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Design of the New Fort McHenry Visitor Center Unveiled

New Facility to Open in Time to Celebrate War of 1812 Bicentennial

(Baltimore, MD.) Plans for the new visitor center to be constructed at Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine were unveiled last night at the Francis Scott Key Awards Gala, which kicked off Baltimore's annual Star-Spangled Banner Weekend celebration commemorating Defenders' Day.

Designed by GWWO, Inc./Architects of Baltimore, a firm that specializes in visitor centers nationwide, the new facility will provide a sustainable, functional, and accessible environment to orient visitors to the urban park and to introduce them to the resource and its story. The 17,200-SF building will feature expanded reception, orientation, retail and office spaces, a multi-purpose room, and an innovative combined exhibit and theater "immersion experience."

The need for the new visitor center at the fort, the birthplace of America's national anthem and one of the nation's most significant historic landmarks, has been identified in Park planning documents since the 1960s. The current center, with its theater that seats only seventy and inadequate exhibits and support space, is unable to meet visitation demands—last year, 30% of school groups that wanted to see the orientation film had to be turned away. Though the Park takes reservations for the film, the schedule fills up quickly.

The new visitor center will be constructed at the east end of the existing parking lot, to the northeast of the existing visitor center, which will be demolished. Keeping the new building out of the cultural landscape—outside of the original 1814 reservation boundary—was a critical project goal. The new location will also afford visitors a better view of the fort structure as they enter the Park grounds from East Fort Avenue. In keeping with GWWO's focus on contextual design, plans were developed in the spirit of the place. "Our main inspiration for the new visitor center was our nation's most enduring symbol, the Star-Spangled Banner," says GWWO president and design principal Alan Reed.

Construction of the new building will start in 2009 and is expected to be complete in 2010, well before the fort celebrates the War of 1812 Bicentennial. The project is following the guidelines of the US Green Building Council and will seek Gold-level certification under the organization's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED®) Green Building Rating System™.

Fort McHenry is best known for its role in the War of 1812, when it successfully defended Baltimore Harbor from an attack by the British navy. It was during this bombardment of the fort that Francis Scott Key was inspired to write The Star-Spangled Banner, the poem that would eventually be turned into the national anthem of the United States. Named after James McHenry, a Scotch-Irish immigrant and surgeon-soldier who became Secretary of War under President Washington, it is also considered the finest example of fort design in North America. The fort was made a national park in 1925 and in 1939 it was re-designated a "National Monument and Historic Shrine," the only such doubly designated place in the United States. It was placed on the National Register of Historic Places 1966. It has become national tradition that when a new flag is designed it first flies over Fort McHenry. The first official 49 and 50 star American flags were flown over the fort and are still located on the premises.

GWWO, Inc./Architects is a Baltimore-based architectural firm that specializes in the planning and design of cultural and educational facilities, with emphasis on quality design that is both inspirational and evocative. The firm has had a relationship with the National Park Service since 1991 and has worked on projects in more than twenty national parks, including new visitor facilities for Homestead National Monument of America in Beatrice, Nebraska, Everglades National Park in Homestead, Florida, and Monocacy National Battlefield in Frederick, Maryland, as well as past work on the restoration of Fort McHenry in the 1990s. Other firm projects include the design of the new Ford Orientation Center and Donald W. Reynolds Museum and Education Center at George Washington's Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens in Virginia, a new Orientation and Education Center for Cylburn Arboretum in Baltimore, Maryland, the expansion and renovation of the Museum of the Rockies on the Montana State University campus, and a new Nature Center for Killens Pond State Park in Felton, Delaware.

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Visitor Center Design Embodies the Spirit of the Place

Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine is the birthplace of America’s national anthem and one of the nation’s most significant historic landmarks. The Fort, the National Anthem and the flag, together and individually, help us to understand how the United States was created, defended and preserved. It was with this context and these rich national symbols in mind that the design team began to consider the appropriate expression for the new visitor center.

“GWWO specializes in contextual design. We strive for each of our buildings to reflect the unique mission, spirit and character of our individual clients and their stories,” says Alan Reed, principal and design principal from GWWO, Inc./Architects, the Baltimore-based architectural firm designing the new building.

The new visitor center is intended to create a moving experience for visitors, which will be achieved through the exhibits and interpretation, as well as through the design of the building itself.

Project Vision. The vision statement for the project—developed in November during a three day kick-off planning session involving National Park Service and Fort officials, City and State stakeholders, community members and the design team—declares that the new facility “will provide a sustainable, functional, and accessible environment to orient visitors to this urban park and to introduce them to the resource and its story. ... The center’s design will help to establish the Park’s rightful place as both a national and international cultural destination, evoking an emotional response from a diverse audience through a variety of interpretive techniques.”

Building Location & Visitor Approach. The new visitor center will be constructed at the east end of the existing parking lot, to the northeast of the existing center, which will be demolished. Removing the existing facility, which is positioned within the park’s cultural landscape, and siting the new building outside of the original 1814 reservation boundary will help restore the park’s primary historic area. Visitor flow will also be enhanced, with visitors arriving from the Fort’s main entrance on East Fort Avenue and from the water taxi entrance on the site’s north side both enjoying an improved entry sequence.

