

From Armory To Town Hall

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Picture yourself driving north on Connecticut Avenue toward Kensington during the evening rush hour. As the road veers to the left just before the Connecticut/Knowles intersection, brake lights flash on ahead of you, and you put on your brakes, too. As you wait to get going again, you notice a narrow open road going straight ahead and wonder if you should take it.

What if you had chosen that straight and narrow road? You probably wouldn't accomplish anything practical, and you wouldn't reach your destination faster. But that strip of road, now called Armory Avenue, reflects a piece of Kensington history. Actually, it was once known as Connecticut... that really was the size of Connecticut Avenue.

After crossing Baltimore Street and passing a few houses, you would notice a large brick building on your right. A fortress? A castle? Surely not a jail? How intriguing, but the light is fading, the traffic is still out there and you have promises to keep. So you resolve to come back sometime for a closer look.

The sturdy red-brick structure at the corner of Mitchell Street and Armory Avenue lends its name to the latter road, for it was indeed the National Guard Armory for many years. It was built in 1927 to house company of the Maryland National Guard. It is now the Kensington Town Hall, and has been for more than ten years.

A photograph of the December 1927 dedication hangs in the Town Council chamber: soldiers, officers, band members, and important-looking civilians line up in rows along the curving entrance road at the front of the Armory. Only a few women are present at the dedication, and a boy in knickers stands watching at the left edge of the photo.

The military aspects of the façade is impressive, with its red-brick bulk standing four-square towards Mitchell Street, its tower-like structures flanking the entrance, and its crenellated roof-line.

But the Armory housed more than the National Guard. It was also home to the Kensington Volunteer Fire Department, thanks to an agreement made when the town deeded the property to the state for the Armory. Photographs of the Kensington VFD now line the long hallway to the council chamber. That chamber was once the rest and recreation room for VFD.

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A handsome brass plaque hangs on the Armory Avenue side of the building. There, the great red doors used to open to the 1943 Seagrave pumper engine and its predecessors. Presented to the Town of Kensington by the Kensington Historical Committee, the plaque honors the "original and charter members" of the Kensington VFD: "organized 1894...reorganized 1918...chartered 1925"...and moved to its present quarters at Plyers Mill Road in 1946.

Eugene Raney, founder and Chief of the VFD, wore another hat at the Armory. He rented space from the National Guard to operate a public bowling alley and snack bar. The bowling alley was right next the National Guard Shooting Range (if you travel back in time to that period, you will need a good set of ear plugs). Tom Curtis of Kensington thinks the bowling alley ran from the late '20's to the mid '30's. He remembers helping set up the pins occasionally. He joined the VFD in 1944, and he and his brother both appear in the hallway photographs.

Lewis Boynton, Jr., tells of more attractions at the Armory in his "Remembering Kensington." "We shot pool and bowled on the lower floor..." and "the fire company held carnivals on the lot adjacent to the Armory."

By the 1950's the fire fighters had been replaced by the Maryland Department of Motor Vehicles. Many a Kensington area resident recalls nervously applying for a driver's license and taking the driving test on surrounding roads in the '50's and '60's. (And you know how far you have to go for a driver's license now!). By the early 1970's the Kensington Company of the National Guard had moved into new quarters off Route 29 in White Oak.

There's more to the story...and it will continue in the next issue.

Martha Lawrenz

(With all thanks to all the people mentioned in the article, and to Valerie Kellogg, Town Clerk-Treasure, William Schmaltz, Kensington Public Works Supervisor, and Charles Stuart, Mayor of Kensington.)