

Brattleboro creates all-purpose armory

By WAYNE CARHART

BRATTLEBORO Ñ The role of a volunteer militia in Brattleboro has evolved over the years to become what is now the Vermont Army National Guard, with headquarters in Westminster. Brattleboro's role in military affairs began at the military post known as Fort Dummer constructed in 1724.

In the mid-1800s, when the Union Army needed more men for the Civil War effort, Brattleboro became a mustering site for all of Vermont. This operation, along with a hospital, took place at what was once the Valley Fair grounds and is now the location of the Brattleboro Union High School and the Department of Public Works.

After the Civil War, the Vermont Militia was restructured, and in 1871, Company I was formed in Brattleboro. There was another reorganization in 1874 and the local military operation became the Estey Guard and Fuller Battery. Most of the resources for this new organization came from Levi K. Fuller, an Estey Organ Company principal and later governor of Vermont. It was during Fuller's tenure that the guard was turned over to the state.

State guards played a major role in keeping labor peace during the last half of the 19th century. The guard was called out to restore order after events such as the 1877 railroad strike and the Haymarket Affair, a strike against the McCormick Harvester Company which resulted in riots. According to Robert M. Fogelson's book "American Armories," state militias were also called to put down bread riots, theater riots, election-day riots and anti-abolitionists riots.

The real or perceived need for a local military force was popular during this period of American history, so it was not surprising that the construction of buildings to house the equipment and provide space for drill and rifle practice took place. In 1884 New York established an Armory Board, later the State Armory Commission, to fund the construction of armories. Other states followed suit including Vermont, and the Vermont Armory Commission was created. Armories were to be constructed where there was the greatest need. However, in 1903, state guards lost most of their autonomy with the passage of the federal government's Dick Act, named after Congressman Charles Dick of Ohio, making local guards accountable to both the state and federal governments.

Brattleboro's armory, now the Gibson-Aiken Center, located on Brattleboro's Main Street, came about as part of this national phenomenon and Brattleboro's political forces joining together shortly after World War I ended on Nov. 11, 1918.

A group of concerned Brattleboro citizens was formed to explore the possibility of creating a memorial for those who served in World War I. At the time, there was also a need to provide space for the Vermont Guard to house their equipment and conduct drills. The Brattleboro High School was looking for space to use as a gymnasium and many civic organizations were looking for some type of facility in which to meet and hold social events. In 1920, the idea of creating one building that would serve all these needs received much support. Patriotic feeling was strong, there was a legitimate need in Brattleboro for such a building and there were considerable resources available for the project Ñ the timing was right.

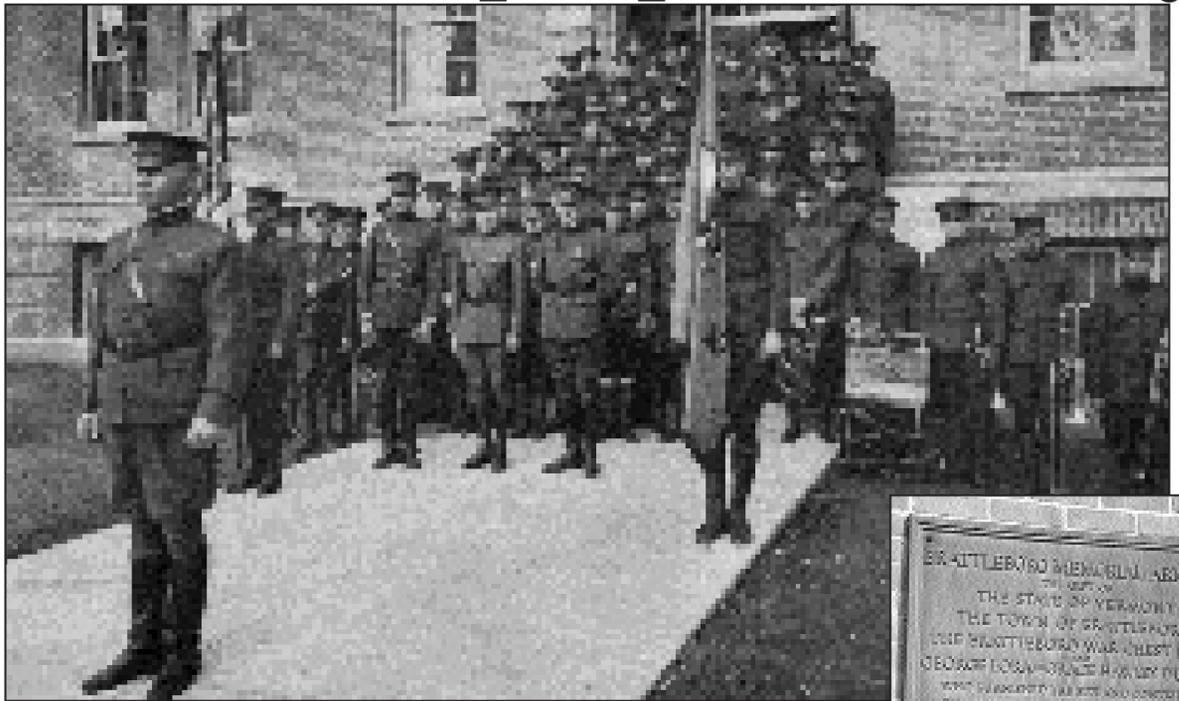
According to articles written for the *Brattleboro Reformer* at the time, the funding for the project was secured as follows: \$15,000 from the War Chest Fund (a fund established in Brattleboro for the war effort of World War I), \$50,000 from the state of Vermont armory appropriation fund, a town of Brattleboro appropriation of \$40,000 which included a \$10,000 armory site appropriation voted in 1911.

