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Setting Sights on Long Island and Wars Past

By KARIN LIPSON JULY 25, 2014

Joshua Ruff, the chief curator of the [Long Island Museum of American Art, History and Carriages](#), has chosen objects of all shapes and sizes for the exhibitions there — including, recently, a large gun sight from a [World War II B-32 bomber](#) that Mr. Ruff estimates weighs “about 400 pounds.”

But the most fascinating objects are often diminutive, Mr. Ruff said one afternoon while guiding a visitor through “[Long Island at War: Battle Front and Home Front](#),” an exhibition on view through Dec. 28 at the museum in Stony Brook.

With more than 200 artifacts, paintings and historical photographs, as well as videos, the exhibition features personal mementos, like a small travel pass dating from the American Revolution. Issued in 1777 to a “Mrs. Floyd” by the British general William Howe, the permit allowed her to carry silk, some quilted fabric, tea and other items to Huntington. “Somebody actually carried this and had to use it to travel and show whatever Redcoat she encountered,” Mr. Ruff said. (Long Island was occupied territory during the Revolutionary War.)

Long Island’s role in American wars from the Revolutionary War through the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan is the subject of this show, which has many uniforms, guns, a couple of cannonballs, and even a “backyard bunker,” a family-size fallout shelter from the Cold War era that has been recreated for the museum. But it is the little pass issued to Mrs. Floyd — whatever her political leanings might have been — that sums up the everyday hurdles faced by those under the yoke of occupation.

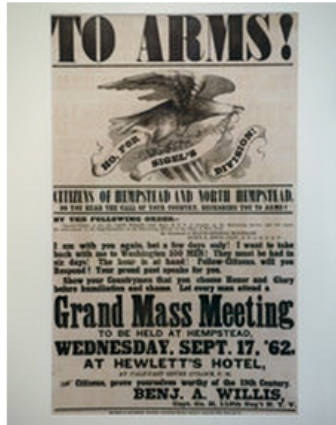


Among the items in the exhibition “Long Island at War: Battle Front and Home Front,” are Civil War-era clothing and uniforms. Kathy Kmonicek for The New York Times

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Although Long Island as it is currently defined (Nassau and Suffolk

Counties) was not the site of key Revolutionary War battles, there were “plenty of skirmishes throughout Suffolk County on the North Shore,” Mr. Ruff said. Beyond that, Long Island was of great strategic importance because of its proximity to New York City and the waterways surrounding it, he said. “The British needed New York and Long Island to disrupt the supply and information lines between the Northern and Southern colonies.”



A Civil War recruiting poster from 1862.
Kathy Kmonicek for The New York Times

The War of 1812 and the Mexican-American War (1846-48) may not stir emotions the way the Revolutionary War does, but once we get to the Civil War, with its terrible casualties, exhibition objects can take on extra meaning.



A photograph of Theodore Roosevelt with officers at Camp Wikoff, in Montauk.
Kathy Kmonicek for The New York Times

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Take the 1862 recruiting broadside, aimed at the men of Hempstead and North Hempstead, issued by Capt. Benjamin A. Willis of Roslyn: “TO ARMS!” it reads. “I want to take back with me to Washington 100 MEN!” How many of those who responded, visitors may wonder, suffered the fate of Capt. William Wheeler, whose uniform is on display nearby. He was a Brooklyn resident with extensive family in Setauket, and was killed in action in Marietta, Ga., in 1864.

As the war ended, the great genre artist [William Sidney Mount](#), a Setauket native, used a distinctive boulder on the Setauket village green as the focal point of his painting “The Rock on the Green,” which is part of the show. Perched on the rock is a little boy, holding an American flag and looking into the distance; nearby is a little girl whose gaze also seems to be riveted on a distant spot, “as if looking into the future, beyond the horrors of the Civil War,” Mr. Ruff said.

For Long Islanders, the Spanish-American War (1898) almost inevitably conjures the name of Oyster Bay’s Theodore Roosevelt and his [Rough Riders regiment](#). And here is the uniformed hero, in photographs taken at Camp Wikoff, in Montauk, where returning soldiers disbanded (or were quarantined with infectious diseases acquired in the war).

The Roosevelt name comes up again in the section devoted to World War I, where a soulful 1917 portrait of Theodore’s son Kermit in uniform (though he had not yet experienced battle) hangs near the uniform of his pilot brother Quentin, fatally shot down over France in 1918. There is also a recreated barrack of Camp Upton, in Yaphank, where draftee Irving Berlin, already a famous songwriter, penned “Oh! How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning,” with its humorous vow to “murder the bugler.”

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Long Island's role as an aviation and industrial powerhouse in World War



Sheet music by Irving Berlin.
Kathy Kmonicek for The New
York Times

II can be appreciated in artifacts like a huge Grumman sign from the former corporation's Bethpage plant, and that heavy gun sight. There are also reminders of the war's human toll on Long Island, like a Western Union telegram informing the mother of Pvt. Raymond T. McNamee of Babylon of her son's death in late 1944. Nearby is a posthumously awarded Purple Heart medal.

Some Long Islanders who survived World War II, Korea, Vietnam and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan are featured in video interviews in which they recall the hardships and occasional satisfactions of the battlefield, and their reintegration into civilian life.

One of those featured is former Sgt. Rex Metcalf of Huntington, who fought in Vietnam. The exhibition also displays his uniform, including an original can of insect repellent strapped to his helmet.

"This gallery is full of stuff — of objects," Mr. Ruff said. "But those objects meant something to people who held on to them."

"Long Island at War: Battle Front and Home Front," through Dec. 28 at the Long Island Museum of American Art, History and Carriages, 1200 Rte. 25A, Stony Brook.
Information: (631)-751-0066; longislandmuseum.org.