Press Release

Release Nr: 2007-04

July 10, 2020

Fort Drum Public Affairs

For whom the bell tolls - Eagle Scout leads project to honor tragic death at Fort Drum’s LeRay Mansion

Fort Drum, NY - It’s a North Country legend that became a Fort Drum tradition – and thanks to a group of local Scouts and family members, it is certain to continue for many years.

Justin Bath, an Eagle Scout with Fort Drum’s Troop 26 B, recently led a team of volunteers to build a bell tower near a historic gravesite at LeRay Mansion on post.

It was while volunteering at Beautify LeRay Day in October 2019, when Bath learned about the LeRay Mansion District and the origin of the bell.

On a return trip from France in 1816, James LeRay de Chaumont – known as the “Father of the North Country” – invited his daughter, Therese, and her husband Marquis de Gouvello, to live at the mansion. Although they only stayed a year, tragedy struck when their 15-month-old daughter, Clotilde, died. She was buried on the mansion grounds, near a large reflecting pond at the end of the lawn.

“Originally, this gravesite marked the entrance to the mansion grounds, and they put a bell tower by her grave,” Bath said. “Anytime they would leave the grounds or come home, they would ring the bell.”

It was a way for family members to let Clotilde know that they were still thinking of her. Years later, the family would vacate the mansion, the bell was removed, but the gravesite remained.

Dr. Laurie Rush, Fort Drum Cultural Resources manager in the Environmental Division, said that the tradition was renewed in recent years when Fort Drum families placed a bell by the grave. She said that sometimes Soldiers returning from a deployment would stop by to ring the bell.

For his Eagle Scout project, Bath proposed to build a bell tower that was easily accessible and would honor the legacy of the LeRay family.

“I just thought it would be cool to bring the bell tower back and make something more permanent,” he said. “An Eagle Scout project is something that should benefit the community for years to come.”

In addition to the construction of a bell tower, the volunteers leveled the ground so flowers could be planted, and they added a few other renovations around the mansion’s gravesite.

Leadership is one of the requirements of an Eagle Scout project, and Bath had to assign tasks to all the volunteers and provide guidance. He said that wasn’t always easy – especially when one of his helpers was his father, who is also the troop’s scoutmaster and serves as a sergeant first class at Fort Drum.

“It’s kind of awkward – takes some getting used to,” Bath said. “It’s the first time I’ve ever had to lead a project. I think it’s a good life experience, and it teaches me how to be in charge.”

In addition to family members, Bath had members of both Fort Drum Troop 26 B and Troop 26 G assisting.

He also had to raise enough funds and seek contributions for all the supplies needed in the project. Bath wasn’t used to asking local businesses and civic organizations for any kind of support, but he found several in the community willing to help.

“Asking people for donations is hard, especially for a 15-year-old,” said his father, Daniel Bath. “The (LeRay de Chaumont Chapter of the) Daughters of the American Revolution actually had heard about Justin’s project and contacted him to make a donation.”

Even his grandparents helped out and provided the bronze bell, which Bath hung at the completion of his project. When Rush and members of the Cultural Resources staff went out to see the finished product, they were impressed by the results from the volunteer crew.

“I could not be more pleased with how Justin’s project turned out. I think it is going to be a really nice addition to the walking tour around the Historic District grounds,” Rush said. “The new bell tower with its beautiful bell and all of the plantings show a genuine interest in not just the history of the LeRays and the Historic District, but also our community.”

Rush said that when the Cultural Resources staff moved their offices into the LeRay Historic District, one of the goals was to strengthen community outreach. Since then, they’ve conducted countless tours and opened the mansion up for reservations so community members can host parties, ceremonies and other activities.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic is currently restricting access to the LeRay Mansion Historical District, the Cultural Resources team looks forward to when tours can resume and people can enjoy the new additions.

“We really want the community to feel welcome here, and to know that it is their historic district,” she said. “When young people, like Justin, show an interest, then we not only get an opportunity to teach them about their history but we hopefully also build partners for the future. It is always such a privilege to work with the Scouts of Troop 26. We are so fortunate to have them as partners at LeRay Mansion.”

To see the bell tower and gravesite, a virtual guided tour on the bell tower project is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqJepRfuQpY.

To learn more about the Cultural Resources Program at LeRay Mansion, visit www.facebook.com/FortDrumCulturalResources or call (315) 772-7170.

###

Media with inquiries regarding this press release should contact Fort Drum Public Affairs, Julie Halpin, julie.a.halpin2.civ@mail.mil, 315-772-8286.