



Bergen County, Where America Begins

CAMP MERRITT

by **Kevin Wright**

(See link below for a history published at the time of the 1924 Dedication of the Monument in Cresskill.)

Until now, the origins of a large military camp in Bergen County, cl

ose to New York Harbor, have been lost to history. As recruits for service in the Spanish-American War began assembling at Sea Girt in May 1898, the Federal Government began looking for a permanent campground for 50,000 mobilized troops, if necessary, with ample ground on the upper part of the Palisades in Bergen County for rifle ranges and maneuvers. On May 10, 1898, General Miles sent Lieutenant Mott, of Major-General Wesley E. Merritt's staff, to make a report on the advisability of using the brow of the Palisades between Alpine and the State line for this purpose. The brief war with Spain ended, however, before any action on these plans was taken.

With America's entry into the First World War, the proposal was given new life. The United State Army needed an embarkation camp near Hoboken where troops could assemble for ship transport to France. In July 1917, Brigadier-General William Wright, Commanding General of the Port of Embarkation, selected a site centered on the intersection of Grant Avenue and Knickerbocker Road, but occupying 770 acres on the ridge between the West Shore and Northern Railroads in the Boroughs of Dumont, Cresskill, Haworth and Demarest. This site would allow troops to be carried by boat from the Alpine Ferry to transatlantic steamers at the port of Hoboken. MacArthur Brothers Company received a \$5,000,000 construction contract. Work began in September 1917, using materials brought by railroad. A total of 1,302 buildings were built to house, equip and train 50,000 men at a time, including 611 two-story wooden barracks, capable of quartering sixty-six soldiers each; 189 lavatories, 165 mess halls; 44 barracks for officers' quarters; 27 administration buildings; 39 warehouses; 15 post offices; 4 fire stations; 5 garages; 93 hospitals, and 94 auxiliary buildings (which included seven tailor shops, a 24-chair barber shop, a motor repair shop, a refrigerator plant, and a theater capable of seating 2,500 people). Camp Merritt also required the construction of 14 miles of paved roads; a mile long railroad spur connecting the West Shore Railroad to camp warehouses; eleven miles of water lines from the Hackensack Water Company's plant at Oradell; 267 miles of electric wire, requiring 1,029 electric poles; 235 street lamps; two large power plants to supply heat to 126,400 square feet of radiators; and a sewage disposal plant



connected to 12.5 miles of pipe. Order was maintained by a force of 300 military policemen. An Officer's Club was built by private donations in May 1918. The soldiers participated in a camp basketball league and frequent athletic competitions.

The first troops arrived in August 1917. Almost thirteen thousand soldier arrived that December. On average, the troops spent one day to two weeks before being sent to Hoboken to board ships for the European battlefields. The Great Influenza Epidemic struck in March 1918 resulting in numerous fatalities. Camp Merritt was decommissioned in November 1919. The contract to dismantle its buildings and infrastructure was awarded in December 1919.



General John J. Pershing, Commander-in-Chief of the American Expeditionary Force, headed the list of dignitaries who participated in the dedication of the Camp Merritt Monument on Memorial Day 1924. The monument is a shaft, 66 feet tall, made of Stony Creek granite, inscribed with the names of 15 officers, 558 enlisted men, four nurses and one civilian, who died at Camp Merritt during the war. The Harrison Granite Company built it in a traffic circle at the intersection of Knickerbocker Road and Madison Avenue in Cresskill. An inscription on the south side states that the obelisk "marks the centre of the camp and faces the highway over which more than a million American soldiers passed on their way to and from the World War, 1917-1919".

9."Sources:

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Miller, Lewis Marsena, chairman, "Report of Camp Merritt Memorial Committee," Bergen County Historical Society Twentieth Annual Report, Number 15, 1921-1922, (Hackensack: Bergen County Historical Society, 1922).

Watson G, Clark, "The Locating of Camp Merritt," and "The Location of Camp Merritt at

Tenafly, N, J.," Eighteenth Annual Report of the Bergen County Historical Society, Number Thirteen, (Hackensack: Bergen County Historical Society, 1920), pp. 52-58

