

Old lodge gets new lease

A Raleigh architect is restoring a piece of Smithfield's history

By SARAH MCNEIL
STAFF REPORTER

SMITHFIELD — A Raleigh architect is giving new life to a 152-year-old building that was once a gathering place for generations of local men and women.

In September, David Maurer, owner of Maurer Architecture, began restoring the old Masonic Hall at 115 N. 2nd St. in downtown Smithfield. "A lot of architecture has to do with historic preservation," Maurer said recently. "This opportunity came up, and I wanted to save the building."

Maurer bought the old Masonic lodge from the Downtown Smithfield Development Corp., which had received it as a gift from Yates and Pansy Dobson. (The Dobsons wanted the eventual buyer to move the building, but Maurer bought both the building and the lot so the old lodge will stay put.)

"This building in particular is really interesting because it had such a varied history and has been moved and renovated several times," Maurer said.

Built in 1854, the Masonic Hall is one of Smith-

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field's oldest structures. It has stood on its present site since 1917, when Judge F.H. Brooks moved it there from a lot on North Second Street above Hancock Street.

Local Masons met in the building first, followed by the Smithfield Woman's Club, which operated the town's first public library there from 1917 until 1933. The Dobson family took ownership of the building about 1960.

"To me, what's really cool about this building is it started off as a men's building, but then once it was moved, it became a women's building long before any feminist's movement was adopted," Maurer said. "It has gone through the whole male-dominated society. It's been on both sides of the gender fence in terms of its use. I just think it's really cool."

Maurer suspects that lumber for the Masonic Hall came from another, older building. In the 1850s, wood from lumber mills was expensive, said Maurer, who has found nail holes and notches in the wood to support this theory. Also, he thinks two additional doors were added in 1917.

Maurer said the two-story building was in pretty bad shape when he bought it. A fire had damaged an upstairs wall, and termites and water had taken their toll.

"When I bought it, the whole building leaned from one side to the other about 4 inches," Maurer said. "We got a house builder to lift the house in the air, and we built a whole new foundation. Then, when we set it back down, it was nice and level."

Maurer hopes to have the renovations finished by the first of the year. Already, he has replaced the roof and added new coats of paint.

Inside, he has restored the first floor to its original design — a reception area, conference room, kitchen, bathroom and storage area. (After the move in 1917, the first floor was carved into six rooms.) The second floor, which has a large office and former meeting hall, maintains the original vaulted ceiling. The building will also get new plumbing, heating and air-conditioning units, and the pine hardwood floors will be restored.

"I don't want to change it so much that it will look completely different," Maurer said. "At the same time, I want to change it enough to make people realize it's a major project. I definitely

want to say it has not been an inexpensive project, but I want to do it right because this building has such significance for the town of Smithfield."

Because of the building's rich history, Maurer is working to get the Masonic Hall placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The designation would allow him to apply for tax credits for the renovations.

"I think there is a very rich history here in downtown Smithfield that needs to be publicized," Maurer said. "People really want to know about old buildings. They will come to downtowns like Smithfield and spend the day visiting old historic buildings