab Calloway. Arriving at the Armory, the popular young candidate was met by thousands outside and over 8,000 inside.

At the end of the speech, pandemonium broke out as the horde rushed to greet Kennedy. The tables on which the press corps was standing collapsed in the rush, throwing reporters and equipment to the floor. A middle-aged woman was trampled by screaming teenage girls, and one girl was nearly crushed against the stage as the mob rushed forward. A police officer even had his badge ripped from his uniform. One woman screamed

at a police officer, "Get out of the way, you [expletive], and let me see him!"

During the 1964 Presidential campaign, conservative Republican candidate Barry Goldwater held an October 7 rally at the Armory, where he was met by a crowd of 10,000. Radical groups, such as the Bergen County branch of Students for a Democratic Society, protested at the event. As Goldwater moved through the throng, a protester threw an egg, which splattered on his jacket and shirt.

The Sounds of Music

The Armory was used for musical entertainment in the late 1950s and into the 1960s. Every December, from 1957 to 1966, the Pageant of Bands featured up to 25 local school marching bands during the multi-night event. The nearly 2,000 students performed before capacity crowds.

Jazz great Louis Armstrong blew the roof off the Armory on May 27, 1960, when he and his band performed a



Davis Dazzles Teaneck

By JIM MURPHY
 Teaneck — Whether he's being Mr. Wonderful, Golden Boy or mean when, through all of this, he never lets his guard down. He did not that last night for more than 4,000 persons at Teaneck Armory in a concert sponsored by Patricia Dickson Lindsay.
 As the show was getting to close, he went into a frenzy of hand-wringing and songs which brought the young stars out of their seats, down the aisles, and to the edge of the stage. They were screaming, reaching out to touch him, and some had their hair and dresses torn by the excitement. He was wildly applauded by the audience, and said "I can't wait to see you again."
 In the more quiet moments he played himself to the music, moving around the stage with a series of waltzes and slow dances, such as "Love Me Like You Love Me." This a few other exchanges with the crowd, and he was back to his usual and serious demeanor, and said "I can't wait to see you again."
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three-hour show before an excited crowd of 4,000. The program was sponsored by, and for the benefit of, the Ridgewood Y.W.C.A.

On November 8, 1963, Dick Clark's Caravan of Stars show rock-and-rolled into the Armory for the first of 31 scheduled one-night gigs. The 17 acts, performing six songs each, rehearsed for about five hours, changed clothes, and did the first show. The crowd of more than 3,000 teenagers enjoyed the music of former Teaneck High School student Linda Scott (who had a million-selling single called "I've Told Every Little Star"), Bobby Vee, The Ronettes, Little Eva, The Jaynettes, Paul & Paula and others. The show grossed \$8,000 (over \$71,000 today). Incidentally, the



show was scheduled for November 22 in Dallas but was cancelled due to the assassination of President Kennedy.

During the folk music craze, 3,500 attended a benefit concert in January 1964 featuring Odetta and The Brothers Four, sponsored by the Englewood Jaycees for the Cerebral Palsy Fund. In April 1967, the Fairleigh Dickinson University Student Council hosted a night with Sammy Davis, Jr. A crowd of more than 5,000 was dazzled by "Mr. Show Business," who was backed by a 30-piece orchestra. When the show ended, the only way Davis could get past the exuberant mob was to be carried over the heads of his road crew.



Shooting Hoops

Sports were an important part of the Armory's line-up. As noted, boxing, wrestling, track-and-field, roller derby and auto racing were popular with audiences. There was also professional tennis and basketball. The world-famous Harlem Globetrotters performed annually at the Armory, where crowds of over 5,000 were entertained by the clowning magicians of basketball who combined sport, comedy and burlesque.



In September 1967, the New York Americans (part of the new American Basketball Association) struck a deal with Teaneck to allow the Armory to be their home. The team changed its name to the New Jersey Americans and

planned to put up over \$100,000 for improvements to the building.

During the 1967-1968 season, the team secured a playoff spot against the Kentucky Colonels. The unexpected need to play an additional home game caused a big problem since the Armory

was already booked for the Pan American Circus. Unable to find a venue, the New Jersey Americans had to forfeit the game. The team would later move to Long Island and become the New York Nets. Then they moved to The Meadowlands and became the New Jersey Nets. Today, they are the Brooklyn Nets.

