

Restoration of original Berkshire County Courthouse will honor building's legacy

Updated: 08/04/2014 06:51:07 AM EDT

BerkshireEagle.com

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LENOX -- From the outside, the rather nondescript commercial building at 27 Housatonic St. looks like it has seen better days.

It's one of the town's historically significant sites, built in 1791 on Main Street to house the Berkshire County Courthouse after Lenox became a shire town and the new county seat, formerly in Sheffield and Great Barrington.

In 1815, as the much larger Greek Revival courthouse was completed (home to the Lenox Library starting in 1876), the old site became the Town House, used as the post office and for local government.

In 1903, the building was removed from its foundation and moved by horse and wagon to its present location following the opening of the new Town Hall next door.

Now among the three oldest buildings still standing in the historic downtown village, it is owned by real estate entrepreneur Steve Oakes, who's embarking on a major rehabilitation project this fall to shore it up, saving it from further sagging of the facade, while giving it a look more in keeping with its deep roots in the town's early history.



The courthouse building after it was moved to Housatonic St. in 1903 for new life as a retail center.

Oakes, who divides his time between Otis and Brooklyn, N.Y., purchased the property from the Khoury family in April 2013 for \$545,000, according to records at the Berkshire Middle Registry of Deeds.

He told the town's Historic District Commission last month that the renovations would replace much of what has been lost from the original design; repair and replace current architectural elements of significant historical value, and improve its overall performance.

In an Eagle interview, Oakes explained that the Lenox site is his third historic building in the county -- "it fits my profile for having some historic interest and being in a location that makes it a viable investment." He already owns 58 Main St. in Lee, housing Cakewalk Bakery and Timothy's Restaurant, and 85 East St. in Pittsfield, home to BBK Insurance and Otto's Diner.

"Any investor in such uniquely Berkshire properties needs to respect the legacy while supporting the individual shopkeepers and entrepreneurs that give each building value in today's community," Oakes said.

The Lenox project has become more extensive than he had anticipated. "My eyes were wide open," he explained, "and it's self-evident that it's sagging badly, with crumbling shingles."

His plans include new supports in the basement, a repair of the sagging facade, as well as new doors, windows and signage. Sprinklers will be installed and the second floor, which houses three apartments, will get a total makeover.



The former Berkshire County Courthouse building on Housatonic Street in Lenox is slated to undergo massive renovations.

The building is to be repainted in "calm earth tones." Restoration of the cupola is a possibility.

Oakes credited Lee Bank for helping finance the work. On June 30, according to registry filings, Oakes's company, 27 Housatonic Street, LLC, took out a \$787,000 mortgage with the bank.

"I'm hoping to begin right after Labor Day," he said. "I didn't want to disrupt commercial activity during prime time. My fingers are crossed that we'll be done by December. By next season, it will look like it belongs in a historic village."

The restoration "will add tremendously to Housatonic Street," said Linda Messana, chairwoman of the Historic District Commission. "I'm so glad he's taken this on and I hope it turns out as we're expecting it to."

The commission unanimously approved the project on July 15.

"From the plans, it appears they've crossed the t's, dotted the i's and are doing everything as historically as possible to make it an easily maintainable building," Messana added.

In addition to straightening the building, new clapboard siding and windows will be installed by Allegrone Companies, whose president, Louis J. Allegrone, attended the commission meeting with his son, Anthony, the architect for the restoration.

During construction, the two restaurants, hair salon and boutique housed at the site will remain open.

"I'm looking forward to it," said Whitney Asher, owner of the Brava restaurant. "The building is in need of a little bit of love." He described the upcoming project as "pretty comprehensive. It's an old building, and a lot of its systems aren't performing well. When it's done, it should look great and it should hold up."

According to Vicki Salvatore of the Lenox Historical Society, the building is believed to be the oldest in town originally constructed for public use.

As detailed in George H. Tucker's 1935 "A History of Lenox," when the town bought it in 1822, it was turned by raising it on planks with cannonballs underneath so it would face the Main and Walker streets intersection.

In his 1969 town history, author David H. Wood described the original structure as a "distinctive frame building. It is, in fact, the only 18th century building of note still standing in Lenox and would make a remarkably handsome structure, properly rejuvenated."

"We're very excited that someone is bringing it back to attractiveness and stability," said Historic District Commission member Lucy Kennedy. "Its outer appearance will be fairly similar to what it was when moved to its present location at the turn of the previous century."

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On Twitter: [@BE_cfanto](#) Reliving Lenox History ...

What: Walking tours of historic sites in Lenox, sponsored by the Lenox Historical Society and the Historical Commission.

When: Saturday, Aug. 16, 11 a.m., at the Lenox Academy, 65 Main St., and Saturday, Aug. 23, 11 a.m., at Church on the Hill to tour newly-restored cemetery. (Both rain or shine)

Why: The events are designed to increase appreciation and awareness of the town's history.

Information: (413) 441-7902 or e-mail Lenoxhistory@gmail.com