

WESTERLY — From a distance, the building can look intimidating: a solid brick exterior set on a granite base with a cannon out front. It is a fortress bordering a residential neighborhood.

But take a closer look at the century-old Westerly Armory, and the sign outside beckons visitors to "The People's Museum." Inside, guests can take a step back in time to find an extensive collection of military and community memorabilia spread over multiple floors, and a massive drill hall that is used for dozens of events every year.

"When you're outside, it looks so fierce, and it's meant to because it's an armory," said Roberta Mudge Humble, who for nearly three decades has worked to preserve and renovate a building she used to visit as a child growing up in Westerly. "I would like people to visit more and not be afraid to come in. It's very bright and cheery once you're in here."

You might say Humble, a retired Community College of Rhode Island professor, has a thing for armories. Twenty years ago she wrote a book about Rhode Island's 18 historic armories, and during an interview she rattled off details about their history and architecture.

But it is the Westerly Armory where you will find her on Mondays and Thursdays from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. talking about the rich past of a building that went up in 1901, two years after its wooden predecessor a few blocks away burned down.

The current building hosted Ella Fitzgerald, who arrived from New York City by train a few blocks over. Rocky Marciano boxed here, the old New York Celtics (that is correct) played basketball in the 6,000-square-foot drill hall, and there was a bowling alley in the basement.

"As a kid I was always here," Humble said. "My father remembers coming here for dances, people met their husbands and wives here at the dances. I remember coming here for car and antique shows." The military was an integral part of the community, she added, and children would also come over and meet with the soldiers.



In 1992, Humble formed a nonprofit, Westerly Armory Restoration Inc. A plaque outside notes that the building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1996. That's the year The Rhode Island National Guard moved out and the Town of Westerly bought the armory from the state for \$1.

Westerly is one of five armories in Rhode Island designed by architect William Walker. They include Pawtucket, Woonsocket, the Kentish Artillery in Warwick and the state's largest and most famous, the Providence Armory (better known as The Cranston Street Armory) — all with Walker's signature look.



Humble says among the 18 armories across Rhode Island, Westerly is considered medium-sized, even though it consumes an entire community block. Its drill hall is 62 feet by 102 feet. By comparison, The Cranston Street Armory's drill hall is 175 by 275 feet.

In 2001, Humble enlisted her ex-husband, John, to help her. Roberta holds the title of president, while John is the treasurer and operations manager. If there is something that needs fixing, John, who has an engineering background, gets the assignment. And he supervises many of the events, from weddings to concerts.

“She’s the heart and soul behind the intent and the purpose of the facility,” John Humble said. “A lot of people in Westerly don’t realize the magnitude of what we have here and the historical nature of not only the building but what’s kept there.”



Almost every day that the armory is open, someone from the community brings in an artifact. There is a museum on the first floor, and the Westerly Band — the nation’s oldest active civic band, founded in 1852 — rents a room upstairs. The armory’s library has more than 2,000 volumes.

“The other source of interest from the community is the memorabilia,” John Humble said. “Folks who have past generations that have served in the military and have memorabilia, a lot of them out of respect can’t tolerate the thought of throwing it away. But there’s a place to take it where it can be remembered.”



When Roberta Humble first got involved in the early 1990s, she got a wakeup call on her first walk through the armory.

“I was rather horrified by the condition of the building,” she said “My first goal was just to restore the building.”

But because the state owned it, raising money proved challenging. “People would say, well, the state should restore it. And that was true, but the state wasn’t going to give any money to these old armories.”

So Humble, who taught technical writing at CCRI, began writing grants. About 15 years ago she created a series of Rhode Island-centric trivia games and books. Her first, "The Right to Crow: A Look at Rhode Island’s Firsts, Bests & Uniques," focused on trivia from the state’s 39 cities and towns. It also talks about unusual moments in Rhode Island’s history since 1636. The book raised \$50,000, which she funneled back into the armory. She has gone on to raise tens of thousands of dollars more with subsequent books and games.

“I think if the people in the state don’t promote their own state, no one else is going to do it,” Humble said. “We have to be a strong voice.”



Admission to the armory is free, but there is also a membership program to help defray the costs, with member appreciation nights in the drill hall that feature a full dinner and entertainment. Organizations can also rent the hall, with a discount given to nonprofits.

The armory has also mirrored much of the history of Westerly. Last year it was home to the town's 350th anniversary celebration with a gala in the drill hall — as it had been half a century earlier when the town marked its 300th anniversary.

In January, the latest class from Leadership Rhode Island rented out the hall for a day, and Humble kicked it off by quizzing them about Rhode Island trivia. A nearby table had her games and books available for purchase.

The pandemic has cut down on the number of organizations renting the drill hall, but it has not totally shut down. In fact, the Humbles never closed their doors, even at the height of the state's lockdown in March and April. Roberta Humble encourages people to come check it out.

"Armories are wonderful," she said. "You have no idea until you've been in them to see what they contain — and what value they have to not only our history, but to today."