The New Jersey Americans did not leave the Armory by choice. Rather, their departure was a result of the Teaneck fire



marshal having taken a close look at the Armory in April 1968 following a fatal fire in a Chicago convention hall. The marshal discovered a lack of proper fire exits, sprinklers and an operational fire-detection system—so Teaneck ordered a stop to all non-military exhibitions. (The state had deactivated the fire-detection



system in 1950 as a way to save money.) Not until 1972 did civilians enter the Armory in any number, and that was for National Guard-hosted recreation nights for local children. These events were a response to the Vietnam War protests that the Armory faced, and the soldiers conducted them to foster goodwill.

Once the state spent approximately \$500,000 to install a fire-suppression system, the Armory could again be used for some non-military activities. In 1990, the entertainment industry discovered the Teaneck Armory—but not for performances.

In February 1990, David Bowie used the Armory to rehearse for his “Sound+Vision Tour.” The theatrical show needed a full month to perfect the coordination of the lighting and special effects to the musical performance. In addition to Bowie, Mariah Carey used the Armory as a rehearsal space

for her 1998 “Butterfly World Tour.” In both instances, the soldiers on duty were entertained by what amounted to unplanned U.S.O. events.

Hollywood Comes to the Armory

The motion picture industry traces its roots to Bergen County. Decades later, production companies discovered the Armory as a perfect space for a soundstage. There are so many benefits: located just minutes over the George Washington Bridge; plenty of parking; a truss roof that can support rigging; a huge and unobstructed space; and doors big enough to accommodate a tank.

In July 1997, Universal Studios rented the Armory to film scenes for the movie *Meet Joe Black* starring Brad Pitt and Anthony Hopkins. Filming began in Jersey City, but the producers needed a larger space to build sets.



Warner Brothers moved into the Armory for three months in early 1998 to film the Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan romantic comedy, *You've Got Mail*. Adapted from 1940's *The Shop Around the Corner*, the movie centers on the children's bookshop owned by Ryan's character. An entire streetscape with the bookshop was created in the Armory, and many other indoor scenes were also filmed there.

The 1999 film *Sweet and Lowdown*, written and directed by Woody Allen, had a number of indoor scenes filmed in the Armory. The movie stars Sean Penn, Uma Thurman, Anthony LaPaglia and Samantha Morton. Penn portrays a Jazz Age guitarist; the

On June 5, 2004, the Teaneck Armory saw troops deployed for the first time since World War II. At 7:05am, a convoy escorted by police cars and fire trucks pulled away as residents waved flags and clapped—and families left behind wept.

soundtrack includes the guitar work of the late Bucky Pizzarelli of Saddle River. (For more on Pizzarelli, see *Autumn Years*, Spring 2015.)

In addition, the film *Bogus* starring Whoopi Goldberg and the BBC-produced movie *Stonewall* used the Armory as a soundstage for filming.

Post-9/11

In the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, the Teaneck Armory immediately began gearing up for war. Approximately 300 members of the National Guard's 50th Main Support Battalion at the Armory were among the first to offer military support to the embattled New York area by hauling equipment to Manhattan and manning a supply center. Many of these dedicated citizen soldiers slept on cots at the Armory as they worked long hours to selflessly serve their neighbors.

With New York still considered a target, soldiers from the Teaneck Armory worked 12-hour shifts, seven days a week, defending key targets. For many who braved bone-chilling cold while guarding the George Washington Bridge, the Armory became a temporary home as military responsibilities kept them away from their real homes.


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On the civilian front, sports returned to the Armory when The Soccer Coliseum opened as the region's first synthetic indoor turf field installed over

the expansive drill floor. In its 24th year at the Armory, The Soccer Coliseum is the region's largest youth soccer arena offering tournaments, leagues, training classes and camps.

Some small-scale events in recent years have been held at the Armory, and the grounds are used for such things as an annual carnival. An outdoor visit to the Armory allows a close-up view of the two armored vehicles displayed out front (an M42 Duster self-propelled anti-aircraft gun and an M728 combat engineer vehicle).

Now you know the rest of the story of the Teaneck Armory—Bergen County's Madison Square Garden and home to our dedicated local troops. 



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