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JAHA breaks ground on Wagner-Ritter House visitor center

Wagner-Ritter House and Garden to open as museum in late 2004

The Johnstown Area Heritage Association has broken ground on the visitor center for the Wagner-Ritter House and Garden. The structure, which is located next door to the house, will provide space for exhibits about the life and times of the Wagner and Ritter families while making both floors of the house accessible to wheelchairs. JAHA expects to open the house to the public in fall of this year.

“Most house museums tell the story of our nation’s elite, mostly because they led better-documented lives,” said Richard Burkert, JAHA executive director. “The Wagner-Ritter House and Garden provides us with a great opportunity to tell the story of a family living and working ‘in the shadow of the mills.’”

Inhabited by the same steelworking family from the 1860s through 1990, the house is one of about a dozen structures left in Cambria City that survived the Great Johnstown Flood of 1889. The house and its contents were donated to JAHA in 1990 by descendants of the Wagner and Ritter families, and JAHA immediately began plans for the restoration of the house.

“The Wagner-Ritter is a wonderful complement to the Heritage Discovery Center’s permanent exhibit,” Burkert said. “The HDC is about the immigrant story and how they lived, worked and socialized. The Wagner-

Ritter will provide more insight into the home lives of immigrants, with a special focus on women's domestic roles."

Originally, JAHA had planned to renovate an existing structure located next to the Wagner-Ritter House for use as a visitor center. However, that structure was completely destroyed in a January 1999 arson, significantly delaying the planned opening. The Wagner-Ritter House was damaged slightly in the fire, mostly from water and smoke, but remained intact. While the loss of the proposed visitor center was covered by insurance, the payment was not enough to fund the design and construction of a completely new visitor center. JAHA has raised the needed funds through grants from the R.K. Mellon Foundation, the Robert Waters Charitable Trust, Westsylvania Corp., and the Allegheny Ridge Corp., among other funding sources.

After a competitive bid process, Burgo Construction was selected to build the visitor center. It will include an elevator and breezeway to the second floor of the Wagner-Ritter House, so that the visitor center and both floors of the house itself will be accessible to wheelchairs. In addition to exhibits, the center will feature a gift shop and restrooms.

Restoration work on the Wagner-Ritter House and Garden has included an archeological dig in the house's backyard that yielded a broad range of information about the family's life. Artifacts recovered in the dig will be displayed in the planned visitor center exhibits. A raised bed Pennsylvania German garden has been established with the help of the Johnstown Garden Club. Interior work has included reproduction of some of the earliest wallpaper designs found in the house.

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. In addition to the Johnstown Flood Museum and the Heritage Discovery Center, JAHA produces the FolkFest, a 3-day free music and food festival held annually over Labor Day weekend; flood commemoration events; a spring lecture series; and a wide variety of additional cultural programming.

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