

PRESS RELEASE

For more information, please contact:
Shelley Johansson, Marketing Manager
Johnstown Area Heritage Association
P. O. Box 1889
Johnstown, PA 15907
(814) 539-1889, x 308
sjohansson@jaha.org

Conservation work begins on historic Blacksmith Shop

Work overseen by skilled mason from Ebensburg

Conservation work has begun on the Blacksmith Shop, which was built in 1864 and is the most significant historic building in the Cambria Iron & Steel National Historic Landmark. A coalition of agencies, including the Johnstown Area Heritage Association (JAHA), the Johnstown Redevelopment Authority and the National Park Service, are spearheading the project.

“Preserving the Blacksmith Shop is one of JAHA’s highest priorities,” said Richard Burkert, JAHA executive director. “Our long-term goal is for it to resume operations as a working shop and open it to visitors, but now our focus is on preserving the building—it was literally falling down where it stood.”

To get the needed funds to begin stabilization work, JAHA applied for and received a highly competitive Save America’s Treasures grant of \$262,000 from the National Park Service. The grant will cover the costs of repairing the exterior brick walls, the roof, the wooden cupola on top of the building, and doors and windows. In addition, the chimney stacks will be removed and stored, to be returned to their proper places when further conservation is done.

Overseeing the work on the exterior brick walls is Dominic DeRubis, an Ebensburg native and skilled brick mason. He is part of the National Park Service’s Historic Preservation Training Center, which is based in Frederick, Md. and is dedicated to the preservation and maintenance of historic structures. In this capacity, DeRubis has worked on many nationally significant buildings and monuments in Washington, D.C., Civil War forts, and other historic structures across the country. On the Blacksmith Shop, DeRubis is leading a crew of local masons. He is charged with making the restoration as historically accurate as possible, using historic mortars and reusing the original brick where possible.

DeRubis had been a union mason for more than 20 years before becoming fascinated with historic preservation, when he was hired in 1987 to work on the Unger House at the Johnstown Flood National Memorial. The historic structure was the home of Elias Unger,

superintendent of the South Fork Fishing & Hunting Club, who led the last, desperate effort to shore up the South Fork Dam before it failed on May 31, 1889, causing the great Johnstown flood. DeRubis so enjoyed the experience that he hired on with the National Park Service full-time as a mason work leader.

“I’m kind of a history buff, and I find it exciting to work on historic buildings and preserve them for generations to come,” DeRubis said. “I live out of a suitcase because I travel so much, but I really enjoy working each site. My job, as I see it, is to protect as much of the original mason’s work as possible, and to make the restoration historically accurate.”

DeRubis is a teacher as well as a work leader. He will be in Johnstown working on the blacksmith shop for about two weeks, but work will go on long after he has left the project. So he is also charged with teaching the local masons in his work crew about historic preservation. That way, the local masons will be prepared to do further work on the building on their own, during the current stabilization project and beyond.

DeRubis is enthusiastic about his work on the Blacksmith Shop, pointing out beautiful architectural details like its unusual octagon shape and arched windows. But working on the building is not without its challenges, DeRubis said.

“The mortar used in the Blacksmith Shop is a lime-based mortar that’s completely different than the cements used today, and you can’t mix the two mortars and get a good result,” DeRubis said. “We have to match not only the brick, but also the type, strength and color of the mortar for the wall to be strong and historically accurate.”

About the Cambria Iron Company and the Blacksmith Shop

Johnstown's Cambria Iron Company, founded in 1852, was regarded by contemporaries as the greatest of the early modern iron and steel works. The company attracted the best and the brightest minds in the industry and was the site of several major technological innovations during the latter half of the 19th century. By 1876, it was the top producer of rails in the United States, and at its peak employed 18,000 men.

In 1923, the Cambria plant was acquired by Bethlehem Steel Corporation, which continued to operate the facility until its closing in 1992.

In 1988, the Cambria Ironworks in Johnstown was identified as having the most intact structures dating from the nation’s earliest steel companies. The Cambria Ironworks was listed as a National Historic Landmark by the National Park Service in 1989, and remains the only American steel mill to have received this designation.

The Cambria Blacksmith Shop is considered to be the most significant building in the National Historic Landmark. In 1997, Bethlehem Steel Corporation began demolition of the Cambria Ironworks complex, including three 19th century structures. A coalition of local agencies was formed to stop the demolition and create plans for this historic group of buildings. Bethlehem Steel Corporation halted demolition, and eventually donated three

structures, including the Blacksmith Shop, to the Johnstown Redevelopment Authority late in 2001.

The Blacksmith Shop is the earliest surviving building of the Cambria Iron Works. Constructed in 1864, the shop is an octagonal brick structure topped by a wooden cupola and an iron and wood roof. The original building measured around 70' X 70', and a few additions were made later.

At the Blacksmith Shop, skilled workers produced a variety of forged metal equipment and tools for the iron and steel works. At its peak, the Blacksmith Shop employed more than 100 men. Today, the shop still contains steam-powered and pneumatic hammers, coal- and gas-fired forges, and many original tools, including a 1885 steam-powered five-ton Sellers hammer and an overhead crane.

The Johnstown Area Heritage Association is a non-profit, membership-based organization dedicated to preserving and showcasing Johnstown's unique history to the nation through high-quality educational, cultural and recreational experiences. JAHA owns and operates the Johnstown Flood Museum and the Frank & Sylvia Pasquerilla Heritage Discovery Center, and produces the AmeriServ Financial Johnstown FolkFest, a 3-day free music and food festival held annually over Labor Day weekend; events commemorating the 1889 Johnstown flood; a spring lecture series; and a wide variety of additional cultural programming. The Wagner-Ritter House & Garden will open in 2004, and a Children's Discovery Center is planned for 2005. For more information on JAHA programs, museums and events, visit www.jaha.org.