After a harsh winter in Valley Forge, the Continental Army emerged from their encampment in June 1778 a more united and disciplined fighting force. This defining moment in the American Revolution motivated civic groups to host rallies and lead preservation efforts until Valley Forge became Pennsylvania’s first state park in 1893. When suburban development pressures and funding concerns at the state level threatened the integrity of the park, the commonwealth transferred the management of the park to the National Park Service (NPS) in time for the bicentennial in 1976. Each year more than 2.4 million visitors come to the park and spend approximately $30 million in local communities. To meet increased visitors’ demands and to help compensate for insufficient federal appropriations, the NPS has pursued historic leasing opportunities. The park utilizes both long- and short-term leases, and a multi-year plan enables the NPS to identify future leasing projects that benefit the park through additional revenue streams, capital improvements, and maintenance savings.

VALLEY FORGE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

KING OF PRUSSIA, PA

PHOTO COURTESY PHILANDER CHASE KNOX ESTATE
THE MONTESSORI CHILDREN’S HOUSE OF VALLEY FORGE

The Montessori Children’s House was seeking a permanent home when they learned the park was interested in leasing several historic buildings. Following a capital campaign, archaeological and historic surveys, and architectural planning, the Montessori Children’s House signed a 40-year lease in 2009 and began rehabilitating the structures. The large house, two-story barn, and cottage were in serious disrepair from water damage, unchecked ivy, wood decay, mold, and asbestos. The school’s repair work preserved the historic integrity of key structures and maintained the basic footprint of the site. The park and the school forged a symbiotic relationship wherein the park benefits from annual rent, mortgage, and maintenance payments while the school enjoys use of a beautiful property in a historic setting, with access to park rangers for educational programming.

PHILANDER CHASE KNOX ESTATE

The late eighteenth-century Philander Chase Knox Estate sits picturesquely amidst the rolling hills of Valley Forge. The mansion was used as a library and storage facility until a ten-year lease was signed in 2015 with Valley Forge Park Events, LLC—a partnership between The Party Center and Robert Ryan Catering—to create an event space. The company preserved the historic integrity of the house and landscape while completing necessary updates and restorations. The park receives a percentage of the revenue from fees and catering sales at the more than 50 annual events, far exceeding initial forecasts. In this partnership, the park uses half of the house as a library while the event company maintains the indoor and outdoor spaces it leases. The beautifully restored mansion is now accessible to the public and guests can enjoy scenic views that will inspire them to return to the park.

“Partnerships between the parks and private entities are extremely beneficial. Our incredible setting allowed us to expand our curriculum to include the eco-system of the park and set our children on the path of being good stewards of the environment and the national parks.”

Gill Gutteridge, Administrator, Montessori Children’s House of Valley Forge
A PROBLEM

The National Park Service (NPS) maintains a network of 417 parks and sites that protect some of our nation’s most spectacular historic, cultural, and natural resources. However, after 100 years of operation and inconsistent public funding, the NPS faces a deferred maintenance backlog estimated at $11.6 billion—of which approximately 47% is attributed to historic assets. Deferred maintenance in our national parks puts historic and cultural sites at risk of permanent damage or loss, and in the absence of funding, the condition of these assets will continue to deteriorate and become more expensive to repair and preserve in the future.

A SOLUTION

Leasing of historic buildings in the National Park System is an effective and proven public-private partnership that can be used as part of the suite of options necessary to abate the NPS deferred maintenance backlog. The NPS has the legal authority to enter into lease agreements whereby the park maintains ownership of the building, but the lessee is responsible for the preservation and maintenance needs of the structure. For long-term commercial leases of 55 years or more, the lessee is able to utilize the federal historic tax credit and receive a 20 percent credit for qualified rehabilitation expenses. Historic leasing partnerships alleviate the burden on the NPS to maintain historic buildings by reducing maintenance costs and the repair backlog for the park, allow reallocation of scarce resources to other priority projects, create opportunities for private investors, provide services for visitors and residents of gateway communities, and bring iconic historic buildings back to life. The National Trust for Historic Preservation plays a leading role in advocating for the use of leasing by the National Park Service by providing research and guidance about best practices and highlighting opportunities to leverage this innovative preservation tool.

The House Appropriations Committee has also noted, in part, that “leasing of historic park buildings has proven to be an effective public–private partnership that has brought private investment to the repair and maintenance of historic park resources.”


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The National Trust for Historic Preservation, a privately funded nonprofit organization, works to save America’s historic places. Visit us at SavingPlaces.org.