



Old visitor center at Fort McHenry reduced to rubble

Outdated building gives way to new center that will accommodate more visitors to the national historic site

By Meredith Cohn, The Baltimore Sun

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This bombardment was led by one man — a crane operator who ripped into the brick building at [Fort McHenry](#) National Monument and Historic Shrine at dawn's early light.

"He's doing what the British couldn't do," park ranger Scott Sheads said jokingly about the contractor hired to demolish the structure at the fort, which defended Baltimore's harbor against the invaders during the War of 1812 and inspired Francis Scott Key to pen the poem that would become the national anthem.

The 5,200-square-foot structure was the 1960s-era visitors center, demolished to make way for one three times its size due to fully open in March.

The old center was outdated within a few years of being constructed on the [Locust Point](#) peninsula and is now overwhelmed by the 650,000 people who visit annually. Sheads was ready for bombs bursting in air, but acknowledged the Locust Lane Farms crane operator was handling the job with precision, reducing much of the building to a pile of metal and brick in about an hour.

Gay Vietzke, park superintendent, said officials had been turning away busloads of schoolchildren for years because the old center was too small to tell the story of the "The Star-Spangled Banner." Even the restroom plumbing was insufficient.



It was a banner day at Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine — the old visitor center, outdated for decades, was torn down as a new state-of-the-art building that can easily accommodate the 650,000 annual visitors nears completion. "He's doing what the British couldn't do," joked park ranger Scott Sheads about the contractor hired to demolish the structure at the fort, which defended Baltimore Harbor against the invaders during the War of 1812 and inspired Francis Scott Key to pen the poem that would become the national anthem. The 1960s era visitor center is making way for one three times its size due to fully open in March.

For the 35 year-round workers, the offices were drafty, leaky and crowded. Some staff members were relegated to the woefully burdened upper floors of 200-year-old buildings inside the fort's star-shaped walls.

Vietzke said she wasn't sad to see the old center go, though she appreciated its service.

"It's a milestone," she said. "Everyone agreed it needed to happen. It served the public well for a long time. The new center will provide a much better visitor experience."

The only mementoes of the old building saved were the 2-foot-tall silver stars that had been embedded in its brick. They will go to the Friends of Fort McHenry, a private support group that is likely to auction them. She said the stars helped people visualize the size of the flag that Key saw gallantly streaming through the intense fighting while being held on a British ship in 1814 during the Battle of Baltimore. (It was 30 feet by 42 feet, many times the size of a modern flag.)

Vietzke said the new center will have all-new features, including exhibits, a gift shop and a film from Key's perspective that will explain the writing of the anthem. They will be available in March, after the center's grand opening. For now, the information desk, restrooms and offices in the new center are open.

The \$15 million building — a rare new visitors center in the U.S. National Park Service system — was paid for with federal, state and local dollars, as well as some of the park entrance fees. It was constructed outside the historic fort's footprint so as not to trample historic grounds. It is also closer to the water taxi.

It's expected to have enough environmental features in its materials and operations to be certified as LEED, the environmental ranking from the U.S. Green Building Council. For example, the center was built with leftover brick that was fabricated 15 years ago to repair the fort fencing. And workers will spend the next two weeks separating brick and metals from the old center for recycling.

Outside the new building, officials also plan to widen and pave the path that circles the fort property, a mile-and-400-foot loop popular with local residents for recreation. Cyclists banned since construction began in spring 2009 will be welcomed back.

Paul Bitzel, chief of resource management, said he's been planting trees around the new center since the 1980s in anticipation of the building. He'll plant more on the site of the old center, along with some grass.

All of that should be ready in 2011 for the 80th anniversary of Congress' order officially naming "The Star-Spangled Banner" the national anthem.

A two-year bicentennial celebration of events that culminated in America's defeat of the world's strongest military force will begin in June 2012 with a maritime festival and end in 2014 with a re-enactment of the September 1814 battle at Fort McHenry.

Sara Hisamoto, a spokeswoman for Visit Baltimore, the city's visitors bureau, said the new center should boost attendance there and around Baltimore because it will offer a more educational and pleasant experience.

She said it already is one of the region's most important historic sites and one of the city's most visited tourist attractions, as well as a highly used waterfront park.

"The modern facility, with more seating capacity and better views, will be more welcoming for people coming into Baltimore," she said. "They will better able to share in Baltimore's role in the War of 1812 and understand the story behind 'The Star-Spangled Banner.' "

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Images: Old visitor center demolished at Fort McHenry as new center is completed



Demolition begins

(Photo by Colby Ware, special to The Baltimore Sun / December 27, 2010)

The original visitors center at Fort McHenry, dedicated in 1963, is demolished.



Out with the old

(Baltimore Sun photo by Jerry Jackson / December 27, 2010)

An excavator works on the pile of rubble that remains of the old Fort McHenry Visitor Center. The new visitor center seen in the background is partially in use now and will have a grand opening in March.



In with the new

(Baltimore Sun photo by Jerry Jackson / December 27, 2010)

An excavator works on the pile of rubble that remains of the old Fort McHenry Visitor Center. The new visitor center seen in the background is partially in use now and will have a grand opening in March.



Fort McHenry

(Baltimore Sun photo by Jerry Jackson / December 27, 2010)

An excavator works on the pile of rubble that remains of the old Fort McHenry Visitor Center. The new visitor center is partially in use now and will have a grand opening in March.



Demolition reflection

(Photo by Colby Ware, special to The Baltimore Sun / December 27, 2010)

The original visitors center at Fort McHenry, reflected in the window of the new visitors center, is demolished.



Old center demolished

(Photo by Colby Ware, special to The Baltimore Sun / December 27, 2010)

The original visitors center at Fort McHenry, dedicated in 1963, is demolished. The new visitors center is pictured to the right.



New center

(Photo by Colby Ware, special to The Baltimore Sun / December 27, 2010)

The new visitors center at Fort McHenry



View from the fort

(Baltimore Sun photo by Jerry Jackson / December 27, 2010)

Seen from the fort, an excavator works on the pile of rubble that remains of the old Fort McHenry Visitor Center.