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Fairview man restored historical home, watched it burn and is building anew

Judy Ausley

Joe White's work to preserve a piece of Buncombe County history recently earned him a Griffin Award from the Preservation Society of Asheville and Buncombe County.

But the project that earned him the award has tested his inner strength and determination.

White worked for more than two years restore the historic John A. Lanning Home in Fairview. Just as he neared completion, the home burned down in November.

Now White is working to re-create the home, rebuilding it and salvaging any materials left over. Along with the loss of the building is the loss of its historic designation. At least the original fireplace and chimney were left standing.

"Coming about this collection and the home has been the experience of my life," White said. "Now my blood and sweat is mixed with Lanning's."

The history

Built in 1839, the John A. Lanning Home is often referred to by locals as a "cabin." But it was considered one of the most stately homes in Buncombe County when Lanning built it. The home was placed on the National Registry of Historical Places for its architectural design and woodwork.

In early Fairview, Lanning wore several hats, as pioneers often did to survive on the farm. He was a naturally gifted woodworker, farmer, landowner — and whisky dealer. A part of the estate was the Barrel House near the main house, where Lanning stored and sold whiskey.

The Lanning Home is shown in the book "Cabins and Castles: History and Architecture of Buncombe," which is being reprinted this year by the county. Many locals remember the home because it sat practically on top of Emma's Grove Road in Fairview.

Besides the home and the property, White acquired the contents of the house, including furniture and artifacts such as Lanning's handwritten journal/ledger, in which described items such as "the largest wood antique dining table in the state" and a kitchen cupboard from the home.

Fortunately, White had removed the contents of the home for the restoration, and they were not lost in the fire. Some of those pieces are now on display in an exhibit, "The Artistry of Plain-Style Furniture," at Western Carolina University's Mountain Heritage Center, which runs through Dec. 15.

The restoration

White moved to Fairview in the early 1980s, working as an antique dealer. The log home he built for his family is about 300 yards from the Lanning house.

Irene Owenby, who also loved and traded antiques, became friends with White. She told her family that she wanted White to have the old house, in its run-down and dilapidated condition. Sure enough, in

2006, when the heirs decided to sell off some of the property, White was able to buy it.

White said he feels “a great deal of gratitude to Irene Owenby. She is responsible for me having this place.”

It was a great find. For example, White discovered that hinges on doors in the home were handcrafted by Lanning. While the restoration would be a big undertaking, the historic integrity of the building was inspiring.

“I simply could not wait to get started on the work,” White said.

He removed and stored the home’s contents. He numbered all the logs in the home as it was dismantled and reconstructed.

White is quick to say he did not do all the work by himself. His partners in the restoration have included builder Paddy Donovan, a longtime friend from Western Carolina University, and log designer/restoration professional Mel Reid, of Asheville.

Then came the fire in November. Its cause: a chimney foundation fire.

White thought all was well when he went to bed Nov. 16. Shortly after 3 a.m., he awakened to find the fire raging in the newly restored home. Neighbors and volunteer firemen pitched in to fight it as White watched his work engulfed in the flames.

The fire started in the foundation under the rock fireplace, the only place he had not checked when putting on the finished touches. Unbelievably, the historic chimney and its authentic mountain rock remained intact. White gathered as many pieces of the original logs slightly burned from the fire, pieces of historic hinges and locks made by Lanning and a couple of parched doors from the restoration.

With those remains he began the job of rebuilding.

Now Donovan is helping White with the new construction, which they expect to finish in August.

The new home is being re-created as near as possible to the original structure, with the historic saddlebag construction with yellow pine and full dovetail cornering traditional in early homes.

“Paddy is my pal and surely my best friend in this,” White said. “I could not have done this without him.”

Although the Lanning Home will no longer be on the National Registry of Historic Places because of the fire, White is receiving accolades for his dedication to its preservation.

“We would be better in Buncombe County if we had more people committed to historic preservation,” said Becca Johnson of the N.C. Historic Preservation and Cultural Resources Department, who worked with White on the house before the fire. “Joe has such a personal attachment to this project, I really want to see him finish.”

Judy Ausley is an Asheville-based freelance writer. Contact her at Judyausley@aol.com.