Rediscovering the Lunney

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John Martin gingerly picked his way Thursday through equipment in the kitchen of the century-old Lunney House, which is currently undergoing extensive renovation. He smiled as he approached a set of masterfully-crafted windows that had once pivoted open to provide ventilation in the days before electricity. The windows, removed decades ago, were only recently rediscovered.

To Martin, they're not just windows. They're portals to Seneca's past.

"This is just a jewel. These are the original windows," Martin said, his voice a respectful whisper. "No one alive has ever seen this."

Martin, manager of the Lunney House Museum, has overseen a massive restoration of the Seneca landmark that is expected to transform it from a grand memory into the most elegant feather in the cap of Seneca's Historic District.

The home of Dr. William John Lunney and Lilian Mason Lunney was completed in 1909, three years after the couple spent $1,046 to purchase the property on "Silk Stocking Hill," an affluent area of Seneca situated around present-day West South First Street. The house was built by prominent Charlotte, N.C., architect Charles Christian Hook.

Lunney called the nine-room structure home until his death in 1929. His widow

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After massive restorations, Seneca landmark set to open in two weeks



'The house will speak to us. It unveils secrets to us everyday.'

John Martin | Lunney House Museum manager



PHOTOS BY JESSICA WEMS / THE JOURNAL

John Martin points out the Lunney House Museum's 1866 Chickering & Sons grand piano in the living room. The piano, which is one of only 39 ever made, is just one of dozens of historical items that will be on display when the museum reopens later this month. Contract restoration experts, below, were still swarming the Lunney House on Thursday, preparing for the home's grand reopening less than two weeks from now.

LUNNEY: House returned to its 1909 splendor

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remained on Silk Stocking Hill until her passing in 1969. One year later, her sister, Myra Mason Lindemann, deeded the home to Oconee County for the purpose of creating a museum.

For a little over a decade, it was operated by the Oconee County Historical and Recreational Society. In the 1980s the Oconee County Museum Association took over stewardship.

As the decades passed, the Lunney's character changed, Martin said. Paint that would have been foreign to its walls in the early 1900s covered authentic burlap in the dining room. Luxurious dressed lumber lost some of its luster. Portions of the front porch began to rot.

By 2007, the home was in disrepair and Oconee County cut its funding. The future looked bleak.

In January 2008, the Lunney House Museum Board appealed to the city to assume funding. The city jumped at the opportunity.

"It is a historical landmark," Mayor Dan Alexander said at the time. "Seneca would be very fortunate to keep it."

By June 2009, the home had reverted to its only surviving heir, Charles Finley, and the city negotiated its purchase for $45,000. The city has now poured $40,000 in hospitality and accommodations tax money into renovating the home.

Today, there's hardly a spot in the Lunney that's been untouched by the effort to restore its 1909 splendor. The living room pine floor has been stripped and refinished. Flaking wallpaper is gone.

The banisters on the front porch have been stripped and repainted. Rotten wood has been replaced, plank-by-plank.

"It's going to be a historical site that's unique and educational for the community," Martin said. "It's going to let us rediscover a way of life."

Standing across the street from another Seneca landmark, the Lunney will also provide a cultural and architectural bridge through history.

"This represents the New South," Martin explained. "Across the street stands the Gignilliat Mansion, a Victorian-era house."

The Lunney bungalow was less cluttered and more advanced than the typical Victorian-inspired homes still common at the turn of the century. Years before electricity and indoor plumbing, Hook (architect) saw to it that the Lunney House was wired and plumbed.

"This is just speculation," Kevin Harbin, a volunteer on the project said. "But the architect had been building houses in Charlotte, where there was already electricity. You could almost imagine him saying, 'It's coming.'"

The work of volunteers like Tom Kinnard, in addition to hired restoration experts, has been key to the project.

"It was almost by accident that I got involved in this," said Kinnard, an exhibit designer whose work with the Smithsonian Institution included work at the Natural Museum of American History and National Postal Museum in Washington, D.C. "I moved here three years ago. Just recently, I happened to drive by the house. I just became enthralled by it."

Now Kinnard is helping piece together an exhibit room in the home that will feature photos, graphics and original objects of the home, one-third of which have never been seen by the public.

One object that is sure to be prominently placed will be the actual pew in which Lilian Lunney sat while she attended Seneca Baptist Church.

"The house will speak to us," Martin said. "It unveils secrets to us every day."

The Lunney will have a grand reopening May 27, an invitation-only event that will be followed by a public opening May 28.

The facility is expected to not only serve as a museum but a locale for formal city events, including the newly-developed New Year's Eve at the Lunney, a black-tie affair.

Martin envisions outdoor events such as a summer soiree inspired by Monet's Impressionism and other gatherings that call for a level of sophistication not offered by other Seneca venues.

It's an opportunity for the city to show a different side.

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A contract worker refinishes the original dressed lumber inside the Lunney House.