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## Former fort to house vets

From hospital to Hollywood, a history of changes

By Josh Mitchell | Sun reporter



Barbara Mitrovich (center) and her daughter, Carol Hatem, look over the first house being renovated at Bayside at Fort Howard. Painter Wayne Hamilton works in the background. (Sun photo by Amy Davis / October 11, 2007)

A scenic patch of waterfront in southeastern Baltimore County is where the British disembarked during the War of 1812, where injured U.S. military veterans were later nursed to health and, more recently, where scenes for a George Clooney movie were shot.

Now, Fort Howard is undergoing another transformation: retirement housing for military veterans.

Department of Veterans Affairs officials say it is the first time such a large piece of department-owned land will be used for housing for veterans.

In an agreement with the VA, a developer has begun to rehabilitate the old military quarters and brick buildings on the 94-acre campus. In time, some 1,300 residential rentals will make up Bayside at Fort Howard, and many of the units will be occupied by military veterans and their families.

The first families are expected to move in by early 2009.

On Monday, project managers will unveil a museum on the site featuring old helmets, flak jackets, ammunition, journals and other war memorabilia donated by veterans who have signed up to live on the campus, on a peninsula surrounded by the Chesapeake Bay and Patapsco River.

"We're trying to develop this as a veteran-focused community," said Dennis H. Smith, director of the Veterans

Affairs Maryland Health Care System.

"The people in the state of Maryland and the veterans really feel that it's veterans' property and that it should be used for veterans."

To that end, veterans will move to the top of the waiting list for housing, followed by their spouses, former spouses, and then others age 55 and older. The veterans will also receive rental discounts.

Apartments for active-living seniors are advertised to start at \$1,045 a month.

About 300 people have put down payments to live on the campus, and 1,100 others have expressed interest, said property manager Kimberly Smearman.

The land, once a plantation, was where the British disembarked to fight the Battle of Baltimore in the War of 1812.

The site was later an Army post, with Gen. Douglas MacArthur among the soldiers once stationed there.

In 1940, the land was turned over to the then-Veterans Administration.

The campus has for decades operated as the Fort Howard Veterans Affairs Medical Center, but the 377-bed hospital closed in 2002, and the campus has largely been vacant since, save for an outpatient clinic.

In recent years, the property has been the setting for scenes in the HBO series *The Wire*, the 2005 film *Syriana* starring George Clooney, as well as other productions, VA officials said.

"It was a real dilemma as to what do we do with the property," Smith said. "We certainly didn't want to just sell it to anybody."

A staff member suggested turning the campus into a community in which veterans could settle into retirement and live the remainder of their lives. Now the community will feature four levels of living: active, independent, assisted and nursing care.

Lutherville retiree Walter Pasciak, an Army veteran of World War II who has signed up to share a one-bedroom apartment on the campus with his wife, said he was attracted to the idea of living in one place the rest of his life.

"It was a whole community that they were going to build, and that interested me," said Pasciak, 82.

"So that there's no more moving after that."

He also said he enjoyed the picturesque views on the campus, which includes an expansive field -- the old marching grounds -- in the center that will remain open.

On a recent afternoon, the sun glistened off small ripples of the water, with the Key Bridge visible in the distance. Contractors applied a fresh coat of paint on one of a series of cottages -- once home to Army officers -- that are being turned into housing for active families.

The community will also feature a performing arts theater, exercise and swimming facilities, and a resource center.

Project organizers point out that residents will not be required to pay the six-figure down payments that other retirement communities often require.

"People can move into Bayside without having substantial sums of money," Smith said.

Developer Federal Development LLC, which is leasing the property from the VA, is building the project in phases, with 532 units expected to be completed in 2009, 411 in 2010, and the final 387 some time after that.