

Fort Trumbull could offer a room-by-room timeline of its history

\$80,000 renovation project is ongoing

By JUDY BENSON
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New London — Soon after Henry Alves became superintendent of Fort Trumbull State Park last October, he noticed a few things at the site's central structure that needed fixing.

Some were easy to spot, like the badly deteriorating windowsills and doorframes inside the octagonal granite fort, built from 1838 to 1854 to replace two earlier forts at the site.

"You could literally take your finger and stick it through these sills, they were rotted that badly," he said last week, showing the custom-built, freshly painted woodwork that now frames many of the windows, while



TIM MARTIN/THE DAY

Sherrie Delmore of Lisbon, a full-time employee at Yankee Remodeler of New London, paints a door of the original dining barracks of Fort Trumbull State Park in New London.

crews from Yankee Remodeler continued working.

But just repairing the fort, which

opened as a state park in 2000, wouldn't be enough to make it the kind of space he envisions for visitors.

Often, he said, visitors would tour the exhibits housed in the museum next door, then walk through the fort itself quickly, just sticking their heads inside each of the open doors briefly and moving on.

"I wanted to get the public really involved in the space," he said.

Since April, an \$80,000 project funded with state bond money has been underway to renovate the fort and create exhibits in each of the rooms of the structure that correspond to a different period of its use — a kind of active historical timeline visitors could walk through.

It would be a way to tell the unique story of the fort and its predecessors from the Revolutionary War — including a role in Benedict Arnold's invasion of New London — through

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the Civil War, to its stint as the first Coast Guard Academy, used by the U.S. Maritime Service and finally to a research lab for the Navy during both world wars and the Cold War.

"He's got a vision of being able to walk from room to room that's really cool," said G. Cliff Carter of Waterford, president of the 134-member Friends of Fort Trumbull, which supplies donations and volunteer labor.

Like many members, Carter is a retired scientist who spent much of his career at the fort when it operated as the

Naval Undersea Warfare Center, working as an electronics engineer on research and development of sonar signal processing.

The sound lab closed in 1996, when it was moved to Newport, R.I.

Carter and his group, who've been lobbying the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection for years about the deteriorating condition of the fort, are hoping that with the repairs and more engaging exhibits, more visitors will come to learn about a local site that has played an intriguing part in the nation's history.

The museum and fort currently host between 5,000 and 10,000 annual visitors.

"We'd really like to get more school groups in there," Carter said.

As part of the project, Ashley Rice has been working at the fort this summer as a seasonal interpretive guide, spending much of her time researching the history of the fort and finding period furniture, historic artwork and other artifacts from Craigslist and second-hand bookstores to be displayed in each of the rooms.

Historical fireplaces, closed off with bricks years ago, are

being reopened, and interpretive signs are being developed.

One room is set up like the barracks Army soldiers would have slept in while they mustered at the fort in preparation for being sent to join Civil War units.

Another is equipped with replica rifles, boxes of ammunition, cannonballs and other equipment from the time it served as a weapons magazine, while others are set up as officers' quarters, a mess hall and a brig.

"We had one fellow who donated his father's Merchant Marine uniform," Alves said.

He plans to display the uniform on a mannequin in a

room that will be decorated with artifacts from the period when it served as an officer training school for the service from 1939 to 1946.

Another room is being set up to depict the era when sonar engineers worked at the fort, with metal desks, obsolete sonar testing equipment obtained from Navy surplus and, when complete, mannequins wearing the fashions of the Cold War — white shirts with skinny ties.

"How many kids have ever seen a rotary phone, or a manual typewriter?" Alves asked, pointing to some of

the desk equipment.

Volunteers with the friends group have helped acquire and refurbish some of the old equipment, including a Bottom Reflected Acoustic Sonar System, or BRASS II, machine, Carter said.

"We got all the rust off it, and got it all painted," he said.

Alves said the renovations should be complete by next spring, and Rice, the seasonal interpretive guide, has agreed to return next summer to complete work on the exhibits.

"I'm hoping people will get a lot more out of it," Alves said. jbenson@theday.com