



Fort McHenry gearing up for a banner 2012

Changing of the guard includes new exhibits, new visitor center, new superintendent



Tina Cappetta Orcutt is the superintendent of the Fort McHenry National Monument and Hampton National Historic Site. Here she is standing inside the fort. (Barbara Haddock Taylor, Baltimore Sun / December 23, 2011)

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Ever since Tina Cappetta Orcutt and her family moved to Maryland last summer, she says, her 9-year-old son Adam has been paying close attention to Maryland license plates, especially the commemorative tags that tout the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812.

"He'll go, there's another **Fort McHenry** fan!" whenever he spots one of the red-white-and-blue plates featuring the Star-spangled Banner and the fort, Cappetta Orcutt says. "I don't correct him."

Cappetta Orcutt recently became superintendent of Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine, one of Baltimore's best-known attractions and the scene of the battle in 1814 that inspired **Francis Scott Key** to write the poem that became the national anthem.

She and her staff are gearing up to see a flood of Fort McHenry fans in 2012, the start of more than two years of events and festivities marking the milestone.

They say 2012 is shaping up to be a banner year at the star-shaped fort and one of the busiest since 1976, when tall ships visited Baltimore's **Inner Harbor** and thousands of people slept outdoors on the fort's grounds to mark the nation's bicentennial.

Chief of interpretation Vincent Vaise, the program manager in charge of tours and visitor services at the fort, predicts that it will draw as many as 800,000 visitors in 2012, up from 638,000 in 2011.

Vaise noted that attendance at Fort McHenry has been rising steadily over the past five years. He said the fort drew 612,301 visitors in 2010. That was up from 606,589 in 2009, 598,770 in 2008 and 575,644 visitors in 2007.

Cappetta Orcutt and Vaise attribute some of the increase in visitation this year to the March opening of a two-story, \$15 million Visitor and Education Center, which was designed to accommodate many more people than the smaller, 1960s-era building it replaced.

They say the rise in attendance is also due to the publicity surrounding next year's anniversary events and reminders such as the license plates and, starting in March, \$1 and \$5 coins that will pay homage to the national anthem and Fort McHenry.

With all the attention it is receiving, "the War of 1812 is cool now," Vaise said. "There was a time when it wasn't. Now it's cool."

Cappetta Orcutt and Vaise said the fort is in the best physical shape it has been in in years, with new exhibits inside the fort and a wider "seawall trail" along the water's edge supplementing the visitor center.

The celebrations will kick off June 13 with the "Star Spangled Sailabration," a week of events marking Maryland's role in the War of 1812.

Organizers, including the **U.S. Navy**, expect upwards of 1 million people to attend the events, which will include the arrival in Baltimore's harbor of at least 10 tall ships and other large vessels, an air show, fireworks, concerts, rowing competitions and living history displays.

Celebrations also are planned for New Orleans, Norfolk, Va., New York and Boston, among other port cities. Fort

McHenry will play a key role in Baltimore's lineup, planners say, because it's associated with a turning point in the war against the British. Before the Battle of Baltimore in 1814, the British had sacked Washington, leaving Baltimore as a last point of resistance.

"There's only one Fort McHenry in the world, so you have something that's uniquely Baltimore," said Bill Gilmore, executive director of the city's Office of Promotion & the Arts. "It's a piece of our nation's history. This is an opportunity to celebrate it in a big way. ... When these tall ships come in, it will be a huge magnet."

Along with the physical improvements to the fort has come a changing of the guard in terms of leadership. Cappetta Orcutt, 41, came to Fort McHenry in August to replace Gay Vietzke, who moved up the ranks to become deputy regional director in the Northeast Region of the National Park Service, overseeing properties from Virginia to Maine.

As Fort McHenry's 26th superintendent, or "commanding officer," Cappetta Orcutt is in charge of approximately 55 full-time, part-time and seasonal employees at two federal park properties in central Maryland. In addition to Fort McHenry at 2400 E. Fort Ave., she is superintendent of the Hampton National Historic Site, a property in **Baltimore County** that draws 40,000 visitors a year.

Cappetta Orcutt said she first visited Fort McHenry in 2001, after she had been with the park service for more than a decade. When she learned that the superintendent position was open, she said, "I just couldn't pass up the opportunity to apply."

While many improvements have just recently been completed at Fort McHenry, she said, work is due to begin soon on about \$4 million worth of capital projects at Hampton, including a separate visitors "station" and a new curatorial facility.

Besides overseeing operations at Fort McHenry and Hampton, Cappetta Orcutt has begun to meet with local leaders in tourism and other areas. She said it's a pleasure to take command of a park service property that has as much public support as Fort McHenry, because that's not always the case.

While one of her goals is to increase awareness of the fort and its role in history, she said, she can tell it's already held in high regard by area residents and that people seem to have a vested interest in its future.

"It's so appreciated by the community," she said. "Baltimore owns Fort McHenry. Baltimore owns the Star-spangled Banner and Francis Scott Key. That makes our job so much easier."