



Guest opinion: Battlefield artifacts will be protected, then returned

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As I stand in the dingy basement of Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument's 1950s-era visitor center, a chill runs down my spine — not because of the temperature, but because of what surrounds me.

I gently touch Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer's buckskin hunting pants. I gaze at one of Cheyenne warrior Wooden Leg's ledger drawings of his battle experience. Then I glance up at an exposed water pipe and shudder at the thought that it could rupture and flood the room, destroying these precious artifacts.

Unbeknownst to most of our visitors, a national treasure is stored in that cramped, inaccessible basement. It contains most of the monument's 149,000 documents and objects, items that bring to life the story of the battle and its participants. Because exhibit space is so inadequate, few of them have ever been displayed.

Unfortunately, the basement has been a woeful home for these treasures for decades, and the years are taking their toll. Lack of humidity control is degrading leather objects. Overcrowded uniforms are packed in drawers, risking damage. The basement has no fire protection.

I lie awake at night worrying about irreversible harm or catastrophic loss. We do the best we can, but it is not enough.

Time for action

That is why we are acting now. By summer's end, objects and archives that are not on display will be temporarily relocated to the National Park Service's secure, state-of-the-art conservation center in Tucson, Ariz.

Temporarily is the key word. This intervention for the sake of the collection is not forever. We are working toward a new visitor center and museum storage facility to house and display the collection at the battlefield.

While the collection is away, Little Bighorn Battlefield's 320,000 annual visitors will notice no difference. Exhibits will remain the same. Because nearly all research is done remotely, this move will not affect our local economy.

Since 1986, the park's management plan has called for a new visitor center and museum storage. The plan says they should be built together on land outside our present boundary, which includes only 765 acres. The current visitor center is too small, outdated, and many feel it's an awkward intrusion on the landscape. But attempts to implement this plan have been mired in local politics, controversy and lack of legal authority.

In recent months, we discussed this crisis with the public, interested groups and tribes. Their feedback was loud and clear: The museum collection must be preserved, even if that requires temporarily relocating it.

Emergency treatment

This means more than just a safe place to sit on shelves and gather proverbial dust. Like a patient arriving with no pulse at the hospital emergency room, the collection needs immediate evaluation, treatment and stabilization. That triage must be by professional conservators, curators, and archivists, all of whom await our "patient" in Tucson.

While the collection is cared for, we will focus on the new visitor center and storage facility. This renewed effort requires fresh discussion and negotiation, especially with two key parties: the Crow Tribe, whose reservation surrounds the monument, and the Custer Battlefield Preservation Committee, which purchased land near the monument for donation to the park. We need the

support of the entire community to make this happen.

On a recent spring day, I strolled across Last Stand Hill. Looking down on our outdated visitor center, I imagined a day when visitors will step through the doors of a new facility — one that will do justice to this historic place, its priceless collection, and the profound significance of the battle of Little Bighorn. I know that day will come — and I appreciate the understanding of the American public as we make that dream a reality.

I understand the collection's deep connection to this place and to Montana. To those who fear it will never return, I pledge that all of us in the National Park Service — here in the park, at the conservation center and beyond — are committed to this goal. We will protect the collection and we will bring it back.