

NEW LIFE FOR HILLSDALE

The war memorial in Hillsdale's Veterans Park hasn't been updated in nearly a century. Now, members of the local American Legion hope to see the memorial updated to include all the wars in which Americans served, and turn the location into an educational spot where kids can learn about history.

Eighty-five names are listed on Hillsdale's present monument, the men from the borough who served from 1917 to 1918 during America's involvement in what was then called the Great War or the World War. Two of those names—Benjamin Klass and Albert Baker—have asterisks representing that their lives were lost. Yet, these men's stories had long been a mystery. Post 162 Vice-Commander Doug Frank, chairman of the Veterans Memorial Committee, asked Pascack Historical Society for some help finding information about these two men. Consulting census records, military documents, news clippings, and cemetery records, your RELICS editor set out to discover the men behind the names.

We learned that Klass was actually a civilian. Born in 1890, he grew up in Hillsdale, the son of John and Minnie Klass, and was part of a family that had at least six children. By 1917 at age 27 he was living in New York, self-employed in vulcanizing tires. He was married to Anastasia M. Wilson on Sept. 16, 1917, and departed from Hoboken, bound for Europe, just four months later. As part of an Army construction contract, he went to France to help with bridge building alongside older brother John Klass, who was in steel construction. Just 12 days after leaving the U.S., he died of meningitis on Jan. 25, 1918. He was buried at The Oise-Aisne American Cemetery and Memorial, Fère-en-Tardenois, France.

Baker was born June 12, 1892 and grew up on Cedar Street in Hillsdale. Part of a family that included mother Margaret, father John and at least five children, he went by "Bert" and "Bertie" as a child. His 1918 draft registration card says he was employed as a teamster. He



Benjamin Klass and Albert Baker.

was inducted into the Army at Hackensack July 20, 1918, and served with the 153rd Depot Brigade at Fort Dix. He died of influenza on Sept. 27, 1918. In September and October of 1918, the Spanish Flu pandemic killed 863 people at Fort Dix. During the same time period the quick-spreading, deadly virus killed nearly 9,000 people in New Jersey overall.

In 1920, an Honor Roll Committee was appointed in Hillsdale to devise a fitting way to honor World War I servicemen. They decided to create a monument with a plaque fixed upon a huge boulder. The time it took to see the project brought to fruition seems to have been the cause of friction in Hillsdale at the time.

"As the American Legion boys pass the spot where a memorial to them is supposed to stand, they must have noticed that the slab of cement laid down months ago to hold the sturdy boulder native to Bergen County, typical of their spirit, is still unoccupied," *The Record* newspaper reported April 28, 1921. "A pertinent question would be: When is the rock to be brought from its bed and set into its place?"

Later that year the boulder was brought to Hillsdale on a flatbed railroad car. Near the Hillsdale station, as it was being moved to a transfer vehicle, the boulder toppled to the ground. Because moving the multi-ton stone to its final destination was deemed too costly a task, an Erie Railroad crew dragged it a



The original location of Hillsdale's World War I monument can be seen to the left of the police booth in this image from the late 1920s.

LE'S WAR MONUMENT

small distance off the road to just south of the railroad station—where it still remains nearly 100 years later.

"The boulder which has been standing by the road near the Hillsdale station was moved yesterday by an Eric wrecking crew," *The Record* reported Oct. 19, 1922. "The foreman of the crew stated that it was going to be used as a stop at the end of the switch where the cars are left overnight. Hillsdale will not be rid of the boulder after all."

The town fathers decided to give the project a second try, this time with considerably more success. Hillsdale's present granite war monument arrived in 1922. However, it wasn't located in the park back then. Early on it was next to the train station (on the Broadway side) and faced Hillsdale Avenue. It was later moved to a triangular piece of land between the railroad station and Broadway, facing the direction of Washington Avenue. The monument was moved to the park in 1961, both because of its tree-shaded location and the desire to keep the streets open to traffic during ceremonies.

The monument reads "Erected by the Township of Hillsdale, 1922." When Hillsdale first incorporated in 1898 it was a township, and remained so until switching to a borough form of government in 1923.



A little girl peeks out from behind the monument on Memorial Day 1950. By then it had been moved to a triangular piece of land between the railroad station and Broadway, facing Washington Avenue.



American Legion Post 162's vision for an updated war memorial site.

Today, the veterans' vision for an updated war memorial includes six monuments arranged in a semicircle. The first one will encompass all of the "Early Wars," including the American Revolution, War of 1812, Mexican American War, Civil War and Spanish American War. The existing monument will be used to represent World War I, but new ones will be created for World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War/War on Terror. Embedded in the walkway in front of the monuments will be the seals of each of the branches of the military. In the center of the semicircle will be a flagpole and a dedication monument, which will have a QR code that visitors can scan with their smartphones. The code will lead to a website with details and statistics on each of the conflicts, an honor roll of Hillsdale veterans, donor recognition and a memorial list. The veterans hope families and schools will visit the spot and use it as an opportunity to teach kids about history and patriotism.

The legionnaires have been busy since 2018 raising \$65,000 to match an Open Space grant from Bergen County. They hope to have the project completed in time for Veterans Day 2019. For additional information about the project, visit americanlegionpost162.org.

by Kristin Beuscher



The plaque on Hillsdale's existing World War I monument.