



## The Visitor Center



Fort Vancouver Visitor Center four years after opening. *National Park Service photo*

Soon after Fort Vancouver National Monument was established in 1948, planning began for visitor service facilities within the park. In 1961, with redesignation as a National Historic Site and as a part of the “Mission 66” initiative celebrating 50 years of the National Park Service, Fort Vancouver received its first building: a Visitor Center that included visitor amenities, exhibits, a theater, and staff offices.

### Mission 66

After World War II, the United States experienced a period of prosperity. The construction of the US highway system, the increase in car ownership, and the popularity of road trip vacations led to an influx of visitors to national parks. But in the nearly 50 years since its creation, the units of the National Park Service faced deteriorating infrastructure, and lacked services and modern amenities.



Looking forward to the 50th anniversary of the National Park Service in 1966,

Miss Washington poses next to the Mission 66 sign during the dedication of the Visitor Center. *National Park Service photo*

Congress funded a ten year program to improve visitor experience in the parks. This program would be called “Mission 66.”

Mission 66 planners developed the idea of a central facility for visitors. This building would be “the center of the entire information and public service program for a park.” The idea was to combine old and new building uses into one facility that could serve as the main point of contact for visitors. Visitor centers would become the location for museum displays, interpretive presentations, administrative offices, and restrooms. Mission 66 led to the construction of over 100 visitor centers throughout the national park system, including the one at Fort Vancouver National Historic Site.

### Park Service Modern

Mission 66 architecture was a departure from the rustic structures traditionally built in national parks. New park facilities were built based on contemporary design principles. Simple, geometric forms, horizontal lines, and earth-tone colors characterized Mission 66 architecture. These new buildings were made from more modern, inexpensive materials like concrete. Windows were sometimes unusually shaped, and positioned to frame park landscapes or historic features. New visitor centers were designed to be unobtrusive and harmonize with their surroundings. This distinctive style is called “Park Service Modern.”

Mission 66 planners hoped this fresh design and new construction would create a consistent architectural “look” throughout the national park system.



Mission 66 Brochure. *National Park Service photo*

## The Surrounding Landscape

Set at a higher elevation than the reconstructed Fort Vancouver, the Visitor Center was designed to provide visitors with an opportunity to see the landscape from a slight distance. From the building's south-facing windows, visitors can see the geographical relationship between the Columbia River, the Hudson's Bay Company fort, and its employee village. Pearson Air Museum, the air field, and parts of Vancouver Barracks are also visible. The gently rising access road between the fort and Visitor

Center was designed to provide a pleasant route between the two locations.

The Visitor Center is the heart of the complex that was built at Fort Vancouver as a part of Mission 66. This complex includes the park's administrative offices, bunkhouse, and maintenance building (now housing the park's Costume Department). Together, these buildings are a contributing element to the Vancouver National Historic Reserve District.



The rest of the Mission 66 Complex, including the Visitor Center parking lot and the three buildings right of center, seen from the roof of the Visitor Center. *National Park Service photo*

## Interpretation

A main goal of Mission 66 visitor centers was to standardize the core elements of services at national parks: information, amenities, and interpretive programs. Because of this, historians and interpreters were involved in the Mission 66 planning process. The hope was for the park's "story" to be told as clearly and effectively as possible.

The first exhibits were installed in the Fort Vancouver Visitor Center by 1962, and visitation to the park dramatically increased. Technology was a new and important aspect of the visitor experience, including a slide projector, projector screen, speakers, and push-button audio-visual stations.



A Park Ranger shows school children a sea biscuit. When the Visitor Center opened, Fort Vancouver had not yet been reconstructed. *National Park Service photo*

## Preservation

Since its opening in 1961, visitation to the Visitor Center has increased more than tenfold. As the National Park Service geared up for its centennial celebrations in 2016, a major rehabilitation updated this historic building to improve accessibility and sustainability. In addition, both the exhibit area and theater were expanded to offer more educational opportunities to visitors, including the over 12,000 elementary school students who come to the park each year for curriculum-based programs.

The rehabilitation was carefully planned to preserve defining features of the Park Service Modern architecture and retain or reuse as many elements as possible. The exterior and front plaza remain virtually unchanged, though the entrance gable is a new addition (photo, right). Inside, the bank of south-facing windows and the board and batten finish on the walls are example of original features visible today.

For over half a century, the Fort Vancouver Visitor Center has been a vital part of this national park. From the hill overlooking the park's historic landscape, this building will continue to provide visitors with opportunities for learning, exploration, and connection.



For more information, contact Fort Vancouver National Historic Site at (360) 816-6230 or [www.nps.gov/fova](http://www.nps.gov/fova)

For more information on Mission 66 in the National Park Service, see:

*Mission 66 Visitor Centers: The History of a Building Type*, by Sara Allaback

*Mission 66: Modernism and the National Park Dilemma*, by Ethan Carr