

Nonprofit group hopes to restore Fort Gorges in Casco Bay

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Fort Gorges, a Civil War-era stronghold of granite between the Portland peninsula and Peaks Island, is sorely in need of restoration in order to remain one of the city's foremost historic landmarks.

The nonprofit group Friends of Fort Gorges has announced plans to commission a feasibility study that will determine how much that restoration effort might cost and outline how any repairs might be carried out.



A seagull stands on seaweed-covered rocks near Fort Gorges in Casco Bay. Gregory Rec/2009 Press Herald file



The entrance to Fort Gorges in Casco Bay. The fort is a short paddle from East End Beach in Portland.
Gregory Rec/2009 Press Herald file

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Paul Drinan, the group's new executive director, said he was "completely taken" the first time he visited Fort Gorges as a teenager and has returned many times since.

"Thousands of people appreciate the fort every year, either in person or from afar, and this is our first, and perhaps last, best chance to preserve this unique historical gem for future generations," he said. "Aside from preserving this asset to our community, the economic, cultural, educational and historical opportunities the fort provides are numerous.

"If we don't act now, Fort Gorges could become Portland's next Union Station – once admired and appreciated, then lost."

Preserving the fort likely won't be cheap, though. The feasibility study alone is expected to cost about \$180,000, Drinan said. Renovations would likely be in the millions.

But Drinan said he and a new board of directors have revived the organization, which formed in 2000 but has been dormant for many years. He said a private fundraising campaign has been launched and the group also will seek out grant and foundation support, but he said he hopes the community buys in as well.

“I think the desire to save the fort has always been there, but this is something we need help with, help from the community,” he said. “We want the public to be as involved as possible.”

Fort Gorges, marked by its six walls of granite topped by a layer of grass, is open to the public but its access is limited because the only way to get there is by private boat. Thousands pass the fort during trips to one of the many islands of Casco Bay and it can also be seen from many spots on the mainland in Portland, South Portland and Cape Elizabeth.

It's named for Sir Ferdinando Gorges, who in the early 1600s was credited with discovering the land that is now Maine. The fort was commissioned after the War of 1812 but wasn't completed until just after the Civil War ended.

Ironically, the fort – nearly identical to Fort Sumter in South Carolina – was largely obsolete by then. There were plans to modernize it, but that never happened. It was last used during World War II for storage.

“It's odd in the sense that it didn't really get to be used,” Drinan said. “It never fired a shot.”

Hilary Bassett of Greater Portland Landmarks said Fort Gorges has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1973 but two years ago moved to the top of her organization's “Places in Peril” list, which means renovations are sorely needed.

“Their goal is to save the fort for generations to come,” she said.

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