

# Chancellorsville Battlefield Visitor Center

9001 Plank Road, Spotsylvania County, Va

The Chancellorsville Battlefield Visitor Center in Spotsylvania County, Virginia, was completed in 1963, the centennial of the Battle of Chancellorsville.<sup>1</sup>

With a prairie style appearance reminiscent of the works of Frank Lloyd Wright, this Modernist structure was part of a nationwide National Park Service facilities modernization project called Mission 66.<sup>2</sup>

**Architect:** The Ralph Thorpe Construction Company

**Built:** 1963

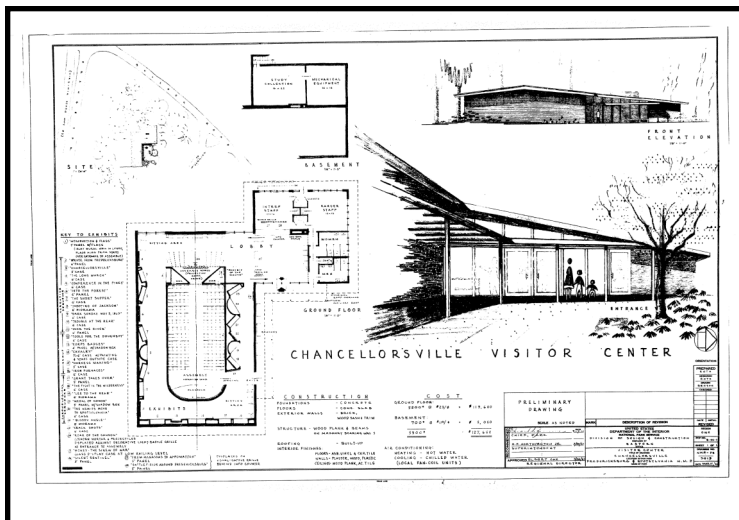
**Primary Material:** Brick, wood

**Square Footage:** 5900 square feet

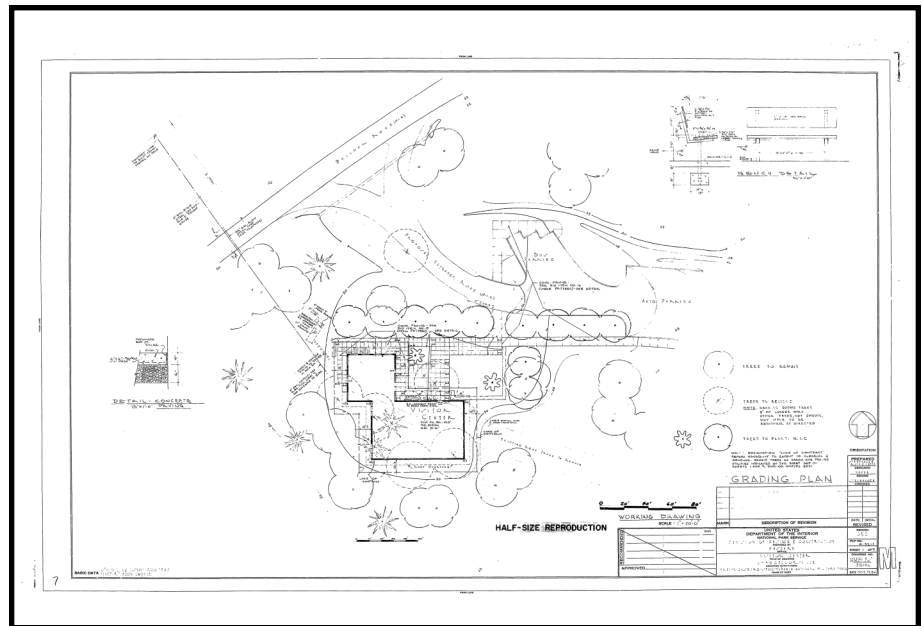
In the 1950's, it was decided by the Nation Park Service that many of its facilities were outdated and in need of repairs, and that structures reflecting the ongoing Modernist movement would be an ideal upgrade from the older, rustic facilities.

The goal of Mission 66 was to complete Modernist construction or reconstruction of both public and residential structures within National Parks by 1966.<sup>3</sup>

Upon completion, the Chancellorsville Battlefield Visitor Center, also known as the CVC, was celebrated by some, but was criticized for being too modern by others. Among such critic were John A. Carver, Jr., the Assistant Secretary of the Interior at the time. His concern with the new, modern look of the Visitor Center was that it would detract from the visitors' experience of the actual battlefield—that their focus would be on the new and exciting structure, and not the historical events that occurred on the grounds.<sup>4</sup>



At right is the construction drawing for the Chancellorsville Battlefield Visitor Center. Included in the drawing are roads, landscape features, parking lots, and the contract limit.



The Visitor Center was built by the Ralph Thorpe Construction Company, based in Richmond. There were a number of other things included under the contract for the CVC, including improvement of the Fredericksburg Visitor Center, as well as construction of residential buildings for the purposes of housing Park employees. Indeed, the employee residences found on the grounds of the Chancellorsville Battlefield, were built from a cookie-cutter designs and are identical to others in more National Parks across the country.<sup>3</sup>

One feature unique to the Chancellorsville Battlefield Visitor Center in regard to a Modernist perspective is its use of traditional materials. While other Modernist structures in the area make use of more modern materials such as steel and cinderblock, the CVC is primarily brick and wood. Indeed, this Modernist building is built on a foundation of brick.

Today, the debate continues on whether this Modernist design is appropriate for the Chancellorsville Battlefield Visitor Center, or if the structure should get another upgrade. The main issues discussed today are still the CVC's Modernist appearance, and, from a more preservationist standpoint, the fact that it is located on the actual ground where significant historical events occurred. The question has been raised as to whether the National Park Service has a duty to preserve and protect structures that it built itself, or if its duty lies solely within the realm of preserving the historical land upon which such structures are built. To some, the Modernist –style Chancellorsville Battlefield Visitor Center is a celebration. For others, the ground it is built on is sacred, and now, scarred.<sup>3</sup>

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> “New Battlefield Center Readied for Opening.” *Free Lance-Star* [Fredericksburg, VA] 15 Mar 1963. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Mink, Eric J. *Mysteries and Conundrums*. 17 May 2010. Web. 2 Apr 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Powell, Kimberly. Personal Interview. 6 Apr. 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Muse, Paul. “Official Is Cool To Center Design.” *Free Lance-Star* [Fredericksburg, VA] 6 May 1963. Print.