

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

### Bay Rat Fashion Accessories *Shopping at the Army Surplus Store*

By David Frew  
September 2021

*Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes. In this series, the JES Scholar-in-Residence takes note of life in and around the water.*



*One of the Army surplus stores in Erie, Pennsylvania was at the corner of Fifth and State streets in a building that was demolished in 1989, the Gage Hotel.*

Bay Rats were fashion-oriented. For example, many of us wore distressed jeans during the 1950s, decades before my grandchildren began paying big bucks to buy them at high-end fashion stores. The difference was that we “distressed” them ourselves, often adding touches of maroon bloodstains to the fabric. Often our

parents (who were probably talking to each other) would decree that “It was time to buy a new pair of pants.” Instead of taking us on shopping trips, however, they would simply give us a few dollars. “Go find yourself a pair of pants, here is \$4,” was a typical parent shopping strategy. The embedded implication in such a clever parenting strategy was that we should have to figure out how and where to acquire needed clothing, and either pay less than the stipend that had been provided or add extra funds ourselves. There were two alternative shopping options. We could go to someplace like the Boston Store, or a specialty men’s and boys’ clothing store like Robert Hall. Or we could hunt for bargain alternatives. There were high-end clothing stores in those days, as well, namely P.A. Meyers and Baker’s, but none of my friends would have considered shopping at those places. Way too pricey.

Even in those old days, clothing came with accessories. A shirt was often accompanied by a necktie. A new pair of pants could be enhanced by a belt. But those were not the most sought-after Bay Rat clothing accessories. Once a few of us discovered the U.S. Army Surplus Store on State Street, word of the incredible bargains there spread like wildfire. For \$2.95, a kid could acquire a perfectly good pair of pants and accessorize them with something really useful like a canteen or a compass. Imagine getting new pants plus a canteen for less than \$4. The Army Surplus Store had dozens of other important accessories, as well. Stuff that could save a kid’s life when he found himself trapped in wilderness areas near the bayfront. We could get hunting knives hooked to our belts, military hats, mosquito nets, or boomerangs for hunting. One of the very best 1950s trouser accessories, however, was a genuine, steel war surplus hand grenade, minus the explosive charge of course. People took us seriously when we were carrying hand grenades.



*The enormous Brooklyn Naval Yard was just steps away from Bannerman’s childhood home.*

Military surplus stores were born just after the Civil War when New York entrepreneur Francis Bannerman parlayed money that he had made as a Brooklyn Naval Yard scrap picker into a major purchase of surplus military equipment. Bannerman emigrated from Scotland to Brooklyn, where he watched his father operate a salvage business. By the time he was 10, Francis was prowling the edges of the Brooklyn Naval Yard “picking” bits of metal, rope, and other marine

equipment. Yard workers tolerated the cute young boy, who was allowed to have the run of otherwise secured dock areas. As he restored and sold his “picked” bits of salvage, Francis Bannerman saved money and eventually went into business for himself at the age of 13. At 14, Francis saw his father shipped out to serve in the Civil War, leaving him to run the family business.

At 15, and just after the war ended, Francis Bannerman confidently walked into the main office of the Brooklyn Naval Yard and offered to purchase an enormous supply of Civil War surplus military equipment. That cute 10-year-old who used to prowl the shipyard picking bits of discarded scrap had suddenly become a businessman. The United States government was eager to generate cash following the war and once officials at the naval yard had become convinced that Bannerman had financial resources, they were more than interested in working with him. Among the items they agreed to sell were cannons, uniforms, brass fixtures, rifles, pistols, ammunition, and a huge cache of confiscated Confederate weapons, including pistols, rifles, and swords. Bannerman’s original interest had been in purchasing out-of-date cannons that he planned to harvest for scrap value but seeing all of the other available items helped him to understand the potential value of things like the Confederate weapons, which could be sold to collectors. When Bannerman’s father returned from his naval service and saw what had happened to the business since he had left, he became comfortable working for his son.



*Francis Bannerman (1851 to 1918).*

Bannerman convinced the Naval Yard to allow him to store the cannons on-site while he was arranging to scrap them and the salvage value profit on the cannons, alone, was enough to finance his original purchase and to set himself up in a retail business in Brooklyn. He leased a large building to store all of the smaller items that he purchased. Meanwhile, his father had the idea to sell cannons to community leaders who were beginning to build Civil War memorial exhibits in town parks. Bannerman took the idea to another important step when he created a catalog to extend his market reach beyond the New York area. It is likely that many of the cannons exhibited today in town parks and municipal centers were originally purchased from Bannerman.

As he sold his stock of uniforms, weapons, and other equipment, he opened retail outlets in Manhattan and began to deal directly with equipment manufacturers in addition to the government. He purchased manufacturer's overruns and materials that had been built but not sold to the government. As his business grew, he expanded his Brooklyn store, eventually owning the entire city block where he had opened his first store and warehouse.

