



Fort Mackinac Walking Tour Auxiliary Aid

Program Content Overview:

This program serves as a guided tour of Fort Mackinac with an emphasis on life at the fort for soldiers stationed here during the 1880s. The tour is broken down thematically by the duties and activities that soldiers would perform to better illustrate to visitors what life was like for soldiers stationed here during the 1880s. The program, conducted by a costumed park interpreter, specifically explains the role of guard duty, maintaining Mackinac Island as a National Park, “fatigue” duty, and recreational activities for soldiers stationed at Fort Mackinac to give visitors a clearer vision of life at the fort during this time period.

Guard Duty:

Guard duty was a 24-hour shift in which 10-12 men would be patrolling the fort’s walls, looking for various dangers/threats. By the 1880s, threats other than invading armies became the principal concern of soldiers on guard duty. The most common and enduring threat to the fort was the hazard of fire. Many of the fort’s buildings have suffered from fire damage at least once in their structural lifetime, including the barracks burning down twice during the fort’s use as a military installation. Soldiers trying to sneak out of the fort without permission was also a common concern on guard duty, especially with soldiers suffering from boredom and the only available distraction being the downtown just below the fort, which included a number of bars. Finally, in the later National Park years of the fort’s occupation, unauthorized access by tourists was another concern for guard duty.

National Park Duty:

Mackinac Island would become the second National Park in the U.S. in 1875, right after Yellowstone, due primarily to the efforts of Michigan Senator Thomas W. Ferry, who grew up on the island and appreciated its natural beauty and historical significance. The National Park Service was not established until 1916. Prior to that, all National Parks were administered by the War Department, hence the Army’s principal role at the fort from 1875 until 1895, when the fort was de-commissioned and transitioned to the oversight of the State of Michigan. During the National Park period, soldiers stationed at the fort acted in the capacity of park rangers in which they enforced rules and regulations, forged trail heads, and monitored fire hazards. These duties fell outside of a soldier’s regular position expectation and required the Army to pay the men “extra duty pay” in addition to the \$13.00 a month starting salary for soldiers at the rank of private. To offset these additional expenditures, the Post Commandant sold government land on Bois Blanc Island and leased out land on the east and west bluffs of Mackinac Island. In addition to their pay, enlisted soldiers also received free board in the barracks, three hot meals a day and clothing in the forms of uniforms issued to them. The combination of the opportunity to earn extra pay along with the generally pleasant atmosphere of the fort location is what gave the reputation of Fort Mackinac as a “desirable station” as referenced by one former officer who served here.

Fatigue Duty:

Operation as a National Park required a great amount of labor and maintenance work by the soldiers, not only on park lands, but especially on the fort itself which was over 100 years old in the 1880s. This work done by soldiers outside of daily military specific tasks was known as “fatigue duty,” a special type of duty reflected in the different type of uniform the soldier is wearing for this portion of the program. This work included patching up the fort’s limestone walls, painting buildings, cleaning windows, patching roof tiles and general fort hygiene maintenance. Seasonal work like chopping firewood on Round Island, tending to the Post Gardens (now Marquette Park), and chopping out ice blocks during the winter for food storage in the Commissary. Military drill six days a week for an hour to two hours a day, practicing marching and maneuvers, and rifle practice at least twice a week were also included in a soldier’s daily schedule.

Recreation:

From the end of the War of 1812 onward, Fort Mackinac had an increasingly lack of strategic importance from a military standpoint. By the 1880s it had virtually no military significance, which allowed for a fair amount of free time on the hands of the soldiers stationed there, who sought to fill this time with recreational activities. If of good character, a soldier could be given a leave pass for a day or two, so they could go downtown to visit friends, perhaps go dancing at one of the various hotels on the island, or more often than not, frequent one of the many saloons downtown. This soon became an issue as soldiers often found themselves drinking in excess and getting into trouble with some of the locals. This would include getting into scuffles with civilians, passing out under private porches, showing up to drill late, drunk, or not at all. To remedy this problem, in 1889 the Post Commandant converted the Wood Quarters into a Post Canteen which contained a game room with a billiards table, a Post Exchange to buy amenities, as well as a small bar in order to better regulate the alcoholic intake of soldiers. After this conversion, there was a large decrease in incidents involving enlisted men downtown. The fort even had its own baseball team, the “Fort Mackinac Neversweats,” which would play with local teams from Cheboygan and St. Ignace in the field directly behind the fort. Seasonal recreation was available as well which included boating and fishing during the summer and skiing or sledding down the various hills on the island or skating on Lake Huron once the water froze over in winter.

