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Washington Light Infantry turns 200

Group named for 1st president organized in 1807 as militia
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BY JESSICA JOHNSON

When Maj. Neil Moore's grandson walked into the Washington Light Infantry's relic room, he took one look at the throne-like chairs and proclaimed: "King Cole was here."

Moore, the infantry's current historian, still laughs while recounting that story.

The Washington Light Infantry organization is almost a century younger than the 1709 nursery rhyme. The group formed voluntarily in 1807 when there were fears that the British army would return. The men who form the infantry group today no longer carry weapons, but they will celebrate the organization's 200th anniversary this month.

The infantry is one of 88 associations in the Centennial Legion of Historic Military Commands. Since the voluntary militia formed in the 1800s, it has had quite a history. Relics from the Revolutionary War and nearly every war since cover the walls and fill display cases in the room where the organization holds its monthly meetings.

The group's relic room and armory are off limits to the general public, though tours can be arranged. Most guides begin with the George Washington tapestry, one of five woven from silk on a famous French loom. The infantry was named for the president, and the organization celebrates on his birthday each year.

Immediately next to the portrait is what may be the most prized relic, Col. William Washington's Revolutionary War battle flag. It's called the Eutaw Flag, a crimson square with a romantic story. William Washington visited his fiancé, Jane Elliot, at Sandy Hill, an estate near Charleston, before riding off to a Revolutionary War battle. Washington needed a flag for his troops, and Elliot cut her Damascus curtain saying, "Let this be your flag!"

Moore said different versions of the story say the flag came from the back of a chair or a throw pillow. Wherever it came from, the Washington Light Infantry acquired it in 1827, when Elliot donated the flag to the group. The organization adopted William Washington's flag as its battle colors.

The flag is a possession so prized that it once took two light infantrymen to remove it from a vault, as an added security measure. In the group's Meeting Street location, the framed flag hangs above the gun display case protected by a complex security system.

Passing guides sometimes tell tourists that the armory is named for Col. William Washington, though it is named for his cousin, George.

The Washington Light Infantry formed shortly after a British ship, the Leopard, fired on the frigate Chesapeake. Replica leopard fur can be found on the band of the infantry's kepi hats and hanging from the bearskin shako hats used in ceremonies today.

The relic room is home also to Confederate mementos, including a battle flag from the Confederate cruiser Shenandoah. The story goes that the commander, James Waddell, continued to attack U.S. whaling ships for four months after the Civil War ended. Moore said communication was so poor that Waddell didn't know the war was over. When he learned the truth, he surrendered in England, fearing that he would be charged with piracy.

Commander Waddell's ancestors still live in the state today, Moore said. Relatives and

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Commander Wagner's ancestors still live in the state today, Moore said. Relatives and members of the Washington Light Infantry have donated most of the hundreds of items of memorabilia on permanent display.

However, the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Boston has loaned one of their war trophies: the saddle of Confederate Gen. Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard, which was seized by Union troops. Beauregard played a role in designing the South's battle flag and defending Charleston during the Civil War.

More than 400 Washington Light Infantry members fought in the war, and 114 lost their lives. In 1866, the group formed the Washington Light Infantry Charitable Association to assist struggling Southern families. The organization continues to help area families today with donations to groups such as Toys for Tots.

Despite hard feelings between the North and the South, the group headed north in 1875, marching with a Northern company to celebrate the centennial of the Battle of Bunker Hill. They did so with borrowed rifles, since Southern militias were not allowed to have guns in the post-Civil War era. In 1876 the group again participated in Revolutionary War celebrations, again with borrowed rifles, some of which they were allowed to keep. The rifles remain on display today in the relic room.

Washington Light Infantry membership was once linked to the National Guard's Company B, 118th Infantry, but the state moved the unit out of Charleston. Membership is now open to any former servicemen with the proper sponsors. Currently the membership's waiting list is seven years long. Steve Banis Jr., of Boston's Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company is one of those waiting. He moved from Boston to Charleston and wants to become part of the group.

"They keep moving me down the list," Banis said.

"That's because he is a Yankee," Moore quipped.

Banis' Boston artillery company will join the Washington Light Infantry for its 200th celebration through Sunday. The Boston unit and other historic military commands will join the Washington Light Infantry during a march through downtown Charleston starting 10 a.m. Saturday.

The British might've come back

Charleston residents founded the Washington Light Infantry in 1807 fearing a second war with the British. The corps was named in honor of President George Washington.

The unit participated in every war since its inception through World War II.

It is one of 88 associations in the Centennial Legion of Historic Military Commands that have pledged to keep alive their ancient traditions and preserve their military records.

If you go

Following are events open to the public for the 200th anniversary celebration of the founding of the Washington Light Infantry:

Friday - 4:20-5:20 p.m.: The Citadel Review, Summerall Field, The Citadel

Saturday - 10 a.m.: Grand Military Parade, Marion Square

Sunday - 11 a.m.: Memorial service, St. John's Lutheran Church, Archdale Street

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