He made his biggest deal right after the Spanish-American War in 1898, taking advantage of the fact that the War Department had nearly bankrupt itself by overbuying equipment for a war that ended after just a few months. Eager to rid itself of the burden of a massive volume of surplus goods, the government negotiated a deal with Bannerman to hold much of the material until he could find places to move it. They also extended credit so that the Spanish-American War goods could be paid for overtime.



*Brenneman's original Brooklyn headquarters.*

The physical size of Bannerman's Spanish-American War order created a new problem: storage. Potential spaces in Brooklyn were either too expensive or not secure enough to ensure the safety of the new materials. And another issue emerged. Suddenly, New York City authorities became aware of the volume of live ammunition that Bannerman was storing. After a series of emergency meetings by politicians, he was told that he had to remove the explosives from all of his borough warehouses. Bannerman needed a big new storage facility, somewhere out of town. In 1900, he found the answer: a small Island in the Hudson River near Fishkill, New York. Even though his new island headquarters was more than 40 miles "up the river," he was able to service it inexpensively with supply boats. In characteristically thrifty, Scottish style, Bannerman decided to build both an

all-purpose storage building that would serve as a warehouse and distribution office for his growing stocks of war surplus, as well as a family home on the island. Hiring a New York architect, he designed the new storage building in the style of a Scottish castle and called it “Bannerman’s Armory.” Eventually, he was persuaded to add a separate building for his family, primarily because of the dangers associated with storing live ammunition. That decision proved to be prudent since there were several small explosions at the Hudson River castle. The castle included a huge sign, advertising the business: “Bannerman’s Armory.”

Even though both of Francis Bannerman’s sons worked in the business with him, his empire collapsed after his 1918 death. One problem for his business was that the United States government did not overbuild its supply base for World War II. A second issue was that individual states, as well as the federal government, began to crack down on the sale of weapons and ammunition during the 1920s. By 1930, it had become apparent that his business model would no longer work.

The army and navy surplus business made a recovery in the 1950s after World War II. The government had oversupplied for the war and several entrepreneurs who had observed the Bannerman business entered the industry but in a much smaller and nimbler way. By the mid-1950s, almost every city in the United States had a downtown surplus store. While there would never be another Bannerman empire or huge mail-order surplus catalog, many of the individual businesses were highly successful. Surplus stores became shopping havens for campers, hikers, adventurers, and others who were seeking bargain clothing. Sleeping bags, tents, wool coats, and outdoor equipment were stacked in giant piles that were emblematic of the major warehouse discount stores that would appear later. Military quality and extreme bargains continued at surplus stores in cities like Erie, which had three at peak until after the Vietnam War when the owners of these stores began to buy inexpensive Asian goods. Smaller and nimbler than the ponderous Bannerman operation, individual surplus stores that populated towns like Erie were able to move around quickly, taking advantage of better locations or reduced store rentals.

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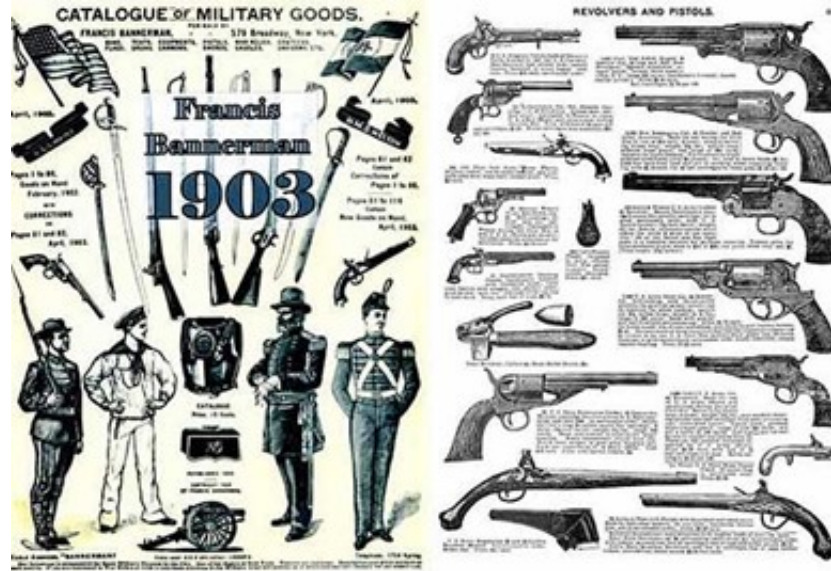
The infamous “Jeep in a crate” advertisement circa 1956.

Near the end of the Bannerman empire, there was a massive explosion at the castle that damaged the once beautiful building. Fortunately, no one was living there at the time. Today's castle building is more of a ruin than a tourist attraction.

