

# National Park Service and Army Join Forces for Historic Preservation

**T**he quality of hand-crafted construction with which immigrants built America was passed on from father to son, from craft master to apprentice. Now, the National Park Service is joining forces with the Cultural Resources Division of Fort Sam Houston's Directorate of Public Works to carry on the tradition.

Twenty-eight skilled carpenters, painters, masons, architects and project managers from military installations across the continental United States and Germany came together to work in the hand prints of our industrious forebears.

Under the guidance of the NPS Historic Preservation Training Center in Maryland, master artisans and historic conservation experts presented a five-day training program to expand skills and knowledge of restoration, maintenance, and preservation of historic properties under federal care.

Four days of hands-on experience followed a one-day classroom study of laws and regulations and philosophy of historic conservation.

All course objectives for practical experience coincided with tasks needed to be performed on historic buildings here. Last year, extensive critical work was accomplished on the old Band Building.\* This year, participants gained technical experience painting and wooden deck repair, brick work, and window restoration on the post museum and the Stillwell House in the old Infantry Post area.

Donald Runion, a carpenter work leader who refers to himself as "an old country stump jumper from Virginia," explained the process of removing and replacing damaged wooden floor boards in the deck along the front of the post museum.

"Before we start tearing anything apart, we measure and photograph everything so we'll know how it all goes back together. We strive to do it so the wood in the deck will last for 100 years, instead of just 70 years, as the present deck has lasted, and eliminate any safety hazards of the original construction," said Runion.

According to Runion, each replacement plank was hand-sanded as done in earlier years.

and then painted with primer on all sides. Many floors of this era were only surface painted but the all-around painting gives the wood better protection. The new boards, cut in the interlocking tongue and groove design of the original floor, were installed while the primer was still wet. As it dries, the paint serves to cement the boards together, protecting the wood from the elements and keeping water from seeping between the boards, according to Runion.

A common bond joins people from diverse locations to share the responsibility, and very often, a reverence for the works of history. George Meyer, with the Department of Housing and Public Works at West Point, ties his background in historic carpentry to his father, a German craftsman who did historic preservation for the New Pfaltz Huegenot Society in New York. Meyer learned the trade as a boy, working with his father.

*Lucy Klass, an engineering technician from Fort Belvoir, Virginia, peers through dust-dimmed goggles to chisel away the crumbling cement from a former masonry repair. Use of the wrong material allowed water seepage and caused further damage to the brickwork. The new repair will be made with a sand and limestone compound as in the original construction.*



"There's so much satisfaction in working with your hands. You know you've done something at the end of the day. Most modern construction is done with plywood, staples, and nailguns. The way we do it, everything is done by hand, piece by piece," Meyer said. Working side-by-side with carpenters from New York and Fort Sam Houston was Master Carpenter Benno Jeitner, a German national employee of Spangdahlem Air Base in Germany.

Jeitner, and David Praner, program manager of the environmental flight of the 52d Civil Engineer Squadron in Spangdahlem, are responsible for preservation of a French kaserne, a small military compound, near the town of Bitburg and listed on the German Historic Registry. Maintenance and restoration of the property is the responsibility the U.S. government as long as it is leased from the German government as part of the Air Force military community there.

"We learn from our mistakes and we learn from each other. That is why we are here. When we first worked on the French kaserne, we replaced some windows with the wrong materials. We don't make those mistakes anymore," said Jeitner.

Praner, an environmental engineer, was getting his hands-on-training with a group repairing water-damaged masonry in the museum basement.

"I'm just a geek engineer, but the practical application I'm learning here makes me able to administer the restoration project at Spangdahlem and understand the legitimacy of what various contractors talk to me about. Right now we have 12 people doing work a good mason would do in

an hour but we're talking and asking questions and exchanging information to learn from each other," said Praner.

The window repair process included proper removal of the window, the old glazing material and the original glass. After sanding the sash, the original glass is put back in, if possible, and old fashioned handmixed linseed oil glazing, is reapplied with a skilled technique.

The original glazing material, as well as being historically accurate, is superior mater-

ial to modern commercial putty. The linseed oil glazing holds its body, doesn't dry out, and is easier to remove and replace.

"These windows, over 100 years old, were designed for repair, on site, by local craftsman. They were intended to last. Modern windows only last a fraction of the time," said Don Kermath, master architect, and instructor during the classroom portion of the training. Work on the old Stillwell house included deck replacement, painting and window restoration. Under the expert guidance of the Paint Guru, Donn Brunson, from Public Works at Ft. Lewis, Washington, course participants learned the proper way to set up a work site, protected from the elements, efficient work management, and safety priorities.

Techniques for hand-sanding and hand-brushed painting take the place of using modern spray guns and paint rollers. The columns on the deck, according to Brunson, are not the original structure and at some point will be removed and replaced with period correct pieces. In the meantime, the present columns are stripped of paint and repainted by hand, in place of the roller painting on them now.

Despite the use of historic methods, Brunson recognizes the superiority of modern paint. "The key to preserving the historic integrity of wood is to paint," said Brunson.

Before new paint is applied, the surface must be prepared by stripping away the old paint. In many cases the old paint contains lead and requires special precautions to handle with care for the environment. Then the building can be restored to its original color. A special sanding technique, called feathering, is being taught to expose progressive layers of paint. Then a microscopic examination of the feathering reveals each layer and color of paint, down to the original.

Not everything eyed for preservation is made of wood and stone. Several recent structures have been added to the list of historic treasures. According to Mike Hilger, Fort Sam Houston's historical architect, age is not the sole measure of historic significance.

"One of the most modern 'historic' structures is the vertical assembly building at Cape Canaveral, a totally unique construction with a singular purpose," Hilger said.

#### Note

\* See CRM, Vol. 19, Nos. 1 and 4.

*Cleo Brennan is a writer in the Fort Sam Houston Public Affairs Office.*

Photos by the author.

*John Mendez (left) of Public Works, Fort Sam Houston, refines his glazing technique as Harold Leggett, (right) of the Corps of Engineers in Buffalo, New York, provides assistance, with a little resistance on the window pane.*

