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Exterior of Grant Barracks at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York. Credit: Dan Desmet, Public Affairs.

With honor

Army Corps shares love of preservation for Ulysses Grant's family

New Jersey resident, Ulysses Grant Dietz is named after his great great grandfather, Army General Ulysses S. Grant, the nation's 18th president and commander in chief. Dietz realized at a young age that bearing his name would be significant in his life.

"In 1968, at my grandfather's memorial service at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., I met his older sister who was born in the White House in 1876 and who married a Russian prince in 1899," Dietz says. "I suddenly became aware of my ignorance. I realized that my family was not like other families, and that somehow I had to do something about that. I was only 13, but I think a switch was flipped that day."

Since then, he has set out to preserve and share his family's history. He has done this by being on the board of the Ulysses S. Grant Association and speaking annually at the General Grant National Memorial or "Grant's Tomb" on the General's birthday. He's also made preservation his career and was the Chief Curator of the Newark Museum for many years.

So when he heard that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, New York District, is renovating and preserving Grant Barracks at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, he was pleased. "Buildings like this are often not treated with historical sensitivity,

which seems too bad. So the idea that the historic aspect of the building—even though it was built in 1931—is being considered is a good thing," Dietz says.

The Army Corps is performing this work as part of the West Point Cadet Barracks Update Program. This purpose of the program is to provide additional modern living space for the Cadets:

- Grant Barracks—formerly named "Old South Barracks"—was constructed in 1931 and is the oldest Cadet barracks in use.
- It was re-named after General Grant who commanded the victorious Union Army during the American Civil War.
- Grant graduated from the academy in 1843 and both his son and grandson would following in his footsteps.

Today, the barracks is being modernized to meet the needs of the modern Cadet. "The renovation includes a complete gut and remodel of the existing structure



Renovation of Grant Barracks at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York. Credit: Dan Desmet, Public Affairs.



Army General Ulysses S. Grant. Credit: Wikipedia.

and the floor plans will be optimized to utilize space in a more practical way,” says Christopher Reinhardt, former Chief of New York District’s Military Programs Branch.

The renovation is being accomplished by Army Corps contractors, while STV Inc. of New York City is performing the design, and J. Kokolakis Contracting Inc. of Bohemia, New York is doing the construction.

When completed, the multi-story barracks will have 162 modernized rooms. To assist the Cadets with their academics, each Cadet company will have Collaboration Rooms that will allow them to meet in large numbers to work on group projects or participate in team building activities.

To help with this, it will be equipped with Wi-Fi and work stations will be equipped with cable connectors and power supply between computers and devices—Universal Serial Bus (USB) ports. In addition, the barracks will be outfitted with completely new mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems.

The barracks will also get something that it didn’t have before—air conditioning. Many of these new and upgraded features will be energy-efficient making the barracks Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Silver Certifiable.

Preservation a birthright

Besides the renovations, preservation work is also underway. Dietz says that preserving old buildings is in his family’s blood and so is the Army Corps.

“My grandfather, Ulysses S. Grant III was a 1903 West Point Graduate, who worked for the Army Corps and was also a founding trustee of the National Trust for Historic Preservation,” Dietz says. “In the 1920s, his job in Washington, D.C. was to oversee all of the public buildings and parks, including the White House, which he altered for the Coolidge’s.”

Dietz was also bitten by the preservation bug. “I’ve always loved old houses and the variety of things that went inside them. While I was Chief Curator of the Newark Museum, I was the keeper of a great 1885 beer baron’s mansion that is part of the museum’s complex.

Interestingly, next door to this was the house of Marcus L. Ward, torn down to build the museum in 1922. It was a house that Ulysses S. Grant and his wife, Julia, visited, because Ward was a huge supporter of Grant, as both governor of New Jersey and a Republican congressman during and after the Civil War.

The Army Corps will be doing its own preservation work on Grant Barrack’s both inside and outside the building. Some of this preservation will take place in the Grant Hall that is connected to the east side of the barracks. The hall was built in 1852 and was the former Cadet mess hall, used to feed Cadets until 1923.

Today, Grant Hall is a kitchen and dining area separate from the mess hall. It is also a great gathering place to meet up with friends socially or discuss projects with professors in a more relaxed atmosphere.



Ulysses Grant Dietz, the great great grandson of Army General Ulysses S. Grant. Credit: Ulysses Grant Dietz.



Exterior of Grant Barracks at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York. Credit: Dan Desmet, Public Affairs.



The Army Corps is performing preservation work inside and outside the building, including restoring the decorative wood work along the walls and ceilings of the dining hall, like these historic unit crests. To preserve these crests, plaster and terrazzo work will be performed. Credit: Dan Desmet, Public Affairs.

"Within the woodwork on the walls and ceiling of the dining hall there is a rich history of unit crests decorating the interior," Reinhardt says. "To preserve these crests plaster and terrazzo work will be performed."

A gothic revival

Grant Barrack's exterior military gothic revival architecture is also being restored in order to blend in with the rest of the historic 200-year old campus. This involves delicate repointing work, pressure washing and re-grouting of the exterior granite stones.

Repointing is when the joints of brick or stonework are repaired by filling in with grout or mortar. The primary purpose of this is to prevent water from infiltrating into the building.

Besides the granite work, exterior historic items will be restored, including decorative metal railings, stone masonry, and decorative metal and wood doors.

The barracks is expected to be available to the Cadets in the summer of 2020. This spring, Dietz will have an opportunity to see the Grant Barrack's renovation work. He'll be at the academy with the Ulysses S. Grant Association to view a new Grant statue.

After this, he'll be traveling with the academy's honor guard to Grant's Tomb in New York City for an annual commemoration ceremony. There he'll give a speech—like he's done for 30 years—educating the public about Ulysses S. Grant and continuing to preserve and share his family's history. **FC**

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