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# Fort Hancock's restoration can't be put off for long

The National Park Service should be lauded for agreeing to allow the public to review the proposed renovation plans for Fort Hancock on Sandy Hook.

But lost in the hubbub over the secrecy that initially shrouded the plans — as well as grumbling over the nature of the project and its cost — is the importance of renovating the fort's precious and beautiful historic landmarks, most of them more than a century old. Although I'm not involved in the proposal to turn part of the fort into a resort, I am an architect who specializes in historic preservation and oversaw a related project — the rehabilitation of the fort's Surgeon's Quarters. The New Jersey Audubon Society now leases the structure (known as Building 20) for its Sandy Hook Bird Observatory.

Prior to being renovated, the Surgeon's Quarters was falling down. The roof had been leaking for decades, rotting the floor joists below almost to the point of caving in. The brick veneer was cracking. Porch columns that weren't missing altogether were decayed and the pedestals on which they stood were crumbling. It wasn't a pretty sight. It was a shame.

Because the building is owned by the federal government, plans for the construction had to adhere to the Interior Department's "Standards for Rehabilitation," a strict set of guide-

lines aimed at making old buildings safe for occupants and visitors while preserving their historic fabric. The guidelines are time-consuming. They are costly. And they are well worth the effort.

Today, the Surgeon's Quarters has been returned to its former glory (with the exception, appropriately enough, of a new handicapped-access lift that recuperating soldiers might have appreciated in days of yore). As a result, we now know what it looked like at the turn of the last century, when Sandy Hook was a vital and bustling military base that protected the Eastern seaboard. Strolling through and around the edifice, you can appreciate, if not feel, that history, all while enjoying Sandy Hook's excellent birding opportunities and the Audubon Society's enriching educational programs.

There can and should be debate over the details of the Park Service's plans for rehabilitating the rest of Fort Hancock. But the debate mustn't be dilatory. These buildings have to be rehabilitated before it's too late — a moment that is quickly approaching, as the prior condition of the Surgeon's Quarters aptly illustrates.

Future generations will applaud our foresight — or condemn our neglect.

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