

PRESS RELEASE

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JOHNSTOWN LOOKS TO FUTURE WITH LIGHTING OF THE STONE BRIDGE; FLOOD MUSEUM RENOVATION; AND “PATH OF THE FLOOD” TRAIL

JOHNSTOWN, Pa. – The small city of Johnstown has big future plans based on its heritage, especially the 1889 Johnstown Flood that claimed 2,209 victims on May 31, 1889. Currently, a committee of community leaders is kicking off a project to restore and light the Stone Bridge, which played a tragic role in the 1889 flood. The Johnstown Area Heritage Association (JAHA) is completing an \$8 million capital campaign to build a new children’s museum, renovate the Johnstown Flood Museum, and additional projects. Finally, the Cambria County Conservation & Recreation Authority has completed a new section of the “Path of the Flood” Trail.

The Stone Bridge Project

The Stone Bridge, located on the edge of Johnstown’s downtown, is an arched bridge built by the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1887. On May 31, 1889, its seven arches blocked tons of debris carried by the waters of the Johnstown Flood, but the bridge itself withstood the flood’s impact. Tragically, an enormous fire broke out at the bridge, killing scores of people trapped in the flood debris. The fire would burn for three days.

Today, the bridge is a Johnstown landmark, and is still an active railroad bridge with three tracks. Owned by Norfolk Southern Railroad, the bridge is located along Route 56, the most heavily-traveled road in the region. It is highly visible from Route 56, downtown, JAHA’s newly-established Festival Park, and the restaurant and visitors center above the city at the Inclined Plane. However, the bridge is in need of restoration; the stone façade has long since been covered with concrete when an additional track was added to the bridge, and the bridge’s general appearance is poor.

A committee of community leaders is leading an effort to restore the stone bridge, including cleaning for physical and aesthetic improvements. The concrete on the southern side of the bridge will be resurfaced. The bridge will also be lit using energy-efficient LED lighting that can be adjusted to different colors and intensities. The project has been estimated at \$1.2 million, and is being announced as part of 2008 flood commemorative activities.

"The significance of the Stone Bridge is that it stood its ground against the flood waters and altered the future of Johnstown completely and forever. It created the backdrop for the event that put Johnstown on the map," said Michael Brosig, co-chair of the Stone Bridge Committee. "Restoring the South facade of that structure and casting LED lighting on it will certainly showcase the triumph of the human spirit in a spectacular style for all to see, enjoy and be proud of their heritage. Based on its strategic location, it is the lynchpin of the historic district of our city."

Consultants on the bridge restoration project include Shadowstone Inc. of Hackensack, N.J., for the lighting. Shadowstone has been involved in a variety of high-profile lighting projects, including such Washington, D.C. projects as the White House and Pentagon briefing rooms; the U.S. Open Tennis Tournament; a special event at the Brooklyn Bridge; and many others. For the bridge restoration and rehabilitation, the group is working with Pawlowski & Haman Architects, P.C. and H.F. Lenz Co., both of Johnstown.

Johnstown Flood Museum renovation

The Johnstown Area Heritage Association is currently conducting an \$8 million capital campaign, "Preserving Our Heritage: Revitalizing Our Community," for a variety of projects, including renovation of the Johnstown Flood Museum. JAHA first re-opened the museum in 1989 for the 100th anniversary of the flood, with new exhibits and a documentary by Charles Guggenheim that went on to win that year's Academy Award for Best Documentary-Short Subject. The museum has hosted more than 750,000 visitors since 1989. The planned renovation includes new exhibits, technology upgrades, and improvements to the building.

"Since 1989, our collections on the flood have more than doubled," explained Richard Burkert, JAHA executive director. "These include the photographs and diaries of the Rev. David Beale, one of the most famous flood survivors, which just came to us in 2006. We have a wonderful opportunity to re-imagine our exhibits to include more artifacts and information than was available to us in the 1980s."

Other needed renovations include the digitization of the Guggenheim documentary and upgrades of exhibit technology.

The museum is housed in the former Cambria County Library, which was built in 1891 with funds donated by Andrew Carnegie, who belonged to the club that owned the doomed South Fork Dam. Renovations to the building are also part of JAHA's capital campaign. These include replacement of the aging HVAC system and refinishing the wood floors, as well as a complete renovation of the theater where the Guggenheim documentary is shown.