There was one last general incursion into the mail-order surplus business during the 1950s. Boys magazines and comic books began to feature large advertisements for adventure items such as rubber rafts, cameras, binoculars, and walky-talkies. The most appealing prospect, however, was an authentic World War II Jeep in a crate for the astonishingly low price of \$50 plus shipping. A high school classmate purchased one and we all listened with great interest as he told stories of receiving it and putting it together. The shipping ended up being much more than advertised. It was a major problem to pick it up at the railroad station and many of the necessary parts, including tires, tubes, and electrical wire, were missing. But he eventually completed it and drove it to school. It was lacking such modern conveniences as windows, but it was a Jeep – just the kind we had seen Roy Rogers' sidekick, Pat Brady, drive on television!



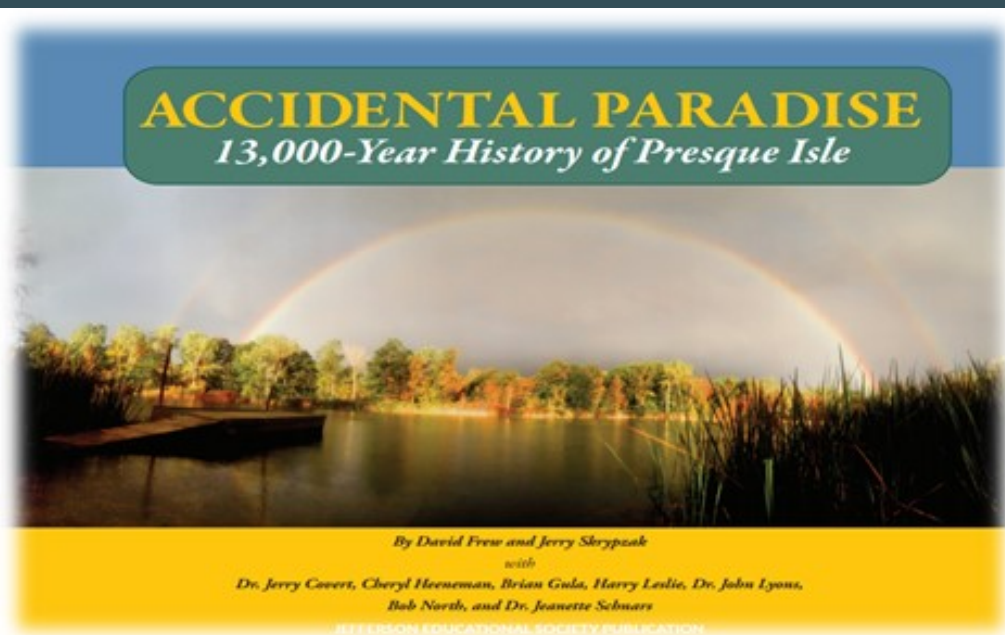
*The remains of the Bannerman Armory are still visible on the Hudson River. The New York Department of Environmental Resources has taken over the island and is planning to make it into a nature destination.*



*Bannerman's Military Surplus Catalog was second only to the Sears Catalog both in size and distribution volume.*

## Accidental Paradise Available at TREC

*Accidental Paradise*  
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



The beautiful book on Presque Isle recently published by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – “Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle” – is on sale at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center’s gift shop and through a special website, [AccidentalParadise.com](http://AccidentalParadise.com).

The book, priced at \$35 plus tax and shipping, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, [AccidentalParadise.com](http://AccidentalParadise.com).

Presque Isle Gallery and Gifts on the main floor of TREC, located at 301

Peninsula Drive, Suite #2, Erie, PA 16505 will also handle sales *daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.*

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To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.*



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Our keynote speaker this year is none other than [President George W. Bush](#)! This program, moderated by Steve Scully, longtime Global Summit chairman and Senior Vice President of Communications for the Bipartisan Policy Center in Washington, D.C., will include an exclusive conversation with President Bush who will discuss the challenges facing the nation in the 21st century and the powers of freedom.

Gov. Tom Ridge, inaugural Secretary of Homeland Security, was instrumental in organizing President George W. Bush's event for this Global Summit. Ridge, who served two terms as Governor of Pennsylvania, will also participate in this program through a Q&A session with Steve Scully.

Click the link below to read the full speaker biographies and event descriptions, as well as purchase tickets for the events you are interested in. Hurry! Tickets go fast. We can't wait to see you back at the Jefferson!

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- **Physical tickets will be mailed out to registrants in the coming weeks** please make sure that your contact info, including mailing address, is up to date on your account.
- We accept annual memberships on a rolling basis. New members are still able to apply member benefits to GS XIII tickets at this time. [Become a member](#) today!
- All attendees will be required to wear masks if Erie County is in the “substantial” or “high” transmission rate of community spread on the day of an event. Attendees must also provide proof of full vaccination or a negative Covid-19 test within the last 72 hours. **Please see our FULL Covid-19 policy [here](#).**

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