

Plans for Valley Forge Museum Stall

Story by Meghan Hogan / Nov. 22, 2005

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A dispute between the National Park Service and a Pennsylvania nonprofit has derailed plans for a museum at the run-down 3,400-acre Valley Forge National Historical Park, where George Washington and his army fought to stay alive during the Revolutionary War in 1777-1778.

Because of unstable conditions, about 13 of the park's 80 significant structures are closed to visitors, prompting a spot on both the National Trust's list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places in 2000 and the National Parks Conservation Association 10 Most Endangered National Parks list in 2002.

Last month, plans for a museum and education center, which would have brought in much needed park revenue, fell through after the National Park Service failed to approve plans for a center large enough to be economically feasible. "This is a major loss for the park," says Tom Daly, president of the American Revolution Center, which recently terminated its six-year partnership with the park. "It's in an extremely deteriorated state."

The center, which partnered with the National Park Service in 1999 to create the \$100 million museum, was excited when the building model was unveiled in February 2004, receiving positive reviews from both the *New York Times* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. "We all felt that we had a building that was really, really great," Daly says. Built into a quarry wall, the 130,000-square-foot structure "captured the essence of Valley Forge and its landscape."

The National Park Service, however, decided to conduct another feasibility study on the Richard A.M. Stern Architects-designed building. After reviewing different sizes for the center, the National Park Service agreed on a structure no larger than 50,000 square feet—too small, according to Daly, who says a center that size would not provide an adequate visitor experience for the park's 1.2 million annual tourists.

Park officials say the long-term costs of the museum were just too risky. "It's one thing to build the center, but it's another thing to continue its operation," says park superintendent Mike Caldwell, adding that the museum would cost more than the park's entire operating budget. "Our deferred building maintenance, as with most national parks, is higher than we want, but we are working to address the issue."

Valley Forge's first chance at revitalization came in 1976, when it was transferred to the National Park Service, but lack of money has prevented any real progress towards the \$12 million restoration of its encampment buildings.

Finding a proper use for so many historic structures has been a challenge, Caldwell says. The park is currently considering a program that would allow preservation-minded organizations to lease and care for some of its buildings. Caldwell says the park is "moving forward," even though there are no plans to build a center without the help of the American Revolution Center. "We will definitely continue to maintain the assets we have," he says.

Despite the change of plans, Daly says his organization still hopes to build a museum elsewhere so the history and artifacts of the Revolutionary War can be officially commemorated. "We have a magnificent collection," he says, "but it's about having the right place and the right program."

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