

# DECK LOG

*Dahlgren Heritage Museum*

## 10 Years Ago...



(L-R): Naval Support Activity South Potomac Capt. Peter Nette, King George County Board of Supervisors (KG BOS) Dahlgren District representative Ruby Brabo, Dahlgren Heritage Foundation (DHF) President Ed Jones, DHF Vice President Rob Gates, KG BOS Vice Chairman John LoBuglio, and KG BOS Chairman Dale Sisson cut the ribbon to open the Dahlgren Heritage Museum in October of 2013. US Navy photo by Andrew Revelos.

## Dahlgren Museum at 10 Years: Celebrating the Past, Inspiring the Future!

*By Ed Jones*

It was a crisp October day 10 years ago when the ribbon was cut to welcome the first visitors to the Dahlgren Heritage Museum on U.S. 301 near the Harry Nice Bridge. The dignitaries for that special event included Capt. Pete Nette, commanding officer of the base, and Dale Sisson, who was then chair of the King George County Board of Supervisors.

I remember enjoying the festivities. I also recall reflecting on how challenging and invigorating the effort had been to establish the first museum outside the base to tell the century-long story of the Navy at Dahlgren.

It didn't just happen. That day of celebration came after three years of hard work to raise the money and to rally the community to the goal of moving our exhibits from a small bank building outside the base's main gate to the former Virginia Welcome Center on U.S. 301.

It all got started in 2010 when I received a phone call from the late Susan Prien of the base command who invited me to meet with her and her colleague Gary Wagner to talk  
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about a Dahlgren museum that would be run, not by the government, but by interested people in the community. It took me approximately six seconds to say I was onboard.

But whom could I turn to to form the leadership team for this project? It didn't take long to put together a list of dynamic, dedicated leaders.

Among them were:

— Wayne Harman, a longtime NSWC employee on the base with a deep love of history;

— Ruth Herrink, the publisher of the King George Journal newspaper, who brought enthusiasm and resources to the cause;

— House of Delegates Speaker Bill Howell and state Sen. Richard Stuart, who helped us to arrange financial support from Virginia Power that was critical to our success;

— Carlton Middlebrook, who loaned key artifacts to our collection, including a propeller from a 1924 seaplane that was part of Dahlgren's radio-controlled, pilotless experiments;

— Stan Palivoda, a local businessman, who helped us to gain a \$21,000 donation from the regional Walmart stores;

— Rob Gates, a longtime leader on the base who oversaw the development of our exhibits as well as the interior of the museum, and

who remains critical to our success to this day, currently as our vice president;

— the Virginia Tourism Corporation, who allowed us to use its former Welcome Center building on U.S. 301;

— and many more

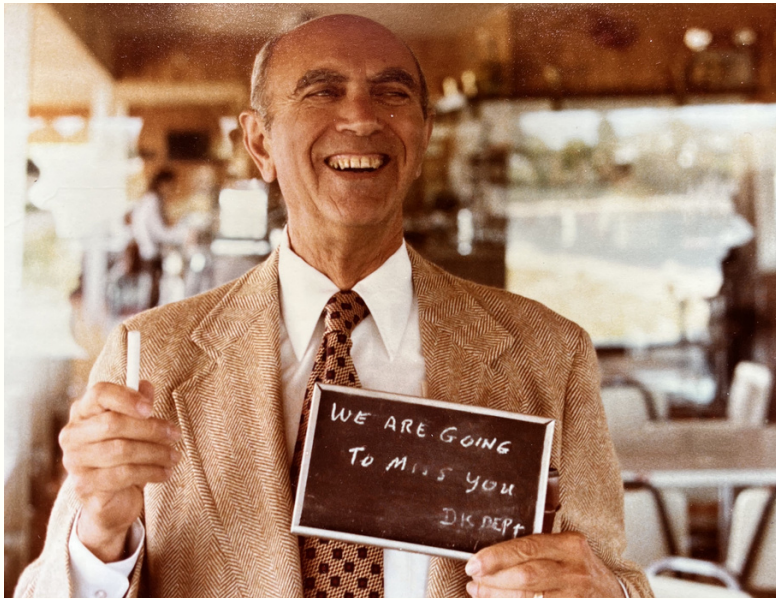
So what's in store for our second decade? That has a lot to do with the people of our community who have been so supportive of our programs and forums. With their help, we can expand our outreach to area schools; enlist the services of more college interns as they learn to become preservationists and curators; add new and interesting artifacts to our collections; and grow our successful series of public forums on key issues relating to Dahlgren's past, present, and future.

