For centuries, the safest way to sail into New York Harbor was by hugging the shore of Sandy Hook. From the colonial period to the Cold War, Sandy Hook lighted the paths of seafarers and protected the city from potential attack and invasion. By the 1940s, the Fort Hancock and Sandy Hook Proving Ground National Historical Landmark District became home to 7,000 army soldiers and Women’s Army Corp members. Now part of the Gateway National Recreation Area, the unit interprets America’s oldest surviving lighthouse and protects ecological resources. Time and harsh coastal conditions have caused severe deferred maintenance, inspiring the park to look towards leasing opportunities to preserve iconic structures and rebuild a vibrant community. The first lease rehabilitated a deteriorating property and signaled the adaptive re-use potential of some 35 nearby buildings. The Sandy Hook unit receives roughly 2.2 million visitors annually, generating $222 million in local economic benefits.
DUPLEX FAMILY HOUSING QUARTERS/
BUILDING #21

The iconic yellow brick buildings comprising Officer’s Row at Fort Hancock were constructed largely between 1898-1910. Originally built to house officers and their families, today many of these buildings are abandoned and face serious maintenance challenges. About five years ago, the park created the Fort Hancock 21st Century Federal Advisory Committee, dedicated to preserving these deteriorating buildings. In 2016, the park signed its first lease. The 60-year agreement enabled the lessees to use the Historic Tax Credit, and the duplex is now available for short-term rentals year-round. The park benefits by saving a deteriorating historic structure that will now be maintained and returned to productive public use. Since then, the park has executed formal Letters of Intent for 13 buildings at Fort Hancock with individuals and organizations with plans to rehabilitate those buildings.

SANDY HOOK CHAPEL

Among the officers’ homes, army barracks, and mess halls, the Sandy Hook Chapel—built in 1941—is a relatively new addition to the main post at Fort Hancock. Occupying a unique location at the edge of the Sandy Hook Bay, the church had fallen into serious disrepair by the late 1990’s. At that point, the NPS made an ongoing commitment to preserve and protect the structure, and it was one of the very few buildings successfully rehabilitated during the 90’s-era leasing program. Now rehabilitated as an event space, the historic Sandy Hook Chapel is available for short-term rentals for weddings, meetings, family gatherings, memorials, and other occasions. The park maintains the structure and grounds and manages the bookings, while the lessee is responsible for other event costs. This investment realizes substantial, ongoing revenue for the NPS. Now fully booked, the park is accepting reservations for dates in 2020.

“...The leasing program at Fort Hancock presents a unique opportunity to rehabilitate historic buildings, build a vibrant new community, and generate much-needed revenue for the park.”

Gerry Glaser, co-chair, Fort Hancock 21st Century Federal Advisory Committee

PHOTO COURTESY FORT HANCOCK 21ST CENTURY FEDERAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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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.

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.”


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

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