

Pearl S. Buck House in Hilltown begins final stage of restoration project

By Bob Keeler

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Pearl S. Buck's clothes have been bagged up.

Shelved books at the home of the Pulitzer and Nobel prize-winning writer in Hilltown are covered with plastic. Furniture is being covered and moved around to make way for the final stages of what has been a multi-year restoration project.

"They're basically working from the outside in and now these are the finishing touches," said Donna Rhodes, curator of the Pearl S. Buck House.

Remaining work includes things such as painting, flooring, alarm systems, upgrading the heating systems and rewiring the entire home.

Buck, who died in 1973, lived at the home with her second husband, Richard Walsh, between 1935 and 1960, when Walsh died.

The earliest portion of it was built in about 1740, with major additions about 1825 and again in 1935 through 1938, Rhodes said.

"The house really reflects 300 years of Bucks County's architecture," she said.

All the stone for the different parts of the house came from the same quarry, she said.

"It's seamlessly blended," she said.

What makes the Buck home particularly interesting is that all of the original items are still there, she said.

"There are no props in the house," Rhodes said. "These are all things the family used every day."

The time frame reflected by the house is 1938 through 1948, she said.

"That's when the farm was thriving," Rhodes said. "The children were here growing up."

Buck and Walsh were also working at the home at the time, she said.

Dances were held for returning veterans at the home and during the war years, the farm was self-sustaining, she said.

Buck built an ice skating rink in the community and local people were among the early supporters of her programs to support sponsorships and adoptions for multi-cultural children, a somewhat radical idea at the time, Rhodes said.

"This is a snapshot into the history of our area and the country as well," Rhodes said.

"It's a real picture of not just the home, but the community as well," she said. "Everybody was welcome here. It was an open area for the entire community."

When Buck died, she left the house to the organization that she had founded to continue her work with multi-cultural children, Janet Mintzer, president and CEO of Pearl S. Buck International, said.



Volunteers Angelina Bartorelli, of Dublin, and Bonnie Janke, of Lower Gwynedd, help tape plastic over books in the library. News-Herald photo — DEBBY HIGH

While that work continued, there wasn't initially much done to maintain or restore the house, she said.

"When I came here as CEO, the house was in pretty bad shape," Mintzer said.

There were questions of whether the house and the organization should be operated separately.

In the end, it was decided the house is a rare treasure that helps do Buck's work, Mintzer said.

"This house is a wonderful historic home, but, also, Pearl Buck stood for helping educate the western world about the Asian culture," Mintzer said. "We should use this house as a way to educate the children about not only Pearl Buck and the value of being a humanitarian and helping others, but the value of understanding and appreciating cultural differences."

An assessment to help decide what should be done with the house also showed the importance of keeping it open, she said.

"When the consultants came in, they told us that there's about 2,500 national historic landmarks in the United States, but they told us only 300 of them are about a woman's contribution to society," Mintzer said, "and of those 300 that are about a woman, there's only 10 in the country that have an intact collection —that means everything in the home was really used by that woman — and that Pearl Buck is one of those 10 houses."

The first phase of the home preservation, which cost a little less than \$1 million, was completed in August 2007, she said. Phase II ended in 2010.

With the final almost \$1.6 million phase, the total costs will be \$2.8 million, according to a Preservation With A Purpose capital campaign update printed in 2012.

The work was done in phases because the organization didn't have the funding to do it all at once, Mintzer said. A study was done to prioritize the needs and what should be done first, she said.

Donations to the work have included a \$780,000 Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program Grant from the state government.

Work in the completed phases included eliminating water infiltration through repairs to roofing, windows and doors and re-pointing the exterior of the house, followed by reinforcing and adding beams.

"When Pearl Buck lived there, she kept making the rooms bigger, widening them, which was OK, fine, the way she did it for residential use," Mintzer said, "but when we have the public in and we have higher numbers of people in the rooms at one time, it didn't meet the requirements for being a public visitation place, so that's why we had to improve the structural supports."

Slate roof repairs, chimney cappings and other parts of the final phase work were done last year.

After opening up walls for the rewiring that is part of the remaining work, interior walls will have to be replastered and returned to their original condition.

"All the plaster here is kind of a specialty finish," known as sand float, said Matt Perch, superintendent for Wu & Associates, of Cherry Hill, N.J., the company doing the third phase work.

"For the most part, when we turn it back to Pearl Buck International, it should look the same as it does now," Perch said.

Paint analysis has been done to make sure the colors of the house are not being changed, Rhodes said.

"Everything will reflect the colors Miss Buck and her family selected," Rhodes said.

The restoration is expected to last for 30 to 50 years, Mintzer and Rhodes said.

Earlier phases of the restoration have made it possible to open up more of the house for the tours by the public, as well as allowing more of the items in the house to be displayed, Rhodes said.

"Up until now, a lot of things have been kept in storage," she said.

In past years, the house tours have not been held in January and February, then returned in March.

This year, the March reopening isn't possible because of the work being done inside the house.

Instead, in March through June, there will be "A View From The Outside In" tours, featuring a tour of the property and exterior of the house, a visit to the Awards Room and timeline and a video tour of the home's interior. There will also be a limited engagement showing of the "Pearl S. Buck Life and Legacy" play, giving an oral history of Buck, as well as the "Silver Screen Exhibit," showing Buck's life on radio, stage and screen, as well as a glimpse of home movies.

"We had to be really creative," Mintzer said. "How can we continue to bring the public here to learn about Pearl Buck and her amazing legacy if we don't have the house as a way to do that, so that's why we developed the alternative programming."

Self-guided tours including the Awards Room, gift shop and timeline are also currently available.

A grand reopening for the restored house, after which tours of the interior will resume, is scheduled for June 26, which would have been Buck's 121st birthday.