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http://www.ozaukeepress.com/images/011013/HSSM.png**Port Washington organization is set to move into its new Franklin Street headquarters thanks to fundraising efforts that will also support nearby museum**

If you peek inside the Port Washington Historical Society's new resource center in downtown Port, you'll see crews busy installing carpeting, refinishing wood floors and putting the final touches on the building.

Movers are expected to transfer the group's files, archives, exhibits and other items from its current home at 429 W. Grand Ave. to the building at 205 N. Franklin St. over three days next week.

The doors are expected to open to the public by March 1.

"It is so exciting for us," Society President Jackie Oleson said Monday. "To have it actually happen is pretty amazing."

What's truly amazing, she said, is how the community has rallied around the Historical Society to turn its dream of having a home of its own into reality.

The Society raised about $360,000 to turn the building into its new home, including $173,000 to purchase it.

"There's been an outpouring of generosity from people. We have 150 donors, and some of them have given multiple times," Oleson said. "The donations are everything from $10 to $175,000. A lot of it has been $50 here, $250 there."

A significant amount of volunteer help has also gone into renovating the resource center, which in the recent past has served as a clothing store and a frame shop.

More than 30 volunteers — including members of the Port Washington Fire Department who used large hooks to tear down the plaster ceilings — helped gut the building.

An equal number of contractors have worked on the building since construction began late last summer.

“It was very daunting when we were looking at this building in September,” Oleson said, noting it took three dumpsters to remove debris from the structure.

Gone are the dark walls and dimly lit rooms that once made up the building. In their place are light, airy spaces that welcome people.

On the first floor, the original tin ceiling has been painted a light neutral color and the original hardwood flooring is being refinished. Small track lights illuminate the space at the front of the building.

This area will have three small exhibit areas, Oleson said, including a space where two large oil paintings donated by the Sophia Bostwick estate will be hung.

One of the paintings is of Barnum Blake, who constructed the building, and the other of his daughter Louisa Blake Bostwick. A copy of a Civil War photo depicting Blake’s son Edward wrapped in a flag during the battle of Franklin will also be hung there.

A small area with tables and chairs will be in the center of the first floor, while an office and resource area will be at the back of the first floor.

A staircase leads to the second floor, which was once a display area for the former Lueptow’s Furniture store.

Today, the buildings are again separated and the upper level houses a large open space that will become the society’s archive center.

A room overlooking Franklin Street will become the boardroom, with office space for the board president and museum director.

Large windows that were discovered when contractors removed cedar siding on the building now offer stunning views of Lake Michigan.

The boardroom will be named for longtime supporters Jack and Shirli Flack, Oleson said, noting Shirli Flack housed the resource center and Society offices in a house she owns for the last five years.

The archive center will be dedicated to Mike Ansay, who provided space for the center for many years before that, Oleson added.

“We’re indebted to the people who took care of us for years,” she said. “They were wonderful, but we had to find a space of our own. We needed the stability that comes with that.”

The building, which was constructed in three stages beginning in 1852, looks cohesive, with light flowing from front to back.

The building has a new roof and mechanical systems, including the plumbing, heating, cooling and electrical systems.

The facade has been renovated, returning the building to its 1910 look.

“Eventually, we want to apply to become a contributing building on the National Register for the downtown historical district,” Oleson said.

The facade work isn’t finished, she said, noting that changes to the first-floor storefront will be the next phase of the project. The Society hopes to raise as much as $40,000 to do this work, which will include moving the door to the center of the building.

As consuming as it is, the research center isn’t the Society’s only project right now. Work is continuing on plans to renovate a building a block away, at 118 N. Franklin St., into a museum.

The Society is preparing to seek bids on that project and hopes to begin construction next month, Oleson said, adding the projected opening is in October.

Image Information: SUNLIGHT STREAMED IN from the large front windows as contractors and volunteers prepared the building at 205 N. Franklin St. to become the Port Washington Historical Society’s new resource center (above photo). The Society will move into the resource center next week and hopes to open to the public in March. The building is just south of the Boerner Mercantile Building, which is also being renovated, giving the Society a home of its own in the city’s downtown (homepage photo). The Society is also working to renovate a second Franklin Street building for use as a museum. Photos by Sam Arendt