


# CELEBRATING ALL VETERANS AT WOMEN VETERANS PARK

As many of you know, the County has been adding new pathways to Women Veterans Park. The newest statues and benches are being placed, and we also have a new feature on the plaza known as *The Charters of Freedom.* The latest additions to the Park will be unveiled on Veterans Day, November 11, 2026. There will be a inspirational program inside the Convention Center allowing the community to celebrate all Veterans. Please plan to arrive by 8:00 A.M. The program will begin promptly at 8:30 A.M. before transitioning to the Service Plaza immediately following the indoor ceremony.

**CHARTERS OF FREEDOM**

The Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and the Bill of Rights - along with the Civil Rights Amendments - are our country's founding documents. They represent who we are and what we believe, as a country, to the rest of the world. These amazing documents can be viewed in the National Archives in Washington D.C. Unfortunately, not everyone has the ability to make such a trip.

Following a moving trip to the National Archives in 2011, Vance and Mary Jo Patterson formed Foundation Forward, Inc. as a non-profit educational project to promote civics, education and the preservation of American history. Part of their mission is to provide stainless steel replicas of our founding documents to each County in the United States. Okaloosa County received their set on Monday, April 27, 2026.

Most communities placed their Charter displays in or near their seats of government, but Okaloosa County is a bifurcated county with two main population areas. Making a decision about the display location was difficult because we wanted them in the north *and* the south ends. We decided to reach out to the Foundation and request a second set – and they said yes! Our north end residents have easy access to view these historic documents at the Courthouse in Crestview. For folks in the south end, they can be found on the Plaza at Women Veterans Park.

**PATHWAY EXPANSION**

In March of 2024 we began the process of expanding the walking trails at Women Veterans Park by adding an additional one-quarter mile of pathways. Infrastructure projects are complex involving everything from budgeting and site evaluations to design work and bidding procedures. And then

there is the weather! Mother nature does not always have the same timeline we have. However, after months of hard work on the part of our dedicated Okaloosa County staff and contractors, the expanded fully handicapped-accessible pathway is nearing completion and will be ready for visitors by the end of the month.

**FOUR NEW STATUES**

So what will we see on this new, expanded pathway? I am glad you asked! On Women Veterans Day 2025, we unveiled statues of Linda Bray and Florence Finch. On Veterans Day 2025 we unveiled Nicole Gee and an Iroquois Warrior. These four ladies will be placed along the newly completed pathways.



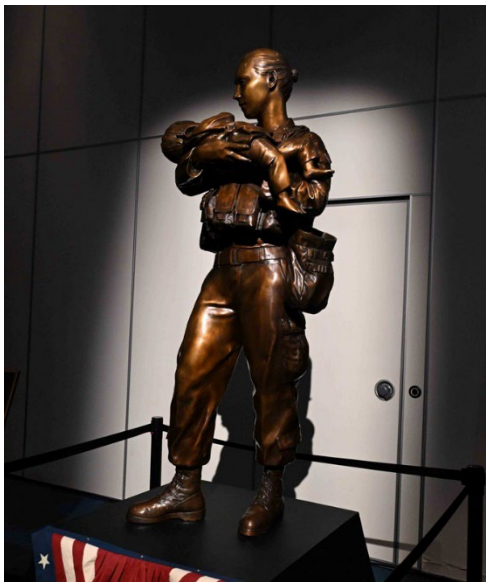
**Capt. Linda Bray, U.S. Army (Ret.),** was the commanding officer of the 988th Military Police Company at Fort Benning when her unit deployed to Panama during Operation Just Cause. What began as a mission to secure an area escalated into a three-hour firefight involving grenades, machine-gun fire, and rifle fire. Although military police were primarily expected to perform a combat-support role, the situation deteriorated to the point that Bray and her soldiers had to respond to the hostile fire. At the time, women were restricted from assignment to certain combat roles, making Bray's leadership during the engagement particularly significant. For her actions during the firefight, Bray received the Meritorious Service Medal, which was later upgraded to the Bronze Star Medal with the "V" device on December 8, 2023.

