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Onondaga Historical Association museum in downtown Syracuse gets a facelift

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By



John Berry / The Post-Standard

Onondaga Historical Association Executive Director Gregg Tripoli stands in the museum's new gift gallery as work is done on new windows installed to open up the museum. The windows along the street used to be bricked over.

The **Onondaga Historical Association** is about to show off its good side this week.

Wednesday, there will be a ribbon-cutting at its headquarters, 321 Montgomery St., followed by a gala fundraising re-opening of the 1906 building. The renewed OHA opens to the public the next day.

"We now have a street presence," said Greg Tripoli, the organization's executive director. Eight, full-story windows to Montgomery Street have been reopened. They'd been bricked up for years.

That allows the association to have a store front and a store and exhibit gallery visible without entering the building.

The renovations close out a three-year period in the association's 148-year history which started with a reassessment of the OHA mission. It is loosely defined as collecting, preserving and cataloging the history of Onondaga County. Greg Tripoli joined the organization in 2008 and OHA began its slow emergence as a major cultural player in the community.

Greg describes the renovations as "an exciting step in our continuing mission to serve the Central New York community."

"We found, in surveys of the public, that they wanted to see four things to improve downtown," he continued. "More parking, more stores, more restaurants and fewer empty store fronts." He said he felt his organization filled all those needs.

If you go...

What: Gala, "Windows Into The Past," for the grand re-opening at Onondaga Historical Association

Where: 321 Montgomery St., Syracuse

When: 3:30 – 8 p.m. Wednesday

Cost: \$40 for museum members; \$45 for nonmember. For tickets, call Karen Cooney, 428-1864, ext. 312

Note: The museum will be open to the public 10 to 4 p.m.

Thursday. Admission will be free.

The renovations cost about \$500,000, all of it covered by grants and donations. The OHA has a budget of about a million dollar a year, with 11 employees and “lots of volunteers,” by Greg’s measure. He said OHA stretched the dollars available to it by several economies, including having staff do exhibit designs and finishing work.

“We saved by reusing a lot of the exhibit hardware that we took out,” Greg explained. “We got the shelves from the Borders store in Carousel Center.”

Onondaga Historical Association to Reopen July 13

Onondaga Historical Association Executive Director Gregg Tripoli talks about renovations at the museum as the facility prepares for its reopening on July 13. Video by John Berry / The Post-Standard

I saw what he meant as the director toured me through the renovations last week. Dennis Connors, the OHA curator of history, was on the

floor putting together an exhibit, along with Tom Hunter, assistant director and collections curator. Also working about the construction litter were Karen Cooney, a research assistant, and Matthew MacVittie, associate curator of history and store manager.

“We have between 10 and 20 volunteers working at any given time,” Greg went on. I noticed several groups of helpers putting exhibits together, working from detailed plans.

The store, or Gift Gallery, was a work in progress during my visit. There were two mannequins from the collection sitting up front, waiting to be dressed for opening day. Greg pointed out that patrons will see material from “Onondaga’s Attic” mixed with sale items in the store.

The historians are trying to make use of hundreds of duplicate and broken examples from Syracuse China Co. Libbey Inc., the owners, donated more than 25,000 items from the factory when it closed the company in 2009. That included pieces of china, records, photographs, documents and letters. “We took everything,” Greg commented.

Six tractor trailer loads of Syracuse China arrived at the historical association. OHA has recycled pieces of broken china into jewelry. New silk scarves were created from china patterns. One-of-a-kind duplicates and factory seconds will be sold in the store.

“These are gifts that will go down in history,” Greg says.

The store also will stock books on local history and books by local authors, as well as maps and photographs drawn from OHA’s more than a million items. Some – such as decorated stoneware – will be sold because they were made outside of Onondaga County.

The store has note cards and postcards, puzzles (including one based on OHA’s Culverhouse painting of the Gridley Building at night), as well as T-shirts decorated by Syracuse beer and other local company advertising.

Visitors will leave the Gift Gallery and wind their way into a refurbished version of OHA's basic exhibit, "The Heart of New York." The display covers everything from our Native American roots to the development of agriculture, business, industry, transportation, immigration and social reform.

Some pieces have never been displayed before, including an Easy washing machine, a Melville Clark Irish harp, a stained glass window from Keck Studios and a chair from Wieting Opera House.

Some of the old favorites, such as the original Franklin car and the Underground Railroad exhibit, are still there.

The museum's south wing has been completely reworked, replaced by new galleries of changing exhibits. Two galleries that look into Montgomery Street have mobile walls that may be moved around to feature new material. There's also a gallery devoted to exhibits by students and interns.

Two new temporary exhibits are good to go, "Our Sporting Life" and a display commemorating the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, "Shadows of the Storm."

For the opener, the association has a new neighbor to the north, Parisa Restaurant, which occupies the space once filled by Brick Alley Cafe. Parisa has no ties to the OHA, although Greg Tripoli worked hard to get the space filled with what he calls "a good neighbor."

The restaurant features history place mats and OHA paintings and other documents on the walls. It's referred to as a "history-themed restaurant" and will have special coupon discounts with the association.

The renovated building, which was built in 1906 as home to Bell Telephone Co., has a new fire suppression (wet and dry) throughout; new main water supply line and drainage and sewer systems, and an enhanced security system.

The association will refer visitors with cars to the city parking garage at the corner of Montgomery and Fayette Streets, where \$2 will cover parking for the first two hours.

Greg attributes some of the OHA's financial stability to the fees it now charges for research and preparation of traveling exhibits. There are special shows assembled by OHA at OCC, SU. St. Joseph's Hospital Health Center, among other locations.

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