

Labor of love finds fruition at Bartlett museum

By TOM EASTMAN
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BARTLETT — “This is a long day in coming!”

So said Bartlett Historical Society President Phil Franklin last Saturday morning as about 30 people assembled in front of the old St. Joseph’s Catholic Church in Bartlett Village to celebrate with a ribbon-cutting ceremony to dedicate the former church into the new, handsomely renovated home of the Bartlett Historical Society.

“A quote by Ben Franklin (no relation) that I am fond of saying is that ‘energy and perseverance conquers all things.’ That certainly has been at the back of my mind these past several years as we have undertaken this project to restore the church to where you see it today,” added Franklin to a round of applause.

He was joined by Andrew Cushing of the New Hampshire Preservation Alliance, which had listed the renovation project as one of its “Seven to Save” in 2017.

That list, Cushing said, has grown to 120 properties throughout the state, including the Millyard in Manchester and the Shaker Village in Enfield.

“I have been doing this eight years and it’s really rare to see a project like this come to fruition — I think it takes community and I really congratulate you on what you have accomplished,” said Cushing.

Next to speak was Norman Head,



The well-lit interior of the new Bartlett Historical Society Museum in Bartlett Village, once the St. Joseph’s Catholic Church, seen last Saturday on opening day. (TOM EASTMAN PHOTO)

longtime former president of the Bartlett Historical Society, who first came up with the idea to save the 1890-built, former church despite votes at annual school district meetings to have it razed.

Both he and Franklin praised local contractor Bill Duggan of W.C.

Duggan Builder of Bartlett for his work in serving as general contractor for the project.

Duggan arrived after the ceremonies and expressed his pleasure at getting to be a part of the project.

“I mean, just look at this place,” he said, as people pored over the histor-

ical exhibits, and sunshine streamed in through new energy-efficient windows set alongside illuminated stained glass from the church’s past.

Adding to the historical ambience was the sound of a whistle from the Conway Scenic Railroad Sawyer River excursion run.

On the walls of the museum are displays on Bartlett’s railroad history, as well as that of Hart’s Location and the lost logging town of Livermore. Other exhibits are dedicated to the church’s history, military service, the Forest Service, schools and hotels.

“What pleased me the most were the comments from many of the visitors that they were proud to see photos of their ancestors as part of the exhibits,” said Franklin, who moved from Connecticut with wife Sue in 2014, with Duggan building their house.

Head recalled how he ran into Franklin and Duggan at Cabin Fever (now Northern Bites) restaurant after the Franklins first moved here.

“He said he and Sue were new to town and that they were looking to get involved,” laughed Head. “Well,” he said, with humor, recounting how the Franklins got involved, “do I have a project for you!”

He saluted the Franklins for their tenacity, noting that for them, it has been a “labor of love,” as it has been for all involved.

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“I remember us thinking that ‘oh yeah, it will take a few hundred thousand dollars,” said Head, noting it turned out to be nearly \$550,000 but that with grants and donations — along with a lot of sweat equity by the Franklins, Duggan and other volunteers — they were able to achieve their goal.

Franklin gave credit to Duggan for his creativity and know-how.

“It’s hard to imagine, but at one point we had the roof off this building. We had cables holding in the walls. Bill was the mastermind behind it all. He really deserves so much credit,” said Franklin.

He said with a long-term lease from the district in place, they started a capital campaign to raise \$450,000 to preserve and restore the building. In a little over a year of actual fundraising, the historical society raised over \$130,000 towards the cause.

“We started a capital campaign in 2016 when we signed a lease with the Bartlett School Board, which owned the former church. Then we started the first removal of hazardous materials — lead paint and asbestos — (and mold) in October 2019,” said Franklin.”

The historical society pur-



Historical society president Phil Franklin holds a ribbon as former president Norm Head cuts it at the Bartlett museum’s grand opening Saturday. (TOM EASTMAN PHOTO)

chased the building and property for \$1 from the Bartlett School Board in November 2019.

Duggan, who has been in business in Bartlett for 43 years, said despite the challenges, when other consultants had felt the

building probably could not be salvaged, he believed it could.

With the assistance of the Franklins’ son Ryan, a diesel engineer mechanic in Connecti-

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cut, a handicap-accessible ramp was installed in 2022.

The floors were sanded and repainted, the loft structurally renovated by Duggan and the old altar removed and preserved.

Prior to having Head cut the ribbon, Franklin said they have many plans for the museum.

"It's nice when the kids come over (from the adjacent Josiah Bartlett Elementary School) to see what we're up to and say hello. We like that!" said Franklin, adding, "There's much we want to do, working with the school and the community. We thank the (nearby) Union Congregational Church for their having allowed us to do programs when we had no space. We have records here and books. We want to do programs. And we welcome everyone to become members."

Among those on hand for the grand opening Saturday were Bartlett Town Clerk Cheryl Nealley and her husband, Ricky, who were the last couple to be married in the church on July 11, 1992.

"It was wonderful to see the church restored," said



From left: Andrew Cushing of the N.H. Preservation Alliance, Bartlett Historical Society President Phil Franklin, past president Norm Head and general contractor Bill Duggan, seen at last Saturday's grand opening of the society's museum. (TOM EASTMAN PHOTO)

Cheryl as she and Ricky signed the guestbook.

Hours for the museum are 10 a.m.-2 p.m., Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays and by appointment by calling the museum at (603) 374-3037 or by emailing Franklin at Phil@BartlettHistory.org.

tom@conwaydailysun.com