**Loring May Ebersole**, later known as **Florence**, was born in 1915 to a Filipino mother and an American father. After High School she took a job as a stenographer with U.S. Army Intelligence Headquarters in Manilla, where she met and married Charles Smith. Six months later she was widowed.



Being half Filipino, she was able to hide her American sympathies from her new employer, the Japanese controlled Philippine Liquid Fuel Distributing Union. Working with the Philippine underground she diverted fuel and other critical items to the resistance. Soon she became part of a network of private citizens smuggling food, medical supplies and clean clothes to POWs. Her activity was eventually discovered, and she was arrested in October 1944. She was imprisoned and tortured until her release in February 1945, having never betrayed the resistance. After her liberation she moved to New York where she joined the Coast Guard in June 1945.

When her U.S.C.G. superiors learned of her work in the Philippines, she was awarded the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Ribbon and later the Medal of Freedom.



**Sgt. Nicole L. Gee**, 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit, a maintenance technician by specialty, also served a vital role in the evacuation of Kabul by communicating with and facilitating support for Afghan women and children.

On the August 27, 2021, Sgt. Gee was assisting with the evacuation of Kabul when a suicide bomber killed 18 U.S. service members, including Sgt. Gee.

"In Afghanistan Sergeant Gee would work multiple shifts a day just to be around the children and families being evacuated. She was the most loving and caring individual I've ever met, she was the 'mom' of any group she was a part of and had a knack for brightening anyone's day." ~~Sgt. Landon Workman, teammate

Representative example of a female **Iroquois Warrior** circa 1812. *They Also Served: American Indian Women in the War of 1812,* an article published in NMAI Magazine discussed evidence of the enlistment of Six Nations women in American military service. At least 5 Native women received military pensions for officially serving as "cooks": Polly Cooper, Susan Jacob, Dinah John, Julia John and Dolly Schenandoah. These women enlisted in regiments of Indian volunteers and served honorably. Though officially labeled as "cooks" in pension records, many served in combat alongside their husbands as a matter of necessity.



**GRANITE BENCHES**

Several Okaloosa County lineage and philanthropic groups have stepped forward to enhance the enjoyment of Women Veterans Park by placing commemorative granite benches throughout the space. Choctawhatchee Bay Chapter Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) placed the first of thirteen benches. That donation was quickly followed by gifts from West Florida DAR, Emerald Coast Sons of the American Revolution, Snowden Horne Society Children of the American Revolution, Eucheeanna Chapter Daughters of the Colonists and Old Spanish Trail Daughters of 1812. This collaborative effort to honor history also includes deep community backing from veteran groups and civic organizations alike such as the Air Force Enlisted Village Women Veterans Group, VFW Post 7674, Fort Walton Beach Woman's Club, Center for Lifelong Learning, Gregg Chapel AME, Okaloosa Island Garden Club, and Republican Women of Okaloosa Federated. To maintain visual harmony, the granite benches feature a uniform design. Each is engraved with the logo,

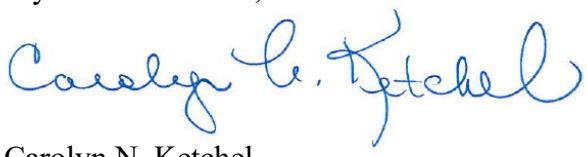
emblem or graphic image representing the donating group as well as an inscription of the group's name. Placement in the vicinity of the park's  statues provides a peaceful setting for rest and contemplation.

**WHAT ELSE IS HERE**

Beyond its monuments, the park is a thriving ecological sanctuary. The Audubon Society has identified over 240 species of migratory birds, alongside a bustling rookery that holds 35 pairs of nesting herons. Other local wildlife species include turtles, bears, foxes, and two recently discovered small alligators. Autumn is a wonderful time to visit, as the park sits directly within the southern migration path of the Monarch butterflies. With so much vibrant natural life to experience, fall offers the perfect opportunity to visit, walk the trails, and enjoy everything Women Veterans Park has to offer.

It is an honor and privilege to serve as your commissioner.

My Sincere Thanks,



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