

\$13M History Museum Expected to Open in 2014

Written by Admin

Wednesday, 10 April 2013 00:00

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The Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia plans to move into its proposed renovated home early next year. The total price tag is 13 million, including 10 million for the project and \$3 million in reserve to maintain the facility, which is expected to attract national visitors to Richmond, the former capital of the Confederacy.

In preparation for the big move to the nearby historic Leigh Street Armory, the museum is going to halt daily operation at its current site, it has been announced. Effective Monday, April 8, the museum was to close to walk-in visitors and tour groups at its longtime historic home, 00 Clay St., which is a former public library named for Rosa D. Bowser, the city's first black female schoolteacher.

The museum will reopen occasionally "to participate in or to host community events," Maureen Elgersman Lee, museum executive director stated.

The museum has operated from the Bowser building since 1991. Stacy Burrs, chairman of the museum's board, said last week the board agreed that Dr. Lee and her small staff need to focus on the planning and development of the new museum in the 108-year-old armory — the castle-shaped building that originally housed black Richmond militia units.

The building is in the 100 block of West Leigh Street, neighbor to Ebenezer Baptist Church. The museum is being designed to tell the story of African-Americans in Virginia from 1619 to the present and to serve as a community cultural and events space.

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“There are a lot of details involved,” Burrs said. “We are not proposing to simply move what we have to the new space. We are creating a new museum experience.”

Burrs said that if all goes as planned, the museum would reopen in the renovated armory in February 2014 and complete the overall project in 2015, including a new addition. The museum is seeking to raise 13 million, he said, with 10 million for development and \$3 million for property upkeep.

The museum plans to start work, he said, with the \$3.3 million already in hand, primarily in state and city grants and historic tax credits. He said he and others are courting donations from foundations and corporations and expect to take the campaign to the public within a year.

Burrs said the museum is planning a summer groundbreaking ceremony to launch the restoration of the armory, the nation’s only 19th century building created for African-American militia. The city designed and built the armory in 1895 as the home of the First Virginia Volunteers Battalion and its subordinate units. John Mitchell Jr., the courageous, crusading editor of the Richmond Planet, secured the funding while serving on City Council.

The city had previously built an armory for White militia units during the era of strict, official segregation. When the battalion disbanded a few years later to protest racial bigotry against its officers, the city-owned building was mostly used as a school until it was left vacant in the mid-1980s. During World War II, the armory also served as a recreation center for Black soldiers.