Dowden’s Ordinary is a 2.8-acre interpretive park on the site of a former “ordinary” or 18th century tavern. The ordinary was built in 1753 as a stop for travelers on Maryland Route 355 between Georgetown and Frederick, which in colonial times was one of the few roads that ran west towards the mountains. The site was home to many significant events in the America’s early history – Michael Dowden was the catalyst for the Repudiation Act of 1765; the tavern was a regular meeting place for the local Sons of Liberty who met during the revolutionary war; and Dowden’s Ordinary is the only known French and Indian War site in Montgomery County. When U.S. Homes proposed a residential development on property that included the site, they agreed to donate 2.8 acres to The Maryland-National Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC) for an interpretive park, which was completed in 2010. The design and construction was a collaborative effort between the Developer, M-NCPPC and volunteers.

The park’s purpose is to preserve and interpret historical and archeological resources as well as provide passive recreation for the adjacent community. It includes some very unique and striking features including a “ghost” structure which is the prominent focal point of the park. It is constructed with a steel three dimensional frame to outline the shape and appearance of the original Dowden’s Ordinary structure. In front of the building is brick accent paving, period lighting and interpretive signage. Space for a future historic-period garden by park volunteers is provided. Painted steel was selected as the material for the structure because it is not flammable, and can be easily repainted to address vandalism. Corten self-weathering steel was considered,
but rejected because of the maintenance problem from tagging and the potential for the rusting steel to stain the surrounding stone surfaces.

A loop trail with a tar and chip surface, enhanced by brick accents, provides circulation throughout the park. The selection of tar and chip was made because it is not as common as the typical asphalt trail and evokes a more natural surface with the gravel chips, yet is more maintenance free and accessible than a limestone or other dirt surface. The accessible route into the site from the sidewalk is at a 5% grade, and the tar and chip provides a non-slippery, yet smooth surface. The trail has a meandering alignment with panoramic views of the surrounding hills of Clarksburg. The site landscaping includes trees that would have been used in landscape settings during the 1700’s, such as Amelanchier canadensis, Ilex opaca, and Nyssa sylvatica. The use of shrubs was limited to the front of the park sign to reduce maintenance requirements.

A wood chip pathway leads to interpretive signage at the site of known archeological remains. Archeological studies began on the site with a Public Dig Day in April of 2004 in honor of the 250th anniversary of General Braddock’s march. Some of the artifacts found in the dig were photographed and included in the interpretive signage. The park construction was staged to prevent damage to archeological resources which are not yet recovered. A monument by the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) was installed at the site in 1911 to commemorate the encampment of General George Braddock and Colonel Dunbar’s Division of the Colonial and English Army.

A cannon replica from the 1700’s period is mounted on a cannon carriage with a sculptural stack of cannon balls and interpretive signage to highlight the significance of Dowden’s Ordinary in the French and Indian War.

The Park’s four interpretive signs were developed through an extensive collaboration between M-NCPPC Staff and local volunteers: Tavern Life at Dowden’s Ordinary, Archeology, and the French & Indian War. The signs explain the historical significance of this site with historic photos, details on historic events that occurred at or near the site and the famous people who visited, and include many graphic elements developed especially for this site. For example, to create a visual link between artifacts from the Archeological dig and life at the Ordinary in the 1700’s, a photograph of a volunteer in period costume holding 1700’s pottery was staged at a historic local building with floor boards from the 1700’s. The map on the French and Indian War panel was developed to show the route of...
The Role of Taverns

In early America, taverns or "ordinary" offered food and shelter for travelers and their horses. The term "ordinary" originally applied to a tavern that regularly offered a fixed price, but later designated the tavern itself. The Maryland Assembly, like other legislatures, not only required a license for operation and a bond for good conduct, but also mandated a listing of the set prices for food, drink, and accommodations.

Because of poor roads, early taverns were generally 15 to 20 miles apart, a convenient day's travel. On the Great Road (now MD Route 255), a traveler from Georgetown to Frederick could stop at a tavern in Ruxton before spending the night at Dowden's Ordinary in Clarksburg. In his petition for a tavern license in 1759, Michael Dowden wrote that because his house was situated on the road between Ruxton and Frederick Town, his regularly received visitors requesting food and lodging for the night. Dowden decided to turn his hospitality into a business operation.

In addition to providing meals and lodging, taverns also served as places for the break to rest, kites, dancing, meetings, and socializing, as well as betting on horse races. At Dowden's, stagecoaches stopped twice a week bringing mail and news from communities along the route. More than a place to have a drink, taverns were the hub of community life.

Interpretive Sign for Tavern Life and History of the Ordinary

Tavern Life at Dowden's Ordinary

Playground with General Store, Tent, Stage Coach and Elephant
General Braddock’s troops on their campaign that included a stop at Dowden’s Ordinary.

The site has limited visibility from the adjacent community because it is so much higher in elevation, which generated concern about safety. Park police and staff recommended including a playground for security reasons in keeping with the principles of the Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) program. Use of the playground and open space for informal play expands the available recreational activities for the community and helps to attract additional visitors which will improve safety and discourage vandalism. The playground components include a concrete elephant. A nearby interpretive sign explains that Benjamin Latrobe, the architect of the Capital, made a sketch of the first elephant in North America during his stay at Dowden’s Ordinary in 1811. Latrobe’s sketches of the Ordinary also include a tavern sign, which is replicated on the MD 355 frontage of the site.