

Preservation of the Lazaretto, America's oldest surviving quarantine center, finally gets underway



By Elana Gordon for Newsworks.org

David Barnes, the Lazaretto is as important as any iconic Philadelphia landmark.

"This place is a treasure. I can't believe that this place is still here," said Barnes, while walking around the perimeter a massive old brick mansion. "There's nothing like it anywhere in the country or in the world. People should be flocking here from all over just to see the site and learn about its history. And nobody knows it's here!"

The Lazaretto, whose name is derived from the biblical patron saint of lepers, St. Lazarus, is North America's oldest surviving quarantine center. Barnes, a professor of medical history at the University of Pennsylvania, had no idea the place existed until moving to Philadelphia, and he has since spent years researching and writing about the place.

Miles away from Independence Hall in Philadelphia, it might be easy to overlook it. The 217-year-old spot is nestled on the inner channel of the Delaware River in Tincum Township, Pennsylvania. It's hidden behind a parking lot and fire station, bordered by a banquet hall and boat marina.

"The only word I can think of to describe it is incongruous," said Barnes, pointing to a noisy airplane, ascending from Philadelphia's nearby airport, while taking in a bucolic view of the mansion by the river.

Barnes and other preservation champions have been deeply worried about the Lazaretto's future, that the stories and lessons engrained in its brick and mortar could be lost.

That's because while the Lazaretto is still standing, for years it has been on shaky ground, neglected and crumbling. Its wood columns are to the point of collapse, its porches are caving in. The township has deemed it unsafe for entry.

But after an "exhausting" and "frustrating" journey that Barnes says has gone on for years, a municipal project will soon breathe new life into the historic spot.

'Ellis Island' before there was Ellis Island

If you were an immigrant coming to Pennsylvania in the early to mid 19th century, chances are you'd pass through the Lazaretto. The 10-acre campus was in many ways ground zero for public health and homeland security in the U.S.

The Lazaretto opened in 1799 after major yellow fever epidemics had ravaged Philadelphia. Boats and passengers coming to Philadelphia from all over the world had to first pass through the Lazaretto and be inspected.

"It's an unparalleled, historic resource. This is almost 100 years older than Ellis Island," said Barnes.

If you were sick, with anything from typhus to yellow fever, you'd have to stay in the Lazaretto's hospital wing. Barnes says a lot of people died in there, but the majority got better, thanks to the use of basic medical and nursing techniques. Those immigrants went on to start families across the nation, and are survived by many descendants today.

"To me that's the story of our country in a nutshell, and it happened here, lives were saved here at Lazaretto," said Barnes.

Shaky ground

The Lazaretto closed in 1895. It later turned into a country club and then became the estate of Philadelphia's famous Mills family. With its sprawling field right by the river, it was the site of a flight school in the build up to WWI and a popular spot for sea planes.

It still is.

But for more than decade, the Lazaretto itself has been closed, without maintenance and left to crumble.

At one point, when a developer purchased the site in 2000, the Lazaretto almost turned into a parking lot for the airport.

"That's like taking a beautiful statue and crushing it and saying it's of no worth," said Herb MacCombie, now chair of a Lazaretto preservation group and a longtime engineer who has worked for the township.

MacCombie helped successfully convince the township to buy the property in 2005.

But for a township of just a few thousand, raising the millions of dollars needed to preserve, let alone do anything more with the place, has been a struggle. Disagreements over its use led to the formation of the Lazaretto Preservation Association of Tinicum, which Macombie now heads, to oversee its future.

The township looked into turning it into a school or a commercial space. In 2007, amid efforts to find a new home for their municipal offices, they found a possible solution: move the township offices into the Lazaretto.

They've been trying to raise the money, but it's a multi-million dollar endeavor. So in the meantime, for years, the building has just been sitting there.

"The question was will this happen, will it ever happen?" said Macombie.

A rebirth

Last year, preservation efforts hit a major turning point, when the township reached an agreement with Philadelphia over airport revenue. That's opened up whole new stream of funding for the community.

"That gives us a steady income. We couldn't justify spending money we didn't have," said Patrick McCarthy, a Tincum Township commissioner and member of the preservation association.

With an estimated one-million dollars coming in annually, McCarthy says the township finally has the necessary funding to move the Lazaretto project forward, which he estimates will cost between eight and ten million dollars.

They hired preservation architect, Vittetta. They secured a loan. Last month, they firmed up a contractor, Wu & Associates.

"It's a huge step," said Barnes, adding that the structural restoration is just one part of a larger effort to breathe new life into the campus.

Actual construction and preservation work is slated to begin any day now.

"We want it to be a centerpiece of the community, and then spread out from there with other projects we have to revitalize the township," said McCarthy.

Along with municipal offices, the township hopes to put in a museum and make better use of the riverfront.

But city leaders and historians aren't the only ones looking forward to the rise of the Lazaretto. Ghost hunters like Rebecca Brumble are psyched.

"It is one of my favorite places, It is totally haunted," said Brumble, a member of the Southeast Paranormal Investigation and Research team of Pennsylvania.

The Lazaretto has attracted attention from all over for its supposed paranormal activity. Brumble says she was involved in a video shoot when the sci-fi show Ghost Hunters visited the site.

Commissioner McCarthy, though, isn't too worried about the reputation.

"I know that one of the commissioners will never go in the basement, shall we say. I won't mention any names...Tom," McCarthy said, smiling. "but yes, that doesn't bother me. If they want to sit down and talk to me, I'll talk to them."

If all goes according to schedule, McCarthy and the other commissioners' offices in the Lazaretto should be open for visitors - dead and alive - by January of 2018.