When the museum opened 10 years ago at its current location, I called it a dream come true. But it turns out, that was just the beginning. There are many more dreams ahead for the Dahlgren Heritage Museum.

Stay tuned for additional chapters in the Deck Log about the museum's first decade and our hopes for the future.



**Tickets For  
Dueling Pianos  
Sat. Nov. 11th  
Are Still Available  
Find Details At:**  
[https://www.dahlgrenmuseum.org  
/events-calendar](https://www.dahlgrenmuseum.org/events-calendar)



## The Life of Dr. Charles Cohen: A Storyteller's Dream Come True

By Ed Jones

As we at the Dahlgren Heritage Museum have discovered, there's much more to the century-long story of the Navy at Dahlgren than the details of its scientific initiatives.

There are the people behind those initiatives — the officers, sailors, scientists, engineers, managers, and support staff that turned this once remote base into what former U.S. Sen. John Warner described as a “crown jewel of American defense.”

One of the most exceptional of these Dahlgren people is the late Charles J. Cohen, whose life story has an Oppenheimer-style theme of scientific excellence to it, along with touches of Indiana Jones adventure. In other words, it's pretty much a storyteller's dream come true. Let me explain.

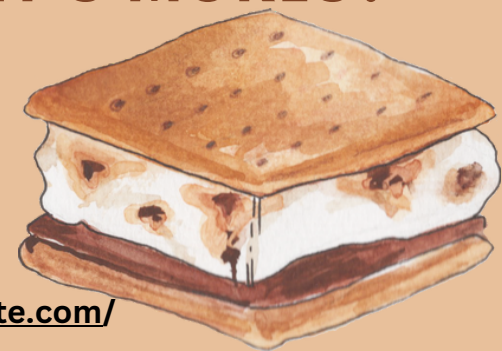
As a 95-pound teenager from Baltimore, Cohen enrolled at Johns Hopkins University in 1926 at the age of 15. According to the Baltimore Sun newspaper, he was the smallest student ever to attend the university. Six years later, at the age of 21, he graduated with a PhD. During three decades at Dahlgren, from the 1940s to the 1970s, he would become the most esteemed mathematician in the history of the base — revered as much for his self-effacing kindness as for his mathematical prowess.

I knew him in a different way — as the reserved but friendly dad of one of my best friends, his daughter Elissa. The Cohens lived three doors down the street from us when I was growing up on the base in the 1950s. Their bountiful magnolia tree in the front yard is still there on Caffee Circle, nestled above the boat dock on Machodoc Creek.

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## HAVE YOU EVER HAD GOURMET S'MORES?

Visit the Dahlgren Heritage Museum Table  
Caledon State Park Art & Wine Festival  
11617 Caledon Rd., King George, VA  
Nov. 4 & 5, 2023, 10:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.



For details and tickets search for “Caledon” on <https://www.eventbrite.com/>

As with so many other intellectual leaders at Dahlgren over the years, Dr. Cohen's passionate interests were not restricted to his superlative work in science and mathematics. I could sense that, as a youngster, from the tusks that hung above the hearth of his modest home on the base. They came from an elephant he bagged in Africa in the late 1930s while serving as a geologist for mining companies. Having survived malaria in Africa and the outbreak of a world war in Europe, he later battled altitude sickness in Peru. And all that came before he had spent his first working day at Dahlgren.

Shortly before his Dahlgren career began, Dr. Cohen met Edra, the woman who would become his wife and the mother of their daughter. They got to know each other while they were both visiting Yellowstone National Park — and theirs was a lightning-quick romance. Since Charles had to return to Peru, they decided to get married in Mexico City. That wasn't as easy as it sounds.