Other JAHA projects

JAHA is also preparing to open the Johnstown Children's Museum in summer 2008. The museum will be part of the Johnstown Discovery Network, a linked system of attractions and historic districts within a mile of downtown Johnstown. The children's museum will feature hands-on exhibits allowing children to learn through play about the region's history, heritage, industry, ecology and geography.

The 7,500-square-foot museum will be located in unused space in one of the organization's existing museums, the Frank & Sylvia Pasquerilla Heritage Discovery Center, which focuses on immigration to the area around the turn of the century. It will become JAHA's fourth museum; besides the Johnstown Flood Museum and Heritage Discovery Center, JAHA also owns and operates the Wagner-Ritter House & Garden, which dates from the 1860s and has been restored into a house museum illustrating the domestic lives of immigrants.

In addition to the Johnstown Children's Museum, JAHA's campaign is funding further improvements to the Heritage Discovery Center. These include the Iron & Steel Gallery, a three-story gallery and theater that will tell the story of steel and Johnstown's role in the development of that industry. It will include a film presentation, "The Mystery of Steel," using footage JAHA commissioned Charles Guggenheim to shoot in the Bethlehem steel mills before their closing in 1992.

The capital campaign also includes improvements to Festival Park, which is located within sight of the Stone Bridge. The park is a 3.5-acre parcel of land purchased by JAHA to serve as a permanent home to the AmeriServ Johnstown FolkFest, a three-day roots music festival that JAHA produces annually over Labor Day weekend. In addition, the park is expected to serve as a venue for existing community events, and become a catalyst for more events. The first phase of improvements includes a large pavilion, utility upgrades, and landscaping.

Finally, the campaign also includes endowments for the Johnstown Children's Museum and the FolkFest program.

The "Path of the Flood" Trail

The Cambria County Conservation & Recreation Authority (CCCRA) completed a new section of the "Path of the Flood" Trail in November 2007. When the entire trail is complete, it will follow the entire 14-mile path of the flood from the Johnstown Flood National Memorial in St. Michael, which preserves the remains of the dam that failed, to the Johnstown Flood Museum in downtown Johnstown. Two interpretive exhibits are in place along the trail. One tells the story of the company town of Woodvale, which was totally destroyed in the flood; the other is about John Hess, a railroad engineer whose quick action, running his engine in reverse away from the flood wave while blowing the whistle, saved hundreds of lives.

The new segment of trail extends from the Johnstown Flood Museum toward the Staple Bend Tunnel beyond the Franklin Ballfield. The first three miles follow the streets of Johnstown and Franklin Borough, including State Route 271, to the Franklin Ballfield entrance on Clapboard Run Road. This is a "Share the Road" route and is marked by green and white "Bike Route" signs to guide the pedestrian or biker. The trail then continues along the ballfield and wooded hillside for a distance of one mile to a steel gate marked "End of Trail."

A completed section of trail stretches from the Staple Bend Tunnel to Mineral Point, which was developed by the National Park Service; another section, running from Mineral Point to South Fork, was completed by the CCCRA.

The CCCRA is currently working to finish the 3/4-mile section of the trail that stretches from the end of the completed trail at the Franklin Ballfield to the Staple Bend Tunnel. Another portion of the trail that has not yet been completed will stretch from South Fork to the Johnstown Flood National Memorial, where the remains of the South Fork Dam are preserved.

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For more on the flood commemoration events, the Johnstown Discovery Network and the Johnstown Area Heritage Association, including its museums, programs, projects and special events, visit www.jaha.org.

JAHA was founded in 1971 as a non-profit educational organization. Then called the Johnstown Flood Museum Association, its foremost mission was to preserve and interpret the story of the 1889 flood. The organization has since developed into one of the most dynamic heritage associations in the state, and has expanded the scope of its programs and collections to include the themes of iron and steel making, immigration and ethnicity. JAHA continues to find new ways to preserve and interpret the nationally significant stories of Johnstown, and to use the community's heritage as the basis for a new cultural tourism industry within the region.