

REQUEST FOR CAPITAL FUNDING FOR WASHINGTON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY HERITAGE CENTER

Organizational Overview

The Washington County Historical Society (WCHS) is a private, nonprofit education organization founded in 1934 by a group of people who were afraid of seeing the history of one of Minnesota's first counties fading away. Today the Society's 750 individual, family, and business members still feel that urgency. For 83 years the Society has served the people, schools, and communities of Washington County by collecting, preserving, and sharing thousands of artifacts and records that document our shared culture and heritage.

History

WCHS began its collection in a small room in the Stillwater Library. It incorporated in 1941 and purchased the old Stillwater Prison Warden's House from the State of Minnesota to use as a headquarters and museum. Today WCHS operates four interpretive sites: the Warden's House Museum in Stillwater, the state's second oldest house museum; the Hay Lake School, a one-room 1890s brick school, and the Johannes Erickson Log House, a pioneer dwelling, both located in Scandia; and the Eder Schoolhouse in the Oakdale Nature Center. The Warden's House, Hay Lake School and Erickson Log House are on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1996 a reconstructed Carriage House replaced one that originally stood behind the Warden's House Museum and today is used for collections storage, archives, and a research facility. Twenty years later the Society's collections have again grown to a point where a larger, more functional building is needed for storage, exhibits, programs, and improved research facilities.

Activities

The Washington County Historical Society strives to be a community resource for individuals and organizations seeking historical information. WCHS provides educational programs and curricula to schools, brings in several speakers each year to the museums and other venues, holds membership meetings, and provides programs for other organizations. Volunteer re-enactors, such as the St. Croix vintage base ball team, help stimulate people's interest in history through entertainment and engagement. Society historians research and publish award-winning county history and help other authors publish their historical research.

Beyond the historical buildings, WCHS showcases county history through exhibits and traveling displays and assists local historical groups mount exhibits and preserve their community heritage. Educational outreach for WCHS includes publication of books and digital media, print and electronic newsletters, social media, and a history website with on-line exhibits and links to other history organizations.

Purpose

The Washington County Historical Society is uniquely situated to document early Minnesota history and tell the story of immigrants from the eastern United States and Europe who settled the region in the mid-nineteenth century. Our county's geographic connections to the Mississippi and St. Croix Rivers were keys to the establishment of the State. As one of the original nine counties established by the 1849 Territorial Legislature, Washington County is truly the "Gateway to Minnesota History."

Mission

The Society's mission is to collect, preserve, and disseminate the history of Washington County and the State of Minnesota. Our vision is to reach beyond historic structures to educate the public on all aspects of county and state history. We want to interest all people in the past and provide resources for people to place themselves in the context of an evolving community.

Current Situation

Lack of Program and Storage Space

While WCHS's house and school museums can provide excellent interpretation of pioneer and Victorian life, and are relevant for early schooling and even life behind bars, these facilities do not have space to adequately highlight other parts of Washington County, its business and agricultural history, and events that occurred before and after the mid- to late nineteenth century. For example, the interpretive sites we operate do not allow for the type of exhibitions that tell the stories of railroads, logging, agriculture, woman suffrage and prohibition in the County.

All items in WCHS collections are donations from individuals, social groups, and local governments. The WCHS does not purchase any items for the collections, but does undertake to maintain acquisitions in the best possible condition.

Most of the artifacts and records collected by WCHS are stored at the Warden's House Museum and in its adjoining Carriage House which also contains the research facility. Storage space is inadequate in these locations. Moreover, some materials are stored off-site and in environments that are not conducive to their preservation. WCHS has large artifacts—such as a birch bark canoe and a nineteenth century fire hose cart—that cannot be exhibited at present for lack of room. We have also received a great deal of archival material from Washington County and City of Cottage Grove that needs to be processed and made available for research. We have an extensive collection of period clothing that is rarely seen.

None of our period buildings has a museum quality HVAC (heating, ventilation and air conditioning) system, nor is it likely such systems can be installed and retain the historic character of the buildings. None of the buildings has areas adequate for meetings and education programs, workrooms for preservationists, space to bring in exhibits from other historical organizations, or facilities for providing refreshment. None has office or research space separated from the public facilities.

Mission Is Compromised

Currently, the Washington County Historical Society is the only organization that is collecting the history of Washington County and preserving its stories. In the near future, our present facilities will run out of space, which will severely affect our ability to collect, preserve, and exhibit the County's historical artifacts and records.

A larger, climate-controlled facility will allow the Society to better conserve and exhibit its collections and tell the stories of the whole County that our current facilities cannot provide.

Search for a Solution

History of the Search

The Society has been working for more than a decade to address these space and preservation issues and to determine how best to make these artifacts and records available to the public through exhibits, research facilities, and educational opportunities for all age groups.

In 2007, the Society began a campaign to construct a Washington County Cultural & Heritage Center. A consultant, Cramer & Associates, was hired to do a feasibility study and a facilities development committee was established. From this study it was determined that the Society had the community support and resources to raise \$4-\$5 million dollars for the project and that the best location for the Heritage Center would be in a central point in the county, which would be near Highway 36.

During this time, the WCHS investigated the purchase of land to construct a new County Cultural and Heritage Center. There were talks with the Washington County Agricultural Society about building the Center on the Washington County Fairgrounds, but the site and building requirements were deemed inadequate for the needs of WCHS. Another site was in Lake Elmo; however, the totally undeveloped land needed utility connections that would not be available for many years..

The Society then looked to purchase an existing building. Because the Center would be a resource for local schools as well as tour groups, it was decided it should be positioned in the Stillwater-Oak Park Heights area close to the highway for ease of access. Discussions were held with county administrators about taking over the Historic Courthouse on South Third Street in Stillwater, but, in addition to adding another unfunded high-maintenance building, the facilities could not be made to meet the goals for the new Center. The Simonet Furniture building at Curve Crest and Washington Avenue was available and seemed more than adequate, so preliminary plans were drawn up and permits sought. After some discussions with the Simonet family and with the Minnesota Historical Society, it was decided that this building was too large and expensive for WCHS needs.

Building Purchase and Upkeep

In March 2013, the opportunity arose for the WCHS board to purchase the vacant UFE facility at 1862 Greely Street South in Stillwater. The 14,000 sq. ft. building was purchased for \$795,000 and was immediately leased to the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) for use as their headquarters during the construction of the new St. Croix River Crossing. WCHS contracted with MS&R Architects, a Minneapolis architectural firm with experience in historical museums, to develop renovation and conceptual plans for the building. The site is part of the Stillwater office park and WCHS has a Special Use Permit to proceed with a cultural facility on the site.

Over the course of the renting of the building to MnDOT, WCHS has paid the property tax, \$30,000 per year, as the building's function was not included in the WCHS mission statement. The WCHS Board has also hired a management firm, Toll Bridge Consulting, Inc., to look after the building in case of damage or needed repairs at a cost of \$7,200 per year. Several maintenance issues have arisen. The exterior stucco was repaired and painted at cost of \$11,000. Patching and repairing the roof and mechanical roof units have cost more than \$10,000. These expenses have been paid from rental income that has been generated through the lease. Rent payments from MnDOT also enabled WCHS to completely pay off the mortgage in 2015 and generate a cash reserve. The WCHS board is now working to raise the capital needed to complete the renovation.