Edra bought tickets to sail to Mexico, only to have her family plead with her to forego the voyage, as the Germans were sinking an alarming number of American vessels during that period. She agreed to travel to Mexico by rail. It was a wise decision, as the ship for which she had purchased tickets was sunk.



But even railroads had their perils during those days. A few days after her train to Mexico City passed over a trestle across a deep ravine, a portion of the bridge caved in due to recent floods.

Having survived these potential disasters, Edra arrived in Mexico City to discover that her husband-to-be was not there. Charles had unanticipated work to complete in Peru, and showed up five days late. It would not be the only time when Charles Cohen was late coming home from work.

Charles and Edra entered a more tranquil  
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chapter of their life together in 1944, when they arrived at Dahlgren — their home for the next three decades, ending only with Edra’s tragic death in an automobile accident on Route 3 on the way to Fredericksburg in the 1970s.

At Dahlgren, Dr. Cohen began a remarkable journey of professional achievement that led to his becoming one of the world’s leading authorities on the use of large digital computers to solve critical problems. He helped to confirm the Earth’s pear-shaped gravity field. He helped lead the efforts to develop the Global Positioning System — which is used not only in weapons technology, but also in our cars for directions. Some of his research was key to the development of guided ballistic missiles.

Soft-spoken and modest to a fault, Cohen brought a laser-like intensity to the research projects that made the United States a leader in missile technology. The intellectual center of so many initiatives, Cohen was held in special awe by his colleagues.

Rob Gates, who put in 37 years at Dahlgren and is now the vice president of the Dahlgren Heritage Foundation, remembers the Friday morning technical review sessions that Cohen often attended. “I always knew that I knew more about the subject than anyone else in the room,” Gates recalls. “But Dr. Cohen would begin asking questions about my work, and making suggestions, so that when the session was over, I knew that he knew more about what I was talking about than I did.”

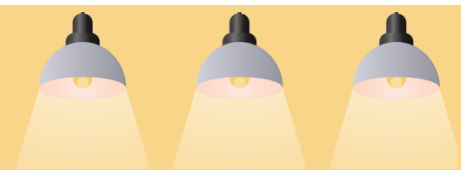
Cohen balanced his professional efforts with tennis and rowing, along with cryptograms and word jumbles, but precious little downtime. He once joined his wife Edra and his daughter Elissa on a bird-watching trip to Sweden in the 1960s. But Elissa remembers that along with the binoculars came a notepad and pencil for mathematical calculations.

I had the privilege of interviewing Dr. Cohen in 2008 when he was 97, a few months before he died. He was happily married to his second wife Dorothy at the time. Though he was bedridden, his mind was just as agile as ever. He had ordered a new computer that was specially equipped for people with failing eyesight.

Reminding him that I was a liberal arts major, not a scientist like my dad, who had worked with him on the base, I asked him if he could describe, in language that a liberal arts major would understand, what he had accomplished on the base through his research efforts. There was a pause, and then he looked at me, and said, “No.” It wasn’t an unkind “no,” but it was a definite “no.”

Perhaps it’s fitting that this gifted man, whose talents so significantly supported our military, would spend the last years of his life engaged in a different kind of research. He was studying the Fibonacci sequence in sunflowers when he died. It was an honor to have known him.

To some, the Navy base at Dahlgren may be best known for the booms of its firing range. But the life of Charles Cohen is a reminder that Dahlgren’s greatest claims to fame are the contributions of the remarkable men and women who have worked there over the past 105 years.



**Visit the Museum  
Wed. – Sun.  
10 am – 4 pm  
to learn more about  
Dr. Cohen from the current  
Pioneers exhibit, created by  
Gillian Both and Alan Dean.**

## 2023 - 2024 Membership

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Thank you for your support of the Dahlgren Heritage Foundation! With your help we are educating the community on the Dahlgren story, running a museum, and working towards hosting more interesting and exciting events. We wouldn't be able to do any of this without you. We look forward to another great year, and we are thankful for your membership. Donate by mailing a check to: P. O. Box 816, Dahlgren, VA 22448 or visit [www.dahlgrenmuseum.org](http://www.dahlgrenmuseum.org) and click the "Support" tab.

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