

*Agency Official 106 Effect Report*

*Rehabilitation and Renovation of the Fredericksburg Battlefield Visitor Center and Exhibits  
City of Fredericksburg, Virginia*

**U.S. Department of the Interior  
National Park Service  
Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania County Battlefields Memorial National Military Park  
120 Chatham Lane  
Fredericksburg, Virginia 22405**

## **Description and Purpose of Undertaking**

### **Purpose**

Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania County Battlefields Memorial National Military Park was authorized by an act of Congress on February 14, 1927 (44 Stat. 1091). The purpose of the park, as stated in the act, is “to commemorate the Civil War battles of Fredericksburg, Spotsylvania Court House, Wilderness, and Chancellorsville, including Salem Church ... to survey, locate, and preserve the lines of the opposing armies in said battles, to open, construct, and repair such roads, highways, paths, and other approaches as may be necessary to make the historical points accessible to the public and to students of said battles ... and together also with such additional land as the Secretary of War may deem necessary for monuments, markers, tablets, roads, highways, paths, approaches, and to carry out the general purposes of this Act.” By Executive Order 6166 in 1933 the park was transferred to the Department of the Interior to be administered by the National Park Service.

Furthermore, the National Park Service Mission Statement includes:

*The National Park Service preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations.*

To achieve this mission, the National Park Service adheres to the following guiding principles:

*Excellent Service: Providing the best possible service to park visitors and partners.*

*Heritage Education: Educating park visitors and the general public about their history and common heritage.*

### **Need**

The Fredericksburg Battlefield Visitor Center has evolved from its original intent as the park administration building in 1936 to a present-day visitor center serving the National Park Service on the Fredericksburg Battlefield. In the past seventy-five years, the interior has been adapted from its original use as park administrative offices to a visitor-use area to both interpret and orient park visitors to the battlefield and park resources. Current museum and interpretive exhibits were last installed in the 1960s, the content and design of which are now considered obsolete. Funding has been secured to replace all of the exhibits and modify the interior space to more effectively serve the public.

The Fredericksburg Museum and Administration Building was built as a Works Progress Administration project that commenced in 1935. The building was designed to house offices for park staff, including the superintendent. The basement contained offices, restrooms, a storage room, boiler room, and an exhibit space. The main entrance floor contained more offices, an

exhibit space, and a lecture room. The second floor contained strictly offices. The building was completed in 1936.

From the outset, park staff recognized that the building did not function well as a museum and visitor use area. In a lecture to the American Association for Museums in May 1938, park superintendent Branch Spalding declared that while the administration building was a beautiful piece of architecture, the "superfluity of windows, misplaced lights, unstudied wall spaces" made clear that the building was "built with museum purposes only secondarily in mind." As a result, the park has repeatedly attempted to improve, through alteration, upon the design of the interior space.

For the first thirty years of its existence, the building served primarily as administrative offices. The doors were locked during the day and visitors were forced to ring a doorbell, whereupon a staff member would let them inside to retrieve information and see the two small exhibit spaces. During the 1960s, the NPS pushed the idea of developing more visitor-friendly spaces, which resulted in "visitor centers." The Fredericksburg Museum and Administration Building was altered to adapt its interior space as a visitor center. Offices in the basement were moved out of the building and that space was opened as an exhibit room. On the entrance floor, two offices were removed: the first near the front door had its walls removed and the space redesigned as an information desk; the second office had its walls removed and was opened as additional space. The lecture hall received an electric interpretive map program and was converted into an auditorium where regularly scheduled automated programs could be shown. Later the electric map was replaced by a slide and audio program before more recently being replaced by a movie. All of the exhibit spaces also received newly constructed museum displays.

As visitation to the park has risen over the past fifty years, the adapted use of the entrance floor as a visitor use area has revealed many flaws in traffic patterns and flow. 73,797 visitors passed through the visitor center doors in 2011. The information desk currently sits right next to the entrance, which results in crowded conditions that block the door. The exhibit spaces themselves are small and cramped and on a busy summer day that might see 200 visitors come through the building, the cramped and confined spaces just are not efficient, adequate or functional.

Now, fifty years after the last rehabilitation, the park is proposing to make some additional modifications to the interior space of the visitor center. The modifications include the removal of walls to create a more open and pleasant experience, as well as replace all of the existing exhibits with new displays that reflect current scholarship on the Civil War and the Fredericksburg area battles.

