



Little Bighorn Battlefield Update - Winter 2015

By Denice Swanke, Superintendent



Greetings!

As you may recall, the period for public comments on Little Bighorn Battlefield's General Management Plan Amendment initiative closed in mid-December and a summary report was finalized in January.

To read what we heard from the public, you can view/download the report at the National Park Service website from a link at the bottom of the "Document List" page at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/libi/>.

In February I reviewed the report with the Denver regional office staff so as to develop a range of draft alternatives that will be published in the spring for further public review and comment.

The report notes several options recommended by commenters in response to the effort of the Park Service "to provide clear guidance for the most appropriate location and future management of the visitor center." They are:

1. Remodel the existing visitor center and museum storage facility.
2. Build a new visitor center and museum storage facility in the same location.
3. Build a new visitor center and museum storage facility in the Garryowen area or near Reno Creek Road.
4. Build a new visitor center and museum storage facility as part of the proposed Montana Department of Transportation rest area.
5. Build separate new facilities for the visitor center and museum storage facility.

Comments also expressed concerns about limited parking space and traffic congestion and noted the vital economic impact of the Battlefield Monument to southeastern Montana.

Interpretation

The Interpretive Division looks forward to another successful and rewarding year. In the spring and fall we will host a few schools through the "Expedition Little Bighorn" program where students can experience the lives of both Indians and soldiers by handling regalia, horse gear and equipment, among other things. This project is funded in part by a grant from the Western National Parks Association.

We plan to discontinue the "Ranger Walk to Last Stand Hill" as a regular daily talk, adding in its place a new interpretive theme that will complement our most popular presentation, the true and tested "Battle Talk."

Because the 139th Battle Anniversary will occur on a weekday, visitation will most likely be less than the highly visited anniversary weekends. The park will not host an Anniversary luncheon for visitors this year but will schedule this event again in 2016 during observance of the 140th anniversary of the Battle of the Little Bighorn and celebration of the 100th birthday of the National Park Service.

Irrigation Projects

A new main water line for the National Cemetery irrigation system will be installed this spring. The current asbestos cement pipe line has failed three times in the last two seasons. Regional funds will be used for this much needed replacement. In addition, a project funded by entrance fee revenue is scheduled for this summer. This second project will redesign and improve the National Cemetery irrigation system to better protect the headstones.

Snow Plow

Our much-needed new snow plow is scheduled to arrive in the middle of March. The new vehicle will replace our 25 year old unit that breaks down more often than it runs causing frequent closures of the tour road during the last two winters.

Resource Management

The Resource Management Division is preparing for a very active, exciting summer. The 2014 season ended with great progress and 2015 expects to build upon those successes.

Since our last update the division has employed six interns to work on various tasks such as paleontological research, the development of a native plant garden, creation of new maps using GIS and more. The park has produced five new interpretive bulletins (prairie dogs, Indian Memorial, a bird identification list, biodiversity of small parks and native plants). They will go to press just in time for the peak visitor season.

To address other needs a permanent biological technician has helped to reestablish and sustain an exotic plant remediation program. Other natural resource needs include water sampling, wildlife monitoring, integrated pest management and more.

An archives technician has researched records that relate directly to the effort to document and map Custer National Cemetery. When this collaborative project with the Historic American Landscape Survey is completed later this year, we will have a locator map for all interments in the cemetery. This resource will become publicly searchable on the park's web page.

The exciting work to document the cemetery is a component of a much larger comprehensive effort to document the park's entire cultural landscape. This work started two years ago when the Historic American Landscape Survey provided the first detailed inventory of all Battlefield markers. The LiDAR data collected this past summer will be processed to develop new 3D interpretive maps of the area. These efforts will not only create new interpretive products for the park but also provide a detailed inventory and condition assessment of irreplaceable park resources to improve future care.

One of our biggest successes last year was completion of a four week preservation project in partnership with the Historic Preservation Training Center and National Trust for Historic Preservation via the Hands On Preservation Experience (**HOPE**) program. Nationally significant monuments such as Bear Paw Mountain, Fort C.F. Smith, Reno-Bentzen and the 7th Cavalry memorial were preserved and cleaned to correct years of exposure to the harsh Montana weather. In the National Cemetery 275

headstones were aligned and straightened to comply with VA standards and cleaned to improve their appearance.

Superintendent's Lodge

A major project is scheduled at the lodge this summer. A new mini-split air conditioning system will replace existing window units. Replacements also include an energy efficient boiler and "on-demand" water heater.

In the early fall window sashes will be forwarded to the Historic Preservation Training Center, Frederick, Maryland for lead abatement, glass replacement and installation of time period weather stripping. As the sashes are being restored, window frames will be stripped, repaired and repainted.

Remaining funds will be used to repair and repoint basement wall and chimney mortar joints. In addition Portland cement based mortar on the stonework interior and exterior joints will be removed to be replaced by lime based mortar that more closely matches historic mortar.

These different tasks will provide a training opportunity for park maintenance staff and other NPS employees throughout the country to experience historic preservation techniques.

The Historic Preservation Training Center will also furnish the park with an estimate for removing the concrete portion of the front porch, repairing and preserving the roof portion and installing a wooden porch and railing to match historic photos. Funding for this construction does not exist at this time but a project will be developed and funding sought.

This project is not only desirable for aesthetic reasons but also to eliminate deterioration of the basement's stone walls from moisture damage.

The Superintendent's Lodge (or the "Old Stone House") was the original residence of the park superintendent. White Swan Memorial Library is located in the building. We wish to thank Supt. Swanke and her staff for this comprehensive report.

Stone House Photo courtesy Lee Noyes