

Agency Official 106 Effect Report

Installation of Handrails on Entrances to Chatham Manor

**U.S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service
Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania County Battlefields Memorial National Military Park
120 Chatham Lane
Fredericksburg, Virginia 22405**

Description and Purpose of Undertaking

Purpose

Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania County Battlefields Memorial National Military Park (FRSP) was authorized by an act of Congress on February 14, 1927 (44 Stat. 1091). The purpose of the park, as stated in the act, is “mark and preserve historical points connected with the battles of Fredericksburg, Spotsylvania Court House, Wilderness, and Chancellorsville, including Salem Church ...” By Executive Order 6166 in 1933 the park was transferred from the War Department to the Department of the Interior to be administered by the National Park Service.

In 1975, FRSP took possession of Chatham and opened the site to the public the following year. Since then, Chatham has remained open as a visitor contact site and has also operated as the park administrative headquarters.

Need

The eastern and western main entrances to Chatham Manor have been identified as concerns by the park’s safety committee. At least once a year, a park visitor takes a tumble down the steps. The limestone elliptical steps were installed during the 1920s renovations at Chatham and replaced standard brick and stone steps. The elliptical steps have non-typical treads and risers at 15” depth and 6” height. These unusual dimensions, along with slippery conditions during inclement weather, have led to a number of injuries among our visitors. Although the house has a designated handicap entrance with a ramp and railings, visitors approaching the main east entrance to the house often don’t see the alternative access. Therefore, the park is proposing to provide some assistance to our visitors by installing one handrail each on the west and east entrances of the main house.

Property Description

A. Major Physical Components – Chatham sits on 85.01 acres in Stafford County, Va. The tract is a mixture of open fields and wood lots, bisected by a few ravines that feed rainwater runoff to the Rappahannock River. East of the house is a maintained enclosed garden. Most of the open fields are under cultivation. The house itself is open to the public seven days a week.

B. Architectural Significance – The main structures at Chatham were constructed between 1768 and 1771 and served as a domestic site for over 200 years. According to the Historic Structure Report, “Chatham...meets the criteria of the National Register of Historic Places for the First Order of Significance. Architecturally, it is a classic example of a brick Georgian-style mansion that despite minor alteration has essentially retained its original integrity.” Chatham is on the park’s List of Classified Structures – LCS #00422.

C. Historical Significance – The house was constructed by William Fitzhugh, a prominent plantation owner in 18th century Virginia. Among his guests at Chatham were George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. During the Civil War, the Union army occupied Chatham

beginning in the spring of 1862. President Abraham Lincoln visited his generals at Chatham during that period. In December 1862, Union generals again made Chatham headquarters and both during and after the Battle of Fredericksburg the house and grounds became a hospital for wounded soldiers. Both Clara Barton and the poet Walt Whitman cared for the wounded at Chatham.

Description of Alternatives

Alternative A – No Action

This alternative would fail to solve the issue of concern for potential accidents on the steps leading into the eastern and western main entrances.

Alternative B – Install a Free-Standing Handrail

Under this alternative, a free-standing handrail would be installed perpendicular to the doors of the two main entrances of the main house. These metal railings would be installed via vertical posts at the bottom of the steps, secured into the patio on the west side of the house and into the walkway on the east side of the house. The railing would ascend the steps and be anchored by vertical posts secured into the top of the steps. This alternative would require an intrusion into the historic fabric of the steps by drilling and anchoring the railing into the top step or landing. Additionally, a railing that divides the elliptical steps could prove an additional safety concern, as visitors approach the steps from multiple directions and the railing could be an impediment if not noticed or seen. To make it plainly visible could possibly result in the introduction of a significant visible intrusion to the designed historic steps and entrance.

Alternative C – Install a Removable Slip-Over Set of Steps

This alternative would involve the construction of a set of steps, approximately six feet wide, with attached handrails that would simply slip over a portion of the existing steps. This application is being used at the nearby historic house at the Gari Melchers Home and Studio Belmont, where the historic steps are uneven and a safety concern. The slip-over steps can be removed when not in use and would not require any intrusion upon historic fabric. At Chatham, the reality is the steps would remain in place except when removed for photo opportunities, thus resulting in the introduction of a significant visible intrusion to the designed historic steps and entrance.

Alternative D – Installation of Secured Handrails on Entrances (Preferred)

Under this alternative two six-foot long 1.5" diameter iron pipe railings would be installed, one on each side of the house, on the exterior walls of the house and adjacent to the elliptical steps.

1. On the east entrance, the rail would be installed on the exterior wall to the left (south) of the door. It would be anchored by two bolts installed into the wall's mortar joints. At the bottom, a 54" iron upright would be sunk into the patio next to the house to support the railing. This would require digging to a depth of 18". The area is disturbed, having been excavated by archaeologists in the 1970s when the building was inspected for foundation and drainage assessments.

2. On the west entrance, the rail would be installed on the exterior wall to the right (south) of the door. It would be anchored by two bolts installed into the wall's mortar joints. At the bottom, a 54" iron upright would be sunk into the ground next to the house to support the railing. This would require digging to a depth of 18". The area is disturbed, having been excavated by archaeologists in the 1970s when the building was inspected for foundation and drainage assessments.

Black iron handrail caps will be installed over the round rail pipes.

Description of Mitigation Measures

- A. An effort has been made to keep the profile of the proposed handrail to a minimum.
- B. The proposed handrail is to be anchored into the mortar joints, thus avoiding removal of brick or other historic material.

Effect Analysis

It is the park's opinion that, as proposed, this project adheres to the Secretary's "Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitation of Historic Buildings." It is the park's belief that the project, as proposed, will result provide improved safety for its visitors to Chatham and will not destroy or remove historic fabric and the impact of the proposed handrails has been minimized to the greatest extent. For this reason, the park's opinion is that this undertaking will have "no adverse effect" on architectural resources.

Park Consultation

The proposal will be circulated to the park's Section-106 advisor for historic architecture for his review and comments.

The proposal will go through a 30-day public comment and review period. During this time, the project is being on the NPS public website. The park has contacted representatives of interested local organizations, such as Mary Washington College's Department of Historic Preservation, the Rappahannock Valley Civil War Round Table, the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust, the Civil War Trust, the Pamunkey Indian Tribe, the Friends of Chatham, and Stafford County.

The project will be sent for a 30-day comment and review period to the Virginia SHPO.

Attached Supporting Documentation

- A. Park Map
- B. Photos

Conclusion

At important historic sites, the proposed undertaking would foster fulfillment of the park's General Management directives to protect cultural resources. This project will have "no adverse effect" upon historic resources.

Report Prepared By

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