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New life at the Walker House

Renovation, conversion to apartments preserves key architectural features



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A man tours the kitchen of one of the apartments in the restored Walker House in Lenox. The Allegrone Companies converted the house into market-rate apartments, while restoring and preserving historic features, such as staircases and fireplaces. The house was built in 1804.

BEN GARVER - THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE



Posted Saturday, May 13, 2017 8:15 pm

By Clarence Fanto, Special to The Eagle

LENOX — Built in 1804 as the home for William Walker, Berkshire County's Probate Judge, Walker House had seen better days when it closed as a Historic District bed-and-breakfast in 2014.

This month, following a 14-month, \$1.5 million top-to-bottom renovation by the Allegrone Companies, the eight-unit Walker House Residences is opening to the first tenants who have leased four of the eight lavishly-appointed, top-of-the-line one- and two-bedroom apartments for \$1,800 to \$2,500 a month.

At a recent open house, the all-in-the-family reclamation project was hosted by the Allegrones, celebrating their third residential redevelopment following two in Pittsfield.

"We specialize in historic restoration," said Louis J. Allegrone, president of the companies which include Allegrone Construction, Allegrone Real Estate, Allegrone Home Builders and Louis C. Allegrone Inc., which focuses on masonry restoration in Western Massachusetts and New York's Capital District.

"This property was set up perfectly for us, the square-footage was ample to get in eight residences and had a lot of character and detail," he explained. "It has a prominent downtown location so it had all the elements necessary to make it work for us."

The business model was based on rentals as an investment opportunity rather than condominiums, said Allegrone.

"We took the outside and restored it to its original configuration," he said. "It wasn't anything we haven't done a thousand times before, reinforcing the structure and laying out of the interior property. Not to understate it, but this is what we do."

"It always feels good to finish a project, and it was a big deal for the town to clean up this property and put something else up," he said.

The project did not encounter any unforeseen complications, Allegrone noted — "it's always straightforward when you know what you're doing. We had a lot of interest in the property right out of the box." Most of the leaseholders have signed one-year rental contracts.

The town's Zoning Board of Appeals unanimously approved the plans in August 2015 under the town's Residential Inclusionary Development zoning bylaw, which promotes market rate residential development.

"They approved the project based on it being a rental project and adding more housing to downtown Lenox, which there isn't a lot of," said Louis E. Allegrone. The \$1.5 million cost included purchase of the property, he added.

"Keep it looking as it was and then fitting in the eight units, that was the true challenge, creating the apartments inside a B-and-B and retaining the historic nature and elements of the property," he emphasized.

After Judge Walker's residency, the house was owned by Judge Julius Rockwell before it was sold in 1906 to the Curtis family, proprietors of the nearby Curtis Hotel. From the 1960s until 1973 it served as a dormitory for the nearby Lenox School for Boys.

The project was reviewed by the Historic District Commission before construction began in March 2016.

A.C. Enterprises LLC purchased the former inn from its owners, Margaret "Peggy" and the late Richard Houdek, who had bought the Federalist-style building at 64 Walker St. in 1980.

"It's fabulous," declared Peggy Houdek as she toured her former home and business. "It doesn't look like the same house, but it's wonderful what they've done, it's beautiful. The memories of it are in my thoughts, but it's not my house anymore and that's fine, it's OK."

"I don't feel like crying or anything like that," she added. "I'm just happy that someone could take care of it because it's a wonderful building that needed so much work that we couldn't do. I think the Allegrones are the best who could have done it because they had the resources and a feeling for the building, not to destroy it."

The interior restoration preserves the original 1804 exposed wood beam ceilings in the front portion of the building, as well as brick chimneys, room layout and stairways in their original location.

Allegrone's recent residential renovations include the Howard Block at Fenn and First streets in Pittsfield three years ago, and the more recent Onota Building on North Street at School Street. Both have residential apartments above businesses on the ground floor.

The family already is eyeing its next restoration, creating a mixed-use development at 34 North Street, the vacant Stevens Insurance building.

The Walker House project designer was Anthony L. Allegrone, with interior design by Susan L. Allegrone and Susan Allegrone-Zaniboni. The project engineer was S K Design Group, Inc., of Pittsfield. NBT Bank financed the development.

The Allegrone Cos. are headquartered in their office park, the Berkshire Design Center, at 150 Pittsfield Road, which has 17 tenant spaces — two recently occupied by a Liberty Mutual Insurance office and a local affiliate of Xerox Corp.

Reach correspondent Clarence Fanto at cfanto@yahoo.com or 413-637-2551.

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