Press Release

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Fort Drum Public Affairs

History tours at Fort Drum continue virtually during pandemic

Fort Drum, NY - The Fort Drum History Tours have become popular among residents in local communities, gathering hundreds of visitors on post in recent years. Now people can still explore Fort Drum history on guided tours, but from the comfort of their homes.

Heather Wagner, Fort Drum Environmental Division public outreach and education coordinator, didn’t want to see this program lose momentum during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. In late April, she began recording video tours, starting with the Lewisburg Cemetery and following up with a tour of Lewisburg – similar to what visitors would experience during the Lost Villages Tour.

She has posted three videos, so far, on the Fort Drum Environmental YouTube channel at [www.youtube.com/channel/UCnZKLRVZrrxe-9QyilnpLnQ](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnZKLRVZrrxe-9QyilnpLnQ) with links also available at www.facebook.com/FortDrumCulturalResources/.

The Cultural Resources staff had the idea of creating educational videos before the pandemic, and Wagner said that this was the right time to start.

“The goals for me are to continue providing quality education and outreach for the Environmental Division, to ensure that our greater Fort Drum community has access to this information in this new normal, and to say thank you for all the public who over the years have provided the teams with information and support,” she said.

Wagner said that she approached this endeavor with no video recording or editing experience, but she is learning on the go.

“The response to them has been overwhelmingly positive, even with a shaky camera,” she said. “I am so glad that they are getting out to people who enjoy them. I have really, unexpectedly, loved doing these videos after I acknowledged to myself that they were not going to be perfect.”

She said that the videos are attracting new visitors, as well as people she has met on previous tours.

“I think having these videos in record is crucial for posterity,” Wagner said. “It has been a great way for me to manage some of our data, put the thousands of images people have given us to good use, and record my own thoughts and memories of these areas. I think, and hope, that they will be a great resource for future historians.”

So far, the Lewisburg tour has been the most popular – with nearly 900 visits. Her oldest son told her she won’t be a social media sensation until she exceeds 1 million views, but she noted that local historical groups have been discussing the videos online. Wagner said she hopes that parents and teachers can use these videos to teach children about local history.

“Even before the pandemic, schools were cutting back on field trips and outside learning experiences due to budget constraints,” she said. “This is a huge issue for me. I am a Carthage (Central High School) graduate and I fell in love with history because of field trips. In 5th grade my teacher, Mrs. Thornton, walked us through Carthage and pointed out historic buildings and why they are important, how the great Carthage fire spread, and how cemeteries hold a wealth of information in them. That was the start of my love of history.”

In high school, Wagner went on a field trip to Fort Drum to observe an archaeological dig where evidence of a cavalry camp was being investigated.

“That was it for me, I was obsessed,” she said. “It was like being in my own National Geographic adventure. And my dad said I would never get a job studying history and archaeology.”

An archaeologist by training and education – as well as a historian – Wagner said she might never have pursued this career path if it had not been for her classroom experiences.

“I feel a personal responsibility to make sure those experiences are accessible to our Fort Drum families, and our greater Fort Drum community,” she said. “Now I get to spread the love of history virtually, maybe to someone on the far side of the world. That is a total ‘pie in the sky’ mentality, but I really do hope it provides a spark to a student’s interest.”

Wagner said that her excursions would not have been possible without the support and coordination from the Directorate of Plans, Training, Mobilization and Security’s Range Control.

“They have been awesome getting me access to these sites,” she said.

Even a fierce encounter with black flies and ticks during a recent visit to Fuller Road Cemetery couldn’t diminish her enjoyment of the work.

“Being outside this spring in particular has been nothing short of magical,” Wagner said. “The pace of my life is so much slower right now than in recent years, and my goal is to really step into that pace while I can enjoy it. I haven't been to these sites with only one or two people in, literally, decades. There is something indescribable about the quiet and camaraderie that exists in that space with your team. It is like a visit with your favorite old friends.”

She still looks forward to the time when busloads of visitors can share history of Fort Drum with the Environmental team.

“I try to mention it on every tour, but I learn so much more from our visitors than I could have ever thought, more than they ever learn from me,” Wagner said. “You get to experience a site through their eyes and memories. To see all the emotion that being in a particular place, that looks so incredibly different, does to and for them.”

Alpina is the next on her itinerary, and she plans on covering all of the Lost Villages, the 13 cemeteries on post and LeRay Mansion Historic District.

Wagner also alluded to stories she is excited to tell about the historic people and places of Fort Drum and a collaboration with Natural Resources staff on a video series.

“I think people will really enjoy them, so stay tuned!” she said.

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Caption for photos:

Heather Wagner, Fort Drum Environmental Division public outreach and education coordinator, shares Fort Drum history with community members during tours on post in 2018. Now, she is continuing the program by recording a series of videos and posting them online so that people can enjoy the sites and history of Fort Drum from the convenience of their home. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)

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