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Plymouth museum to feature history, art, artifacts of the White Mountains

By PAULA TRACY
 New Hampshire Union Leader



PLYMOUTH — It comprises almost a quarter of the land mass of the state, with 48 peaks of 4,000 feet or more, encompassing 48 communities in three counties and attracting millions annually to hike, ski, view foliage and reflect on nature’s wonder.

And soon, the White Mountains will have their own museum on the campus of Plymouth State University.

Construction is under way this summer to transform a former Methodist church at 34 High St. into the Museum of the White Mountains.

It is expected to open this winter with a gallery and archives.

Dr. Catherine Amidon, director of the museum, said it will complement but is separate from the White Mountains Institute at PSU.

The museum will be a place to view paintings, artifacts, photographs and collections on grand hotels, and will allow for research and collaborative efforts among a host of small and large organizations that are in some way linked to the White Mountains.

“It is great that we have all sorts of partners,” said Amidon, pointing to organizations such as the Mount Washington Observatory, the National Forest Service, the Appalachian Mountain Club and a number of historical societies. Many of those groups have worked collaboratively on such projects as the recent 100-year celebration of the Weeks Act, which created national forests east of the Mississippi River.

She said the vision for the museum came together several years after the university purchased the dormant church building. It is going through a significant transformation.

“It is an amazingly wonderful display area,” she said, with dramatic vaulted ceilings allowing for some fairly large pieces of art to be displayed.

The visual displays will be complemented by a significant on-line presence to allow for a world-wide audience.

Amidon said in some ways the focus on the White Mountains will be similar to an effort by the university to document the history of the Brown Paper Company in Berlin. It collected and labeled photographs and artifacts and allowed for public exchange of information on the pieces.

The museum is not yet open but the collection of works has already begun.

More than 8,000 pieces have already been collected including the life’s work of Daniel Noel of Conway, who died in 2010. It includes rare glass plate photographs, stereoscopic images and brochures from grand hotels now gone.

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"This jigsaw puzzle of words and images and artifacts will provide valuable insight into not only our past but our present and future," Noel wrote before his death. "We have a wonderful history that surrounds us with precious few aware of it. I hoped to play a small part along with others in changing that status," with his gift to the museum of his collection.

The museum has added two other rare collections as its opening date draws closer.

The museum has acquired a collection of White Mountains art by women artists from Frances "Dolly" MacIntyre and also a collection of antiques from the Balsams Grand Resort Hotel from Steve Barba, the former hotel general manager.

MacIntyre's collection of art by women artists includes dramatic mountain vistas, pastoral valley scenes, rushing rivers and waterfalls and detailed renderings of the mountain flora by a variety of artists such as Maria a'Becket, Mary Porter Bigelow, Fidelia Bridges, M.E. Loring, Martha Hayes Safford, Susan Ricker Knox, Elizabeth Galbraith MacIntyre Jewell, Martha Safford, Emily Harris Selinger and Lizzie Stevens.

MacIntyre added she is excited about the possibilities the MWM presents to the public.

"I was looking for a place that would value it for what it is," she said of the artwork. "It adds a new dimension to the art of the White Mountains and I felt that the museum would honor that and make it available to the public."

Barba worked for 48 years at The Balsams Grand Resort, which has long been regarded as one of America's finest vacation destinations.

Founded in Dixville Notch in 1866 as the Dix House, The Balsams counts legendary American statesman Daniel Webster as one of its earliest owners.

Barba collected many items over the years at the Balsams and said "I just know that this is going to be the perfect place for my gift to complement that and to further establish a base of authenticity this museum will have," Barba said. "There are few things that we do in life that really deserve to be perpetuated, and I believe this is one of them."

In keeping with Plymouth State's core mission and goals, the museum will preserve and promote the unique history, culture and environmental legacy of the region, Amidon said. She expects it will be open to the public in February.

ptracy@unionleader.com

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