

Polishing a diamond: NIC Powder Magazine to be dedicated Sept. 18

By Kay Thornbrugh, North Idaho College

There's a time machine on the campus of North Idaho College.

Step inside to be instantly transported to 1878, when Fort Sherman was a bustling center of activity around which the city of Coeur d'Alene grew.

Beside Winton Hall, past the white archway and the cannon, sits the powder magazine, where weapons such as rifles, cannons and gunpowder were stored in the days of Fort Sherman. It's a small, unassuming building, but it's one of the last surviving elements of the fort, a sentinel of Coeur d'Alene history. From the floorboards to the rafters, everything in the powder magazine is just as it was in the 1800s.

Well, except for the Wi-Fi. That's new.

NIC Director of Facilities Operations Mike Halpern has wanted to restore the powder magazine for 26 years. Now, after nearly three years of work, his vision is becoming a reality.

"For years, I've been trying to convince the administration that we could do something pretty spectacular," he said. "I've always thought NIC should take this building back and do something for NIC, to have a display showing the history of what happened on these grounds."

While it was operated by the Museum of North Idaho, the powder magazine's original wooden floor was covered with linoleum. Its rafters were hidden behind an acoustic ceiling. Sheet rock insulation was laid over the original brick. It didn't look like a powder magazine, but all the original pieces were there, waiting to be revealed.

The restoration effort began in 2010. Windows and doors have been reconstructed as they were, and much of the original architecture has been preserved. The powder magazine that is open for visitors today is as close to its original state as possible.

“We wanted to bring it back, in all its glory, as it was in the 1800s,” said Rhonda Smalley, NIC Copy Center operator, who was charged with researching and designing exhibits in the powder magazine.

The project is about more than just restoring a historic building. It’s about making the history of Coeur d’Alene accessible to visitors. In addition to serving as a connection to the past, the building will also be available as a meeting space and study area -- complete with Wi-Fi.

Along the brick walls of the powder magazine hang a series of panels that display the history of Fort Sherman, North Idaho College and the Coeur d’Alene Tribe. Visitors can walk through the powder magazine and see how, though the landscape has changed over time, this area has always remained a “gathering place” in one way or another. The gathering place is what the Coeur d’Alene Tribe called this area long before settlers.

“We want to bring that history back,” Smalley said. “We have a footprint here of something that’s been here since the beginning of time. It’s important that people know it’s here.”

The building is alive, Smalley said, a vibrant piece of local history. Every part of it is a connection to the past, even the divots in the wooden floor.

“You just wonder who got their cannon stuck trying to get it out,” she said. “The wood talks. The brick talks. It’s still telling its story. I love the entire structure because it’s still telling its story.”

It was important to Halpern and Smalley to use the informational displays as a way to shed light on the lives of the people connected to Fort Sherman. As they searched through archived information, stories emerged—stories of people, real people, whose lives helped to shape the Coeur d’Alene that exists today.

“There are lesser-known people, like the laundress,” Halpern said. “Who would’ve thought about the laundress at Fort Sherman? Nobody cared. Well, we want people to care and know that there were others who supported this place.”

The powder magazine is already drawing visitors. In addition to locals, the guestbook boasts the signatures of visitors from as far as Pennsylvania and even France.

“We have built a bridge to the past that people can touch and take with them,” Smalley said. “We are who we are because of what they did.”

NIC’s Powder Magazine will be dedicated at 5 p.m. Wednesday Sept. 18 at NIC’s 80th Anniversary Celebration. Everyone is invited to attend. Immediately following the powder magazine’s dedication, there will be a dedication of the adjacent Veterans Memorial and then a 6 p.m. dedication of Cheamkwet Park. At 6:30 p.m., the public is invited to a free barbecue cookout dinner with music by Jazz Northwest Big Band.

The full schedule for the 80th anniversary celebration can be found at www.nic.edu.