

Preserving and Interpreting Historic Houses

VIPs Show the Way

Some members of local historical societies are Volunteers in the Park (VIPs) who augment Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area's (NRA) maintenance and interpretive staff in operating and presenting individual historic sites to the public.

The Montague Association for Restoration of Community History (MARCH) operates two historic properties in Montague, NJ, and has been particularly successful in establishing fascinating exhibits from donations made by past residents of the surrounding area. Docents, often dressed in period clothing, greet an enthusiastic public on weekends and holidays. Like the Millbrook Society which assists the park with the operation of a museum village near Flatbrookville, NJ, MARCH depends on the park for assistance with major upkeep and improvements. Even so, just occupying the once vacant structures and giving them a "cared for look" is, in itself, a priceless form of upkeep.

The ambitious Millbrook Society has also spearheaded the raising of two barns and a 19th-century gristmill — filling voids left in the village from arsonists and a failed dam project. The society supplies docents and craftsmen to entertain thousands of visitors during Millbrook Days, held during the first weekend in October each year. Volunteers operate a wagon shop, blacksmith shop, and woodworking shop; make apple cider and applesauce; and demonstrate dye making and other crafts prevalent in the mid-19th century. Park staff assists with preparation and logistics.

In Pennsylvania, the Friends of Marie Zimmermann (FOMZ) have helped the park in other ways. While park staff coordinates construction planning to restore the Marie Zimmermann House, FOMZ volunteers help maintain the grounds and promote local interest. Members of FOMZ were instrumental in requesting rehabilitation funds from Congress in the first place — something the park cannot do on its own.

Staving off the elements and protecting buildings from vandalism while awaiting rehabilitation, or mothballing, is an ongoing program at Delaware Water Gap NRA. Dedicated volunteers from the Walpack Historical Society (WHS) have made mothballing a routine activity.

The WHS was formed in 1986 to preserve the history and heritage of the Walpack Center Historic District in the central New Jersey side of the park. The WHS supplies docents to interpret the nearby Van Campen Inn and provides security patrols for a large portion of the contiguous Old Mine Road Historic District. Members of its Landmark Preservation Committee look for signs of vandalism and report those conditions to park law enforcement officials. In many instances, repairs are performed by a core membership of volunteers with construction skills.

But mothballing is WHS' specialty. Vacant park buildings left for years without heat, light, or air circulation have been successfully "mothballed" by installing ventilated security panels

Walking the talk, the author, a VIP, has personally participated in refurbishing countless window sash and built ventilated security panels to protect them. NPS photo.



over windows consisting of half vent and half Plexiglas. These see-through panels let sun and air in while keeping curiosity seekers out. Over 350 of these panels have been built and installed by WHS volunteers on buildings all over the park. Members also restored many minor structures including roofs, floors, and porches on some of the major buildings. Less glamorous jobs were tackled too, including cleaning out building interiors. Using park provided dumpsters, structures were returned to a broom clean condition so that interior history tours could be held. As a founding member and past president of the WHS, I personally participated in all these work details.

Mothballing vacant properties until such time as funds for their repair become available is an interim measure calculated to buy time. By educating the public and giving vacant historic properties that “cared for look” — mowing grass, making minor repairs, and providing occasional

house tours — we have witnessed a reduction in vandalism and have, I hope, shown the way to a more promising future for the preservation of our past.

Nonagenarian Leonard R. Peck has been a VIP at Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area since 1987. Len received the National Park Service Northeast Region's VIP of the Year Award in 1996.

VIPs make a significant contribution to the day-to-day operations of Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area. While there never seems to be sufficient staff, enough hours in the day, or adequate funds to carry out the park's mission, there has always been a generous supply of unselfish individuals willing to perform worthwhile tasks on a volunteer basis. VIPs work in almost every park in the National Park System.

The Many Faces of “Eaves”

Dutch Reformed Church, Dingmans Ferry, PA



“Turban Renewal.” Photo taken July 4, 1998.



This combined residence, antiques, and crafts shop is one of the national recreation area's successful historic leases. Today, the carriage house has been adapted for use as a gift shop called “Phoenix.”



“Polychromy.” Photo taken during summer of 1996. The ancient Greeks polychromed their temple facades with a multitude of paint colors. Lessee Doug Cosh has instead planted vast flower beds and, in the process, has turned the grounds of the former Dutch Reformed Church into a polychromatic feast for the eyes. Fourth of July facade decorations have become a “perennial” event.

“Decorative Frieze.” Photo taken during the winter of 2000.