

At Tryon Palace, history gets a facelift

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Posted: Sunday, Oct. 17, 2010

NEW BERN Too many tourists who shuffled through Tryon Palace since it opened in 1959 saw the reconstructed colonial governor's mansion as a once-in-a-lifetime trip.

They could have gone back. They just figured that, having seen the English silver, heard the trill of a costumed fifer and smelled a simmering dish made from an 18th century recipe, they didn't need to.

With the opening next weekend of the historic site's new \$60 million, 60,000-square-foot N.C. History Center adjacent to the palace, visitors will be able to use current technology to craft a different experience of early American life each time they come.

They can play different roles in raucous interactive games, and choose whom they want to narrate their tour of the grounds from eight characters on a handheld computer. They can watch puppet shows and musical performances. They can have their pictures made and added to the electronic Tryon Palace Family Album.

Finally, history can stop repeating itself.

"The first thing people say when they walk into the new building is, 'Cool!' " said Greg Smith, who runs Mitchell Hardware in downtown New Bern, a couple of blocks away. "It's vibrant. It's current."

It also has the potential to turn a roadside stop for travelers on their way to the beach into a must-see tourist destination that forecasters say will generate nearly \$18 million in tourism spending for Eastern North Carolina each year. Economic studies on the project suggest it will more than double attendance at the palace, to about 200,000 people each year, and will add a night to the average hotel stay in the area.

The N.C. History Center has been a long time coming. The state bought the old Barbour Boat Works property next to the palace in 1997 with plans for a simple welcome center. It was to replace the converted gas station the palace has used for decades to sell tickets and to hand out maps for the house and grounds and neighboring historic homes.

Edwin Schlossberg, who designed his first interactive project in the 1970s for the Brooklyn Children's Museum, helped guide Kay Williams, the palace director for 27 years, and public and private supporters to a more modern museum concept where visitors manipulate objects and figure things out for themselves. In that model, Schlossberg said, "the process of discovery is as important as the objects to be seen."