

106 SUCCESS STORY

Army Installation Preserves African American Military History for Future Fort Leonard Wood, Pulaski County, Missouri



“Constant communication during the Section 106 process has been the most important part of the process. Our stakeholders helped us save an important touchstone to American history, one of the last standing historically segregated officers clubs. They helped us rehabilitate Building 2101 to classroom space while preserving its character and history. Rather than attending a class in a boring, sterile, and otherwise unimportant new classroom, students can attend a class in the building on a particular subject and walk away with a better understanding of the African American and prisoner of war experience during WWII.”

—CHARLIE E. NEEL III
Chief, Environmental Division, Directorate
of Public Works, US Army Garrison
Fort Leonard Wood

Photos: Above, interpretive panels about Countee's art in the renovated officers club building; Right, before and after renovation (photos courtesy US Army)



THE STORY

Fort Leonard Wood was established in 1941 as an engineer replacement training post. In the segregated Army of the time, African American troops had separate housing and recreational facilities. The fort's Building 2101 was reassigned as the black officers club in 1942 for the 7th Engineer Training Group. In the summer of 1945, Staff Sergeant Samuel A. Countee, an African American soldier stationed at Fort Leonard Wood, painted a mural for the club. Countee had been an instructor at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts prior to his service in the Army during World War II, and he resumed his art career after the war, exhibiting many pieces and continuing his teaching. Countee painted dozens of murals and other paintings at military installations both in the US and abroad, but the mural at Fort Leonard Wood is believed to be the only surviving piece from his military art career. From 1943 to 1946, the installation also housed German and Italian prisoners of war (POW) who built stonework masonry features that still exist in Building 2101 and its surrounding grounds. As one of the last remaining World War II-era segregated officers clubs within the Department of the Army, Building 2101 was determined to be eligible to the National Register of Historic Places in 1998.

THE PROJECT

In the post-war period, Fort Leonard Wood continued to serve a variety of important functions, hosting the Army Engineer School and later the Chemical Corps and Military Police schools. In 2009, it was re-designated the US Army Maneuver Support Center of Excellence. Adapting to changing Army needs, Building 2101 was scheduled in 2011 to be utilized as office and classroom space by the 43rd Adjutant General Reception Station; however, the unit decided they did not need the building. No other tenant was identified, and the building sat vacant with minimal HVAC supplied in an effort to preserve the Countee mural. The Army considered several options for the building including continued deferred maintenance, mothballing, rehabilitation, demolition, and relocation.

THE 106 PROCESS

The Army, the federal agency carrying out this project, was responsible for conducting

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Photos: From left, Countee's mural; renovating the building; POW-built stone wall (courtesy US Army)

the Section 106 process under the National Historic Preservation Act. Section 106 requires that federal agencies identify historic properties and assess the effects of the projects they carry out, fund, or permit on those properties. Federal agencies also are required to consult with parties that have an interest in the historic property when adverse effects may occur.

The Army was seriously considering the removal of the mural and complete demolition of Building 2101 when it entered into consultation with the Missouri State Historic Preservation Officer, Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Pulaski County NAACP, Rolla NAACP, Sammie Whiting Ellis (Countee's niece), Missouri Preservation, and Center for Sustainable Solutions in 2012. The consulting parties were adamantly opposed to demolition of one of the last remaining World War II-era black officers clubs. The primary issue was finding a new tenant for the building as the consulting parties urged Army leadership to preserve the building. In 2014, the Army began discussions with consulting parties for converting the building into classroom and meeting/social space, conserving the Countee mural, and making needed repairs to the POW stonework. In the end, the Army and the consulting parties concluded the rehabilitation would result in a no adverse effect to Building 2101.

Consulting Parties:

- Fort Leonard Wood
- Missouri State Historic Preservation Officer
- ACHP
- National Trust for Historic Preservation
- Pulaski County NAACP
- Rolla NAACP
- Sammie Whiting Ellis
- Missouri Preservation
- Center for Sustainable Solutions

THE SUCCESS

The consulting parties used the Section 106 process to strongly advocate for the Army to reconsider its demolition plans and find a compatible long-term use. Their efforts prevailed with the decision to reuse the historic property, thereby ensuring its continued viability. In 2018, rehabilitation of Building 2101 commenced based on a rehabilitation plan developed with the consulting parties. The Countee mural was removed for restoration and temporarily displayed at the installation's museum before being reinstalled with a glass enclosure and humidity control system once rehabilitation was completed in early 2019.

The project illustrates how historic properties like Building 2101 can be productive assets to an installation's mission as well as a venue to tell a story that goes beyond the building's physical qualities. Building 2101 stands as one of the last few tangible pieces of the segregated Army history. Its preservation and continued use will provide countless opportunities to tell the story of the African American Army officers' experience during World War II to future generations.

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