In addition, Mr. and Mrs. George L. Dunham donated the parcel of land (former site of the Goodhue family home that had been acquired first by the Centre Congregational Church and then the Dunham Shoe Company). The total funding package totaled around \$100,000 which was considered adequate for the project.

The individuals involved in this project were: Howard C. Rice, Sr., publisher of the *Brattleboro Reformer*, George L. Dunham, owner of Dunham Brothers Shoe Co., Martin Austin, official of the Brattleboro Savings Bank, C. A. Pellett, local building contractor, and E. W. Gibson, lawyer and active in local and state politics.

Brattleboro's Memorial armory and community house was dedicated in April 1923 and became the property of the state of Vermont.

Fifty-five years later the armory received a \$200,000 renovation to create a recreation and senior center for the town as part of a bicentennial project. The Vermont National Guard had relocated to Westminster and the town became the new owners of the facility. The armory was renamed the Gibson-Aiken Center and dedicated on Dec. 3, 1978. Ernest W. Gibson Jr. and George Aiken were both former Vermont governors and United States senators. Gibson made his home in Brattleboro and Aiken was a native



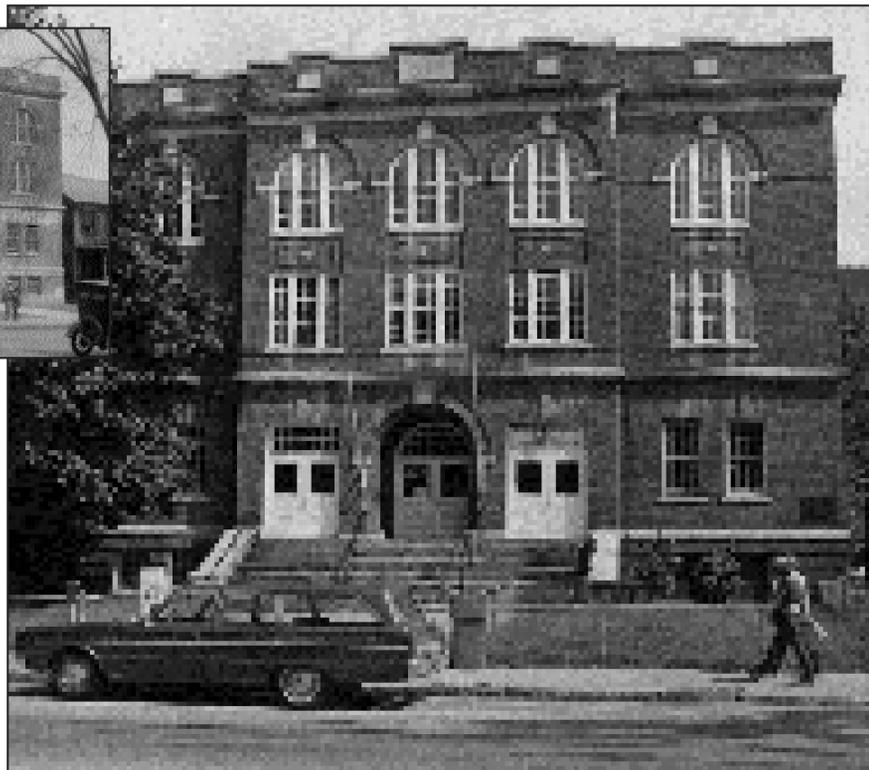
IN LINE Ñ Col. E.W. Gibson with men from Regimental Headquarters Company, Company I, and the band line up in front of the former Brattleboro Memorial Armory on Main Street. A commemorative plaque, right, is located on the building, now the Gibson-Aiken



