

PRESS RELEASE

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Wagner-Ritter House & Garden to open

JOHNSTOWN, Pa. -- The Johnstown Area Heritage Association (JAHA) is opening a new museum, the Wagner-Ritter House & Garden. The house museum tells the story of the Wagner and Ritter families, who inhabited the house from when it was built in the 1860s through the 1980s.

“American house museums tend to interpret the lives of rich and famous people, or are museums because the house itself is architecturally distinguished,” said Richard Burkert, executive director of JAHA. “This house museum is very different, illustrating the domestic lives of ordinary, working-class people working in the steel mills. It’s a wonderful complement to the story we tell at the Heritage Discovery Center.”

JAHA members and special guests will be invited to an opening ceremony at the house at 4:07 p.m. on Wednesday, May 31, the exact moment the 1889 flood struck Johnstown. Invited guests will include city officials, donors, and descendants of the Wagner and Ritter families. A short ribbon-cutting ceremony will be held, followed by a reception. Refreshments at the reception will include root beer, because the Wagner family’s sons had a soda pop bottling business in the house’s backyard; and pretzels, because of the family’s German origins.

The house, which is located at 418 Broad Street, will open to the public on Saturday, June 3. Admission to the house will be free on June 3-4, the Saturday and Sunday of the Cambria County/Johnstown Convention & Visitors Bureau’s Friendly City Polka Fest, which is being held in the Cambria City neighborhood for the first time. Opening hours will be 11:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m. daily. A postcard will be sent to Cambria City residents inviting them to come see the new attraction during the weekend.

“This house tells the story of the people who built Cambria City, so we feel it’s very appropriate that people who live in Cambria City now come see it,” Burkert said. “We’re pleased to be open in time for Polka Fest so that the house can be an added attraction to the festivities.”

After the opening weekend, admission to the Wagner-Ritter House & Garden will be a part of the combination ticket to all JAHA museums, which include the Johnstown Flood Museum and Frank & Sylvia Pasquerilla Heritage Discovery Center. Ticket prices are not

increasing, however; they will remain \$6 for adults, \$5 for seniors and \$4 for students, and are good for admission to all three museums anytime over a 30-day period. The Wagner-Ritter House & Garden will be open from 11:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m. daily. Hours for the Johnstown Flood Museum and Heritage Discovery Center are 10:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m. daily, with extended opening hours of 10:00 a.m.-7:00 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays from Memorial Day through Labor Day.

The project has been ongoing for some 16 years, beginning when the property was donated to JAHA by Robert and Eugene Ritter, nephews of the house's last occupant. In 1991-1992, more than 70 volunteers took part in a public archeology project in the house's backyard that yielded 28,000 artifacts, some of which will be a part of the exhibit in the visitors center. JAHA staff has conducted extensive primary research into the lives of the families, using public records such as census data and tax records.

Originally, JAHA had purchased an existing structure next door, planning to use it as a visitor center where an exhibit, gift shop and restrooms could be housed. However, that structure was destroyed in a 1998 fire that also damaged the Wagner-Ritter House's roof and portions of the second floor. JAHA has since built a new visitors center to replace it.

Most of the house's furnishings were donated to JAHA, along with the contents of the attic. These have been used to decorate the house as it would have appeared around the turn of the century. Some 22 layers of paint were removed from the front of the house to reveal its first unified color scheme, a yellow ochre color. Layers of wallpaper were stripped to discover the first, vibrantly-colored wallpaper, which had been applied directly over the plank walls. The paint colors and wallpaper have been reproduced and applied. Decorative wood elements, including moldings, wainscoting, and interior doors have been conserved and restored.

With the help of the Johnstown Garden Club, a typical 19th-century Pennsylvania German raised bed garden has been planted. Several outbuildings, including a barn, privy, and a bake oven shelter have been recreated based on historic and archeological evidence.

The project is made possible by the generous support of the Richard King Mellon Foundation, Westsylvania Heritage Corp., Allegheny Ridge Corp., Pennsylvania Heritage Area Program, Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission, First National Bank of Pennsylvania, The Robert S. Waters Charitable Trust, MetLife, A&E Television Network, Verizon, H.F. Lenz Co., Mr. & Mrs. Byron Custer III, and Donors to the Inez Horner Memorial Fund.

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 FolkFest, a 3-day free music festival held annually over Labor Day weekend; events commemorating the 1889 Johnstown flood; and a wide variety of additional cultural programming. For more information on JAHA programs, museums and events, visit www.jaha.org or call 888-222-1889.