## **Property Description**

A. Major Physical Components – The Fredericksburg Battlefield Visitor Center sits on National Park Service land on the Fredericksburg Battlefield. It is bordered by a visitor parking lot to the north, Lafayette Boulevard (Business US Route 1) to south, the Fredericksburg National Cemetery to the west, and an overflow parking lot to the east. The property is landscaped and maintained by the National Park Service as a visitor use and access area and receives the highest visitation of any site within the park.

B. Architectural Significance – The Fredericksburg Battlefield Visitor Center was constructed between 1935 and 1936 by the Works Progress Administration. In the most recent draft of the park's National Register of Historic Places documentation update, the visitor center (NR #FR0146d) is considered a contributing structure under the park's subtheme: Military Park Development by the War Department, Civilian Conservation Corps, and the National Park Service – 1927 to 1956. The Fredericksburg Battlefield Visitor Center is on the park's List of Classified Structures – LCS#82069. Slight modifications over the last seventy-five years have changed the floor plan on the entrance floor with the removal of walls that have opened more space and allowed for the creation of an information desk.

## **Description of Alternatives**

### **Alternative A – No Action**

This alternative would hinder the park's ability to develop new exhibits that reflect current scholarship on the American Civil War. It would also result in the continued use of existing traffic flow and patterns within the building that have proven faulty and a hindrance to effective operations.

### **Alternative B – Replace Existing Exhibits**

Under this alternative, the existing exhibits would be replaced throughout the visitor center, but no changes would occur to the floor plan. While this would result in the improvement of the information conveyed through the exhibits, the faulty traffic flow and patterns would remain within the building. This would continue to hinder effective operations within the building.

### **Alternative C – Rehabilitate Fredericksburg Visitor Center and Exhibits**

Under this alternative, the existing exhibits would be replaced throughout the visitor center. Additionally, the floor plan on the entrance floor would be altered, to maximize exhibit space and improve traffic flow and patterns. The changes would be as follows (rooms numbers correspond to appended design plans):

1. Current Auditorium (Room 102) – Remove the east wall separating the current auditorium (Room 102) and the lobby (Room 101) and remove the west wall partition, thus opening the space for exhibits. Remove the acoustical ceiling tiles and install new drywall ceiling throughout. Install new exhibits throughout the room. Install new information desk along the north wall.

2. Lobby (Room 101) – Remove the east wall separating the lobby (Room 101) from the open hallway (Rooms 104 and 105), thus opening the space for exhibits. Install new exhibits within these spaces (Rooms 101, 104 and 105).
3. Current Information Desk (Room 103) – Remove the west, north and east walls of the current information desk area (Room 103), thus opening the space for exhibits. Install new exhibits within this space.
4. Current Entrance Floor Exhibit Room (Room 106) – Remove the west wall separating the exhibit room (Room 106) from the open hallway (Room 104). This wall will be replaced by a glass floor-to-ceiling wall and door. Remove all exhibits within this room. Install acoustical tiles in the ceiling. This space will become the new auditorium.
5. Basement Exhibit Rooms – Remove all exhibits from both exhibit rooms. Install new exhibits within these spaces.

### **Description of Mitigation Measures**

A. Molding, casements and wood paneling on walls will be salvaged and repurposed in the new construction.

B. New exhibits will be free-standing, meaning they will not be built into walls.

C. The park acknowledges that both park and building would benefit from a Historic Structures Report. The park will pursue funding for the development of such a document.

### **Park Consultation**

The proposal is being circulated to the park's Section-106 advisors for historic architecture and museum curatorial services for review and comments

The proposal is going through a 30-day public comment and review period. During this time, the project will be posted on the park's website. The park will contact representatives of interested local organizations such as Mary Washington College's Department of Historic Preservation, the Rappahannock Valley Civil War Round Table, the City of Fredericksburg, and the Friends of the Fredericksburg Battlefield.

The project will undergo a 30-day comment and review period with the Virginia SHPO.

## **Effect Analysis**

During the rehabilitation of the interior space, some historic fabric will be affected. The existing floor plan on the entrance floor will be altered, however some features will be retained that will reflect the original floor plan. It is the park's belief that the project as proposed will result in the better long-term overall continued use of the structure with improved exhibits and improved traffic patterns and flow. For this reason, the park's opinion is that this undertaking will have "no adverse effect" on architectural resources.

## **Attached Supporting Documentation**

- A. Park Map
- B. Exhibit Development Plans
- C. Photos

## **Report Prepared By**

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