

Agency Official 106 Effect Report

*Rehabilitation of the Information Desk at the Fredericksburg Battlefield Visitor Center on the
Fredericksburg Battlefield
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**

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.

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.

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.

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 sections of its walls removed and the space redesigned as an information desk; the second office had its walls removed and was opened as additional exhibit 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. 60,738 visitors passed through the visitor center doors in 2017. The information desk currently sits right next to the entrance, in a space that had originally been designed as an office. Its location and use as an information desk and visitor service area results in crowded conditions that block the entrance door. The counter is five feet in length and not adequate to serve the visitors, which form lines that block the door. In 2017, the park built a temporary additional section of information desk that extended the desk away from the entrance. This temporary extension is not anchored to any fabric, but is freestanding. It was also built at a height to provide handicap access, as the current the desk is too tall for visitors and staff in wheelchairs.

Additionally, the existing park visitor desk area is not accessible to staff who utilize wheelchairs. The enclosed desk space is accessed by staff through a narrow door of 2.5 ft. in width. A park employee in a wheelchair would not be able to access the desk space and would therefore be hindered in his/her ability to offer personal services at the desk.

The park is proposing to make alterations to the information desk space to better serve both the public and the staff that work behind the desk.

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 provide improved personal services to its visitors at the Fredericksburg Battlefield Visitor Center. It would result in the continued use of existing traffic flow and patterns within the building that have proven faulty and a hindrance to effective operations. Also, it would continue to hinder wheelchair employee access to the information desk area.

Alternative B – Widen Access Door at Information Desk

While widening the access door to the information desk would provide enough space for a handicap employee to access the area behind the information desk, there remains a lack of space behind the desk for a wheelchair to move and turn around.

Alternative C – Move the Information Desk

Under this alternative, the location of the information desk would be moved to another location within the building. The park looked at this alternative a few years ago, but the most recent renovations of the museum exhibits in the building foreclosed available locations for the information desk.

Alternative D – Rehabilitate the Existing Information Desk (Preferred Alternative)

Under this alternative, the north counter of the existing information desk would be removed to where it joins with the east wall of the desk area. New cabinets would be built along the east wall to store the brochures and reference material currently housed under the north counter. Under this alternative, the space behind the information desk would become accessible for staff in wheelchairs and would open the space making it a better functioning area for an information desk.

Description of Mitigation Measures

1. The existing opening in the north wall of the information desk area only extends to a height of 8 feet up from the floor. While the park is proposing to remove the desk, and that portion of the wall down to the floor, the park does not propose to remove anything above the desk opening, thus leaving a large section of the wall intact up to the ceiling. This will allow for the reading of the original plan and space that was once an office, but has now been altered into an information desk and visitor services area.

Park Consultation

The proposal is being circulated to the park's Section-106 advisor for historic architecture.

The proposal is going through a 30-day public comment and review period. During this time, the project will be posted on the National Park Service Planning, Environmental, and Public Comment System (PEPC) website. The park has contacted, and solicited comments from, representatives of interested organizations such as the University of Mary Washington's Department of Historic Preservation, the City of Fredericksburg, the Friends of the Fredericksburg Area Battlefields, Central Virginia Battlefields Trust, and the Pamunkey Indian Tribe.

The proposal will be sent to the State Historic Preservation Office (Virginia Department of Historic Resources) for a 30-day review.

Effect Analysis

The park's opinion is that Alternative D will have "no adverse effect" on significant historic resources.

Attachments

1. Photographs

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