

UP FRONT



NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

By Bette McDevitt

Michael Kraus: Collector and Curator

Everyone should be as fortunate as I was on a bright blue February day to take a leisurely walk with Michael Kraus through Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall and Museum. Michael is the curator of the museum and knows the details of every exhibit. He is familiar with each of the uniformed figures in the glass cases, standing eternally at attention among the yellowed handwritten proclamations and the faded ribbons. Michael has created many of the exhibits and tends the others with care.

It was a fairly straight path from growing up in Neshannock Township, adjoining the town of New Castle, to his position at Soldiers and Sailors. Michael believes the journey started in the backyard of his childhood home.

“It’s a good New Castle story,” Michael said. “When I was 10 years old, I found an odd-shaped stone in the backyard. It was polished, about 6 inches long and 4 inches high, and had a groove in it, I thought somebody must have made that, and it opened my mind to a lot of questions. I took it to school and one of my teachers sent me up to the high school to show the stone to Charlie King, a new teacher at the time, and a collector of artifacts.”

Mr. King told Michael that his stone was part of an axe, and they learned that it was from the Archaic era of North American culture and dated back to 3500 BC. It was, they determined, a tool used by the Iroquois who lived there. There is a well-documented history of the tribe in Lawrence County.



Michael Kraus building a new exhibit.

Photo by Lisa Petitta.

The stone that Michael discovered at age 10 that turned out to be an Iroquois tool.

Michael Kraus.



The stone was quite a find. “I was very excited, and Mr. King nurtured that interest. When I went on to the junior high school, we formed the Antiquities Club, and we brought old things in. Mr. King brought in his own collection and used it as a teaching tool. I remained friends with him for the rest of his life. He has now passed away. I’d like to credit him. I owe him a debt of gratitude.”

Michael’s interest in art led to a fine arts degree at Edinboro University that fit in

nicely with his growing interest in history, which increasingly focused on the war between the states. “The Civil War was, to me, heroes, flags, and horses, very visual, patriotic and exciting. That was the 1960s, the time of the Civil War Centennial and there was a lot of material to see and to study.”

His interests have remained constant over the years. He has created two documentary series, *Civil War Minutes Union* and *Civil War Minutes Confederate* (available

Soldiers & Sailors National Military Museum & Memorial, completed 1910, pictured 1937. The building was owned and operated by Allegheny County until 1999, when a charitable trust was formed to lease it from the county. Rental of the auditorium and ballroom is a source of income as are grants and donations. A parking lot beneath the site is owned by the county.

University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh City Photographer Collection, 715.3731932.CP.



Michael's two main interests, history and art, came together when the Michael J. Novosel Foundation, an organization that helps veterans, asked Kraus to create a bronze bust made to honor Medal of Honor recipient Michael Novosel Sr. "I wish that I could do that for every Medal of Honor recipient in the Hall of Valor," Michael said. Novosel served in World War II and then in Vietnam as a medical helicopter pilot. He was joined there by his son, Michael J. Jr., who also piloted a medical helicopter.

Photo by Michael Kraus.



The Antiquities Club at Neshannock Junior Senior High School in New Castle, 1971. Michael is in the front row wearing a Civil War uniform; to the left is teacher Charlie King.

Michael Kraus.

on YouTube), consulted on two full-length films, *Gettysburg* and *Cold Mountain*, and co-authored, with Kenneth Turner and David Neville, the groundbreaking book published by the Heinz History Center, *The Civil War in Pennsylvania: A Photographic History*. He enjoys going to Civil War trade shows and participates often in reenactments.

Michael has been curator at Soldiers and Sailors since 2006. He sees the massive building overlooking Fifth Avenue as an artifact in itself:

Civil War veterans themselves were very involved with the design of the building. A lot of cities chose to make a memorial in a courthouse, or to name a boulevard

in the veterans' honor. Our veterans wanted a community center, a meeting place for the many veterans in the area, and the auditorium in the central part of the building was built with that purpose in mind. Henry Hornbostel, the architect, designed niches encircling the auditorium, thinking they would contain life-size statues of the soldiers. But what happened is that people started bringing things in, so those niches were converted into display cases.

The museum still accepts and welcomes artifacts for their collection that are not duplicates of what they have. Each item needs and receives careful cataloging, using the best methods of preservation available. The site

has expanded well beyond its Civil War roots to dedicated to honoring the men and women of all branches of service, from all generations and conflicts. The building itself was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1974.

As curator, Michael is attentive to the past but also looking around the corner. "I make decisions about our collections, what we're going to display and how we're going to do it, but we're also looking at trends, such as African American and women's issues. We turn on our radar then and look at building for future collections." 

Bette McDevitt is a freelance writer and a longtime contributor to *Western Pennsylvania History*.