



MARK SCHMIDT, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Hooray, Vesta Stoudt!

Today, I'd like to give a big shout out to Vesta Stoudt. In the 1940s, Mrs. Stoudt worked in the Green River Ordnance Plant near Dixon, Illinois, my home state. At the time, she wanted to help the war effort—and her two enlisted sons. Her assignment: to inspect and pack ammunition used by the Army and Navy. Every shift, Stoudt and her co-workers sealed boxes of cartridges with paper tape, leaving a little tab for reopening them. Then, they dipped the boxes in wax to make them waterproof.

It didn't take long for Mrs. Stoudt to notice that the thin paper tabs were weak and often tore off from the tape, making it extremely difficult to re-open the boxes quickly. And it didn't take long for her to conclude that the last thing our soldiers needed was trouble getting to their ammo when under enemy fire.

In one of those “aha” moments, she saw the solution: create a waterproof cloth tape to seal the boxes instead. Well, she brought the idea and a prototype to her supervisors but didn't get the support she expected. So, she did what any patriotic “mom on a mission” would do. She wrote to the President.

On February 10, 1943, she sent President Franklin D. Roosevelt a letter describing the problem and explaining her solution—complete with diagrams!

“I have two sons out there somewhere, one in the Pacific Island the other one with the Atlantic Fleet. You have sons in the service also. We can't let them down by giving them a box of cartridges that takes a minute or more to open, the enemy taking their lives, that could have been saved...I didn't know who to write to Mr. President, so have written you hoping for your boys, my boys, and every man that uses the rifle grenade, that this package of rifle cartridges may be taped with the correct tape.”

A few weeks later, Colonel S. R. Stribling from the Ordnance Department in Washington informed Mrs. Stoudt that her idea had been put into effect. “This office wishes to thank you for your excellent suggestion and will give careful consideration to any future suggestions you may offer,” he wrote.

The company that manufactured the product named it “Duck Tape” because it was waterproof like a duck and made with cotton duck fabric. It quickly became a military sensation and earned a new moniker: “100 Mile an Hour Tape.” Our soldiers found they could use it to fix anything and everything—from leaky boots to jeep fenders. After the war ended, this marvelous adhesive turned up in hardware stores ready to help Americans with household repairs. It was an especially useful tool for wrapping air ducts, so people started calling it duct tape. And, that's the name that stuck.

There are multiple takeaways from this story. Necessity is the Mother of Invention. Persistence Pays. One person can make a difference. These are our key takeaways for 2020, too.

Last year we were up against something none of us had faced before. Ironically, the day after our talk about the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic, the world started to shut down. Our campus never re-opened. We were Part II of Phase III. It simply didn't make sense to open. We couldn't risk a visitor, a volunteer, a staff member—anyone—getting sick on our watch.

So, we pivoted. We transitioned our talks to Zoom. We shared four new exhibits virtually. And, we kept our "Untold Tales of Falmouth" coming. While we ramped up our historic walks, we wrapped up outstanding projects for which we had already received grant funding: restoration and renovation work at the 1790 Wicks House; a new touch-screen exhibit for the 1730 Conant House; and audio guides for our Historical Walking Tours. We also launched a new Digital Membership Program and began a new educational video project.

We did everything we could do to keep moving forward. We also did everything we could to stay solvent. We economized. We tapped into our reserves. We got sponsorships. We applied for grants.

You did your part, too. You signed up for talks and walks. You volunteered for projects. You renewed your memberships. You sent in donations. You gave us ideas. You gave us hope. You made a difference. Like duct tape, you held us together through a particularly difficult time. Thank you.

It looks like we will have to be equally innovative and persistent through 2021. Our virtual talks and exhibits will continue. So will our walking tours. We are also making plans for our Heritage Award Dinner, a fun 1960s Night, fall trolley tours, our annual "Visit with the Night Watchman," and our Christmas Traditions House tour. And, if the pandemic gets in our way, we will pivot and do whatever we can to keep moving forward like we did before.

Vesta Stoudt didn't singlehandedly win the war. She was one of many heroes. So are you. Please continue to help any way you can in 2021. Renew your membership. Send in a donation. Volunteer your services. Share an idea to keep us going. In the immortal words of S.R. Stribling from the Ordnance Department to Mrs. Stoudt, "It is cooperation of this type that will win the war."

For Die-Hard Duct Tape Fans

- There's an annual Heritage Duct Tape Festival in Avon, Ohio, every June
- ["The Jumbo Duct Tape Book"](#), available on Amazon, has an abundance of creative ideas.

For Extra Credit and Bragging Rights

The Green River Ordnance Plant in our story was near Dixon, IL. Which former president called Dixon his childhood home?