
PROJECT NARRATIVE

Introduction

The village of Heuvelton straddles the Oswegatchie River in St. Lawrence County about 6 miles east of Odgensburg and the St. Lawrence River. The village was founded early in the 19th century and today boasts a population of barely 730 people.

John Pickens came to the area in 1819 as an immigrant from Ireland and by 1858 had prospered sufficiently to be able to construct the Pickens Stone Block. Commonly referred to as Pickens Hall the building contained the Pickens Mercantile Store and the third floor Opera House. Built of stone and three stories tall, Pickens Hall was one of the most substantial structures around.

Upon John Pickens' death the building passed to his son John Pickens Jr. whose twin daughters, Bessie and Jessie, were accomplished opera singers who performed before royalty around the world. However, as often happens with such large buildings in small communities, over the years Pickens Hall fell vacant and began to deteriorate rapidly.

Today, however, after a fifteen year restoration effort by a dedicated group of supporters, it's once again the heart of the community and a highly successful center for the arts of the entire region.

Problems & Threats

In 2001, with the building facing imminent demolition, a group of concerned citizens led by David Kingsley formed the Heuvelton Historical Association (HHA) for the sole purpose of acquiring and saving this local landmark. Years of neglect had led to deteriorated structural framing and various other damage both seen and unseen. Their first step was to secure the building against the elements and with an initial grant and their own labor they installed a new roof and made minor repairs. It can be extremely difficult to raise large amounts of money for such efforts in small towns in rural counties and constant fundraising and sweat equity became hallmarks of the organization.

Collaborative Efforts

In 2002 the HHA secured a Technical Assistance grant from the NYS Council on the Arts to have Crawford & Stearns, Architects and Preservation Planners, prepare a Conditions Assessment Report for the building to help guide the initial rehabilitation efforts and assist with fund-raising. In 2004 they also succeeded in having the building listed on the State and National Registers to confirm its well-known significance as well as to enhance funding applications.

Recognizing that not all of the necessary work could be done at once, a four-phase plan was developed: (1) Stabilization, (2) Rehabilitation of the 1st and 2nd Floors for viable use including opening Pickens General Store on the first floor, (3) Construction of a visually subordinate addition at the rear of the building to provide an elevator, accessible toilet facilities, and a second exit stair, and (4) Restoration of the Opera House and the third floor.

The organization and its consultants doggedly (and creatively) pursued a wide variety of funding sources, building one on the other as the overall project budget ultimately reached \$2.7 million, not an insignificant amount for such a small community and fledgling organization.

Significant project support has come from New York's Environmental Protection Fund, Empire State Development, the Sweetgrass Foundation, the North Country Community Foundation, the Oswegatchie Development Corporation, and NY Main Street among others. David McCadam, a former Heuvelton resident from the once-local McCadam Cheese Company family, generously funded several challenge grants to encourage even more widespread giving.

Recognizing the opportunity and the importance of such a project to the region, State Senator Patty Ritchie (D), Assembly Member Addie Jenne (R), and Senator James Wright (R) provided substantial bi-partisan assistance at critical times. And the community at large, from mayor

Barbara Lashua to young school children, contributed as did the project architect and general contractor through significant amounts of donated services.

Impact

Today Pickens Hall is once again the heart of the community. The not-for-profit Pickens General Store sells a wide variety of local goods including Amish-made products as well as non-electric household and hardware items. On the second floor are found displays of local historic interest, a meeting room, and a large event space for numerous classes such as Tai Chi, harmonica, guitar, origami, cider pressing, and pumpkin carving along with 4th Grade history program events. The third floor houses exhibit rooms, a “Green Room”, a small serving kitchen for refreshments, and the magnificent Opera House which can accommodate up to 250 people and has been outfitted with first class sound and lighting systems for performers and general activities.

The project has been an economic boost for the community and the county, has encouraged revitalization in the modest downtown, has provided a location for local and regional performing arts from school groups to traveling professionals, and is also the focal point for North Country Public Radio’s Bluegrass programs.

Design Sensitivity

From the beginning, preservation of the building’s most historically and architecturally significant features was a paramount concern for the HHA. Inappropriate later treatments were removed, tin ceilings were taken down to allow structural repairs and were then reinstalled, mechanical systems were integrated with great care, missing historic features were replicated based on surviving examples and photos, and historic finishes were restored to their original appearance.

On the third floor the severely deteriorated Pickens Hall and its significant 19th century finishes were documented thoroughly and restored to near original condition including using nearly 1,000 pieces of custom printed wallpaper to match the original which had deteriorated beyond repair.

At the same time the building was provided with all new heating and air conditioning systems, new plumbing, all new electrical and lighting, and new fire detection and alarms to ensure the safety of both the building and its occupants. With construction of the elevator and new toilet facilities, and careful attention to circulation routes all public portions of the building are accessible to and usable by all persons.

Best Preservation Practices

In addition to the preservation efforts noted above, the exterior masonry was repaired and repointed with traditional lime-rich mortars, later accretions were removed and the historic storefronts were restored (using hand-formed narrow iron muntins to mimic the originals), and all of the original double hung windows were restored to full operation.

All work was planned by an experienced architectural restoration firm (Crawford & Stearns), was reviewed and approved by the State Historic Preservation Office, and was executed by a regional contractor with a sincere interest in preservation (Continental Construction). From the beginning all parties worked closely together to ensure the best quality of work possible under each phase. Furthermore, the many newspaper articles and radio interviews that covered this project over the years provided an effective regional forum for promoting good preservation.

Summary

At the building’s grand opening on April 30, 2016 State Senator Patty Ritchie said to David Kingsley, President of the Heuvelton Historical Association, that the project is “even better than I could have imagined. What a great addition to our community” while Assembly Member Addie Jenne has written that the group has “transformed a deteriorated historic building, one quite possibly headed for the wrecking ball, into a vibrant center for arts and culture in the region as well as proven to all that our history can be preserved effectively for generations to come.”

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