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Restoration begins

BULFINCH CHURCH CUPOLA TO BEAR INTEGRITY OF 1800S DESIGN

By Lynne Klaft CORRESPONDENT

LANCASTER — Walking through the loft spaces of the Bulfinch church on the Town Green is stepping back in time to the 1800s.

The original numbered timbers and tree trunks sturdily support the church's roof and domed tower, but Mother Nature has been unkind to the exterior features of the almost 200-year-old cupola, columns, dome and eaves.

"The work to restore our local masterpiece began two weeks ago, the first phase of the Bulfinch Fund's 'Restore the Cupola' campaign," said Martha Moore, spokeswoman for the nonprofit organization, which has been working for years on the restoration project.

"The columns that hold up the dome of the cupola were literally rotting away, strapped together to keep them from falling to the ground," she added.

Antique building restoration experts, Murray Brothers Construction of Leominster, are on site.

"All of the balusters have been resecured, and many of the columns and bases have been repaired and resecured," said Jason T. Murray, president of the company.

He reported that one column will be custom fabricated to replace a column that is beyond restoration. White oak timbers will be used to rebuild parts of the bell cradle, and initial prep work for painting eaves and trim has started.

"I think one of the most interesting aspects of the project is the fact that the Paul Revere bell will be hoisted temporarily to rebuild the cradle," said Mr. Murray.

John W. Spencer has been the caretaker of the church for more than 30 years, and is a fount of historical facts about different parts of the building.

"The bell is over a thousand pounds of cast iron and was made by the Paul Revere foundry in 1822. It's a replacement bell. Some say it was cracked, some say the reason it was replaced was because it sounded bad. You know in those days casting wasn't actually a science," said Mr. Spencer.

He and caretaker Thomas A. Mazzola, both Lancaster residents, agree that the company is doing a "fine job" of restoration and reconstruction.

"They are trying to use as much of the original as possible, and they are taking pride in their work. Quite a few of them are Lancaster residents themselves, including the Murray brothers," said Mr. Mazzola.

The supervisor on the job, Matthew Buckley, and carpenter Wilson Pessoa are also from Lancaster, and the rest of the crew come from surrounding communities.

"But this is just Phase 1 of the work, and we are still working to apply for grants and fundraise for Phase 2 and 3, which will include restoring the copper-roofed dome itself, painting and whatever else needs to be done," said Ms. Moore.



Supervisor Matthew Buckley of Murray Brothers Construction of Leominster works around the 1060-pound Paul Revere bell in the steeple of the Bulfinch church on the Town Green. (T&G Staff/RICK CINCLAIR)

"We'd like to invite everyone to come to our May 30th Preservation Celebration," she added.

The First Church of Christ Unitarian has received a grant of \$50,000 from the Massachusetts Historical Commission's preservation project fund.

The Bulfinch Fund is trying to raise an additional \$350,000 to complete the belfry project.

"For a donation of \$500 one's name will be placed on one of the dowels in the mortise and tenon joints, where it will stay until the next restoration another 200 years from now," said Ms. Moore.

The Preservation Celebration will be held at the church from 1 to 5 p.m. May 30, with guest pipe organist Clarence H. Chaisson playing for visitors.

Mr. Chaisson is a Lancaster resident and a junior at Bromfield High School. He received first place in the 2009 L. Cameron Johnson Memorial Organ Competition and was a finalist in both the 2010 ASCAP Young Composers Competition and the NEPTA Piano Competition at Steinway Hall, Boston.