Architecture & Landscape. The primary inspiration for the new visitor center's design comes from our nation's most significant symbol—the Star-Spangled Banner. The two curved walls of the building reflect the dynamic nature of the flag and all it represents. The juxtaposition of the two walls—clad in distinct materials—invokes the meanings behind the flag's stripes. Brick, strong and solid, expresses the hardiness and valor represented by the red stripes, while the thin and more delicate copper façade expresses the purity and innocence represented by the white.

The curved walls also acknowledge the Fort and its flag. From the west, the upward slope of the brick wall, as revealed by the receding copper wall, directs the visitor's eye toward the flag creating a visual dialogue between the Fort and the visitor center. The contrasting volumes of the walls and the gentle change of their heights in opposite directions suggest a sense of motion. This movement is further enhanced by the landscape design, by Mahan Rykiel Associates of Baltimore. Site design incorporates berms, plantings, and vegetation that mimic the gentle curves in plan and vary in height seasonally, while the paving patterns and curved pathways extend the east and west walls into the site.

Inside the building, a light-filled lobby with central information desk greets visitors and serves as the organizing element from which public spaces, including the exhibits, multi-purpose room and gift shop, are accessed. The second level houses park offices and support spaces, including a break room with exterior terrace that offers picturesque views to the Fort.

Exhibits. Exhibit and theater design for the new center, by Haley Sharpe Design of Falls Church, Virginia, takes an innovative "immersive" approach that integrates exhibit content and film experiences throughout. At once both contemplative and inspirational, the space will combine large-scale graphics with more intimate exhibit elements focusing on specific details that visitors may enjoy at their own pace. Natural light, coming in from two tall, thin windows, will visually open the space and introduce warmth and comfort into the gallery.

The visitor experience will culminate with a "final act" when the main exhibit space is taken over by a choreographed audio-visual show, taking the visitor back in time alongside Francis Scott Key. Through careful coordination of theatrical lighting, soundscape and image and film projections, visitors will be immersed in the Battle of Baltimore and the birth of the Star-Spangled Banner. In a dramatic ending, accompanied by the sound of the National Anthem, the view towards the Fort, with the flag floating above, will be revealed.

For more information on the plans for the new visitor center at Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine, or to arrange interviews with members of the design team, please contact Laura Werther at lwerther@gwwoinc.com or 410.332.1009. Gay Vietzke, Superintendent of the Fort can also be reached at 410.962.4290, extension 223.

About GWWO, Inc./Architects

GWWO, Inc./Architects is a Baltimore-based architectural firm that specializes in the planning and design of cultural and educational facilities, with emphasis on quality design that is both inspirational and evocative. The firm has had a relationship with the National Park Service since 1991 and has worked on projects in more than twenty national parks, including new visitor facilities for Homestead National Monument of America in Beatrice, Nebraska, Everglades National Park in Homestead, Florida, and Monocacy National Battlefield in Frederick, Maryland, as well as past work on the restoration of Fort McHenry in the 1990s. Other firm projects include the design of the new Ford Orientation Center and Donald W. Reynolds Museum and Education Center at George Washington's Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens in Virginia, a new Orientation and Education Center for Cylburn Arboretum in Baltimore, Maryland, the expansion and renovation of the Museum of the Rockies on the Montana State University campus, and a new Nature Center for Killens Pond State Park in Felton, Delaware.

About Haley Sharpe

Haley Sharpe Design is an internationally acclaimed design consultancy with offices in the United States, United Kingdom, South Africa and the Middle East. The firm works in partnership with museums to display their collections and shape their services to create environments that inspire learning and provoke discussion. National Park Service projects include: the Brown v. Board of Education Interpretive Center in Topeka, Kansas; the National Center for the American Revolution to be constructed at Valley Forge National Historical Park; and the Fort Stanwix National Monument Visitor Center, Rome, New York. Recent projects completed in 2007 include the Historic Jamestowne Archaearium and Visitor Center; two museums in Oklahoma for ConocoPhillips; the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada; and the Jordan Children's Museum. The firm is also working with Mystic Seaport: The Museum of American and the Sea on the exhibition design for their expansion project.

About Mahan Rykiel

Mahan Rykiel Associates is a 40-person landscape architecture, urban design and planning firm located in Baltimore, Maryland. Since the firm's establishment in 1983, they have garnered national and international acclaim for award-winning, people-centered design. Their approach to site design is shaped by a thorough understanding of each site's unique natural resources, the surrounding context and the client's vision. Their park work seeks to balance the need to provide passive, active and interpretive recreation experiences for people with the desire to preserve and enhance natural environments and ecosystems. Recent firm park and open space projects include work at the U.S. National Arboretum, War Memorial Plaza, Fells Landing, the Conservatory Master Plan at Druid Hill Park, Cylburn Arboretum, and the recently opened Center Plaza in downtown Baltimore.



Rendering of the new Fort McHenry Visitor Center