

Lehigh Canal preservation effort takes new tack

I've been lucky enough to visit the Lehigh Canal's Lock 44 in Freemansburg many times, and I can tell you it's a beautiful, peaceful spot.

But despite efforts to preserve and protect this site of the Freemansburg Canal Education Center and some of its special features for future generations, the Delaware & Lehigh National Heritage Corridor has struggled to get the help and funds it needs, a problem I've chronicled from time to time in columns.

So it has adopted a new approach that already has begun to show promise.



Bill White

Dennis Scholl, D&L education manager and author of "Tales of the Towpath," the popular children's book about the lives of an Irish boy and his family as Lehigh Canal boat operators, approached me to help get the word out about what's happening.

He wrote, "Over the past three months, the D&L has begun the process of forming a nonprofit organization with a goal of having this organization eventually take over the administration of most of the operation at the Freemansburg Canal Education Center and become caretakers of the borough's stretch of the Lehigh Canal."

As I walked through the greenery a week later with Scholl and longtime canal supporter Charlie Derr — who was mowing the grass when I arrived — they explained what has happened so far and what they hope to accomplish.

"This group would like to help the borough retain its canal history," Scholl said. About half the 44 people on the membership list so far are Freemansburg residents, a local commitment they haven't had in the past, he said. "I've been elated by the turnout and the enthusiasm that there seems to be," he said.

D&L Executive Director Elissa Garofalo told me later that while her organization is happy to help get things rolling, it's important that people in the community end up in charge. "Until there's real local support and blood, sweat and tears in a



CHRIS SHIPLEY/THE MORNING CALL

Efforts are underway to continue restoration of the historic Locktender's House at Lock 44 at the Lehigh Canal site in Freemansburg.

she said. "We are looking at a sustainable type of effort over there, because it's a gem."

Scholl noted that organizers haven't really started recruiting yet, although there have been four meetings. "I'd love to see 100 people or more with this organization," he said, "and I think that's possible."

He said what is being called the Old Freemansburg Association already includes people with all kinds of different talents, and they'll all be needed. The group will need to raise funds, maintain the Freemansburg portion of the canal, hold special events and some education programs and help restore some of the structures there, including the Locktender's House.

Derr acknowledged, "We've done a lot down here, but it's been a struggle to maintain a volunteer corps." He said they were down to about a half dozen volunteers last year.

They said the linchpin that helped get the

House, one of only two still standing along the Lehigh Canal. The exterior largely has been restored, thanks to a grant from Northampton County, but inside, it's another story.

Derr said, "The interior is a museum of the 1970s era of vandalism, including graffiti and beer cans." He said the last tenant left in the mid-'70s.

As we stepped inside, Scholl said, "The county wants us to have this first floor open for field trips this fall." There's a lot of work to be done.

Derr said all the houses built for the families of canal locktenders looked about the same. They had two floors, with a fireplace and kitchen downstairs and the sleeping quarters upstairs.

The locktenders were expected to operate the canal locks from 4 a.m. to 10 p.m. six days a week. "They got Sundays off," Derr said.

plete restoration work for the house and the rest of the Lock 44 area, which means fundraising will be needed, including another appeal to Northampton County officials. Scholl said fully restoring the lock will cost about \$400,000.

The group did get some encouraging news at its meeting last week, though. Scholl said a local contractor who is part of the newly formed association stepped forward with an offer to spray paint the wooden areas of the first floor white — among other benefits, covering the graffiti — once the room has been cleaned and otherwise prepped.

Scholl said the goal in this early organizational stage is to establish a group that will be in this for the long term. "We want people to know if you come in to this group, we want you to work."

Both men said they have an ambitious wish list of improvements to the site, which also includes a mule barn and a big garden where they grow heirloom vegetables, herbs and dye plants for student lessons.

"We have a long list of what needs to be done, what really needs to be done and we'd really like to get to that someday," Derr said.

A thousand Bethlehem fourth-graders visit this site every October to reinforce what they've begun reading in the book. About 6,500 children read "Tales from the Towpath" each year, spanning 80 elementary schools, 20 school districts and two private schools.

But as important as it is for children to understand our area's history, that site has a lot to offer adults, too, as I'm reminded every time I visit.

"It's one of those really special places along the way," Garofalo concluded. "The Locktender's House, the path, the canal, the river. It's one of those places we want to preserve."

If you would like to be a part of this effort or want more information, contact Dennis Scholl at dennis@delawareandlehigh.org or (610) 923-3548 ext. 225.

"There's so much potential here for programming," he said. "We can turn this into a living history center with the right amount of help and funding. This group is a step in that direction."

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Bill White's commentary appears Tuesdays.