

Opening a new door to Port's past

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
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Historical Society will display items that reflect city's proud heritage during unveiling of center Saturday

The Port Washington Historical Society has pulled out some quintessential items from the city's past to exhibit when it opens the doors of its research center to the public Saturday, April 27.

Four exhibits — on Smith Bros., Paramount Records, the Port Washington City Band and the Wisconsin Chair Co. — will be featured at the open house, which will run from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Among the items on display will be uniforms, sheet music and instruments from the City Band; chairs, a tabletop mirror and footstool made by the Chair Co.; floor and tabletop record players and records from Paramount Records and signs, a fish box, net and models of the fishing tugs once operated by Smith Bros.



"It's so nice to be able to have those out where people can see them," Society President Jackie Oleson said, noting that in the organization's previous homes, there wasn't room to display artifacts.

The grand opening marks a new chapter for the Society.

It was just a year ago that the research center was a dream for the Society. It had made an offer to purchase the building last January, but the group didn't close on the purchase until August.

It took about two months to complete demolition work in the structure, and since then members and contractors have worked steadily to renovate the building at 205 N. Franklin St.

"It's basically a new building inside," Oleson said, noting it has a new roof and mechanical systems, as well as woodwork and cabinetry.

The tin ceiling and original floors, however, have been refurbished and gleam.

In January, the Society moved its records and artifacts into the center and began organizing

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things.

"It's been a crazy year, but we are finally settled in," Oleson said. "We want to share our new digs so people get a chance to see what we have here and to appreciate an 1852 building that's gotten new life."

The open house is one of the few chances people will have to see the entire building, she added, noting the second floor will generally be off limits to the public.

The second floor holds a board room and archival area, where work will be done to catalog the Society's collections and preserve items.

One major project for the Society will be cataloging the extensive Paul Wienen collection of photographs and slides, Oleson said.

The first floor of the building has exhibit space near the street, with a research area toward the middle. A raised area in the back holds offices.

The society's exhibits will likely change twice a year, Oleson said, although there will be one permanent exhibit. A corner of the first floor is dedicated to Barnum Blake and his family.

Blake, who was a mover and shaker in the city, constructed the building that houses the research center — it's one of two remaining buildings he constructed, Oleson said.

The exhibit includes some Victorian furnishings, restored oil paintings of Blake and his daughter Louisa Blake Bostwick and a framed Civil War photo of Blake's son Edward.

Although the Society has completed much of its work on the building, some renovations to the exterior are still planned. These renovations — moving the door to the center of the front and adding a transom window above it, framing the windows in wood, raising the canopy, refurbishing the awning and adding a sign — were approved by the city's Plan Commission last week.

The Society hopes to raise \$50,000 for this work, Oleson said, adding members would like to complete this project by the end of the year.

The research center is one of two buildings the group is renovating in downtown. The other, the historic Businessman's Club at 118 N. Franklin St., will be converted into a museum.

That work probably won't be done until 2014, Oleson said.

"That building has its own historic features we want to preserve and respect and work with," she said. "It's a building with a lot of potential."

Oleson said the Society hopes its work will inspire other property owners to not only consider restoring their buildings to their historic roots but to also look at new uses for them.

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“Really, when you get down to it, this was taking an old building and finding another use for it,” she said. “We hope this will encourage others to take a look at their buildings, too.”

“We’ve got so many buildings in downtown that date back to the 1800s. But unless you look at the top of some of them, you wouldn’t know that.”

The grand opening is the first formal event at the research center, but it’s certainly not the only time the building will be open.

The center will be open from 1 to 4 p.m. Mondays and Thursdays, and the Society is seeking volunteers to help staff the facility as it looks to add hours on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays.

Image Information: PREPARING FOR an open house at their new Research Center on Friday, (from left) Port Washington Historical Society President Jackie Oleson and members Pat Moren, Geri Zehren and Sarah Smith checked out instruments and other items in an exhibit on the City Band. Photo by Sam Arendt