

THE BUNKER AT BURNLEY RISE

Marching soldiers? Target practice? Tucked away in a Perinton subdivision, obscured by trees and scrubs, masked by manicured lawns, is a remnant of that “war to end all wars.” On a hillside in southeast Perinton is a concrete structure 30 feet long, 8 feet wide, and 7 feet high that served as a practice bunker for soldiers training for action as part of the American Expeditionary Force in World War I. Due to its unique nature, possibly the only remaining structure of its kind in the state, if not in the country, it has been designated as a Perinton landmark by the Town’s Historic Architecture Commission.



For many years, the bunkers, (originally there were probably three), were known only to old-timers and young people who discovered that they made great out-of-the-way partying spots. In the early 1990's, the development of the area and resulting erosion brought the bunkers to the attention of town officials. In the course of doing road work in the area, the Perinton DPW unearthed part of one bunker that had been buried under the asphalt of Burnley Rise. The second bunker, located nearby, was found covered with graffiti and filled in with about eighteen inches of eroded dirt. The location of a reported third bunker is still unknown. The developer of the area, Gary DeBlase, donated the site and nearly one acre of surrounding land to the town in 1991 in order to preserve the remaining bunker. Meanwhile, Susan Roberts, town historian, had been researching the provenance of the bunkers, but despite her correspondence with military historians as far away as Fort Sill, Oklahoma, the US Military Academy, and the New York State National Guard, she was not able to find any significant information about the facility except that it was probably a “known distance” target range generally used for infantry training. She also discovered that there are known rifle ranges in Tryon Park and in Rush, New York, that do have concrete structures, but there seemed to be nothing quite like those here in Perinton.

The bunkers are located on what was formerly the Crump farm on Pittsford-Victor Road, and the recollections of Warren “Barney” Crump, who grew up on the farm, are the primary source of information about them. According to Crump, the bunkers were located up the hill from the farm house off a farm lane. He also remembered a mess hall, the site of which he thought was probably now under Route 490. He described the bunkers as being parallel to each other, about 200 to 250 feet apart. They are made of concrete faced with steel plates and include a small room at one end for protection from the firing practice and a flight of stairs at the other end. The east side was lower than the west side so as to accommodate the targets and the mechanisms that raised and lowered them. The bunkers were originally deep enough for a man to stand upright and not be seen, and had the additional benefit of replicating the pill boxes and bunkers that troops might encounter in Europe. Soldiers would probably raise and lower the targets and then take cover in the small room during the firing. Mr. Crump also mentioned that the reason that one of the bunkers was filled with dirt was because once after a farm horse fell in, the stairs had to be covered with dirt to form a ramp so that it could get out.

There is some question as to who used the target range. Crump recalled that “the soldiers would come marching up the road to camp at our place. There always seemed to be so many of them....” Apparently, Company H of the 3rd New York Infantry, from the East Main Street Armory in Rochester, would arrive in Bushnell’s Basin on the trolley, march to the Crump farm, set up camp for the weekend, leave their things in the lockers in the mess hall, and commence

their training. An excerpt from The Rochester Historical Society Publication Fund Series, Vol XIV, about the troops of Company H, many of whom were veterans of the Spanish-American War, states that “...with...rifle practice at Bushnell’s Basin, those were grand times in the National Guard...when the 3rd New York was at the height of its glory.” The range might also have been used by Troop H, 1st Cavalry, of the New York State National Guard, since Mr. Crump also recalled that one time the soldiers had arrived on horseback. The existence of spent shells and tips of bullets could corroborate the conclusion that the site was a “known distance” target range, and Mr. Crump did remember digging lead out of the hillside: “We could sell it for a few pennies then, you know.” When the end of the war brought the end of a need for target practice, the bunkers made pretty good fruit cellars, as Mr. Crump recalled his family using them for apple storage.

Although there are many questions that remain about the specifics of who actually used the bunkers and exactly how they were used, the site is very much a part of Perinton’s heritage and is worthy of preservation. At present, the bunker site, which includes a path that was created as an Eagle Scout project by Bill March of Troop 207 in Fairport, is overgrown and gradually being filled in due to erosion. Future plans do include excavation and creation of access for the public, both in memory of the 280 Perinton men who served in World War I and to witness this remaining silent reminder that warfare was once quite close.