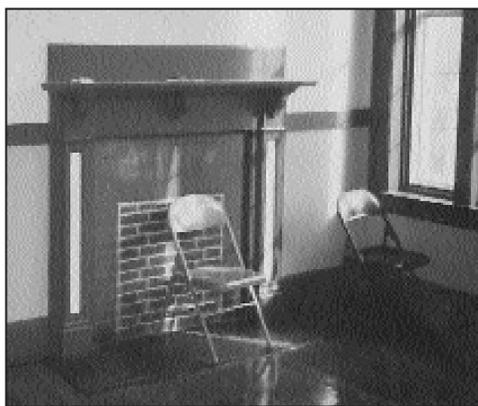
Benjamin Crown ÒWith InterestÓ photo



Mary Clapp Hinkley photo



CHANGES Ñ At the time of its opening, above, the armory had a single-door entranceway as it does today. The armory's lower level had a doorway leading to the rear parking area which enabled military vehicles to be stored inside. The communications room, class room and locker and shower room were also located here. The drill hall was on the upper level along with gun and ammunition storage and offices. At right, the stairs have been widened and two additional entrances added in this 1970s photo.



Wayne Carhart photo

HEAT Ñ Several offices were equipped with working fireplaces even though the building always had central heating. Today the fireplaces are no longer used and have lost some of their elegance.



Barrett family collection



Charles Akeley photo

GOODHUE VIEW Ñ The Goodhue family home, the first on the left in this southeast view of Main Street, is now the site of the Gibson-Aiken Center.

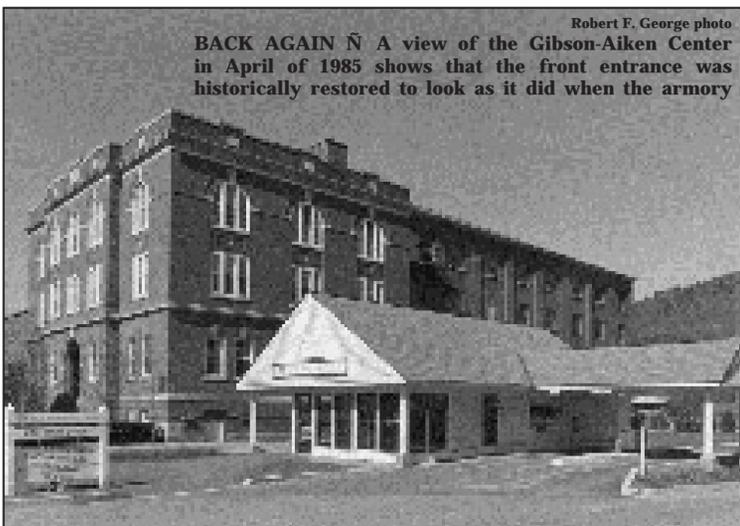


Bigelow ÒWith InterestÓ photo

UNIFORM TASKS Ñ Above, Charles Langmaid, left, and John Barrett, second from right, stand during an inspection at the armory in this 1960s photo. At left, equipment is stored in cubbies in the lower level of the armory. Below, men practice at the rifle range also located on the lower level of the armory. A sign posted on the wall prohibits the use of rifles and pistols of greater .22 calibre at the range.

BACK AGAIN Ñ A view of the Gibson-Aiken Center in April of 1985 shows that the front entrance was historically restored to look as it did when the armory

Robert F. George photo



Photos Courtesy
Brattleboro
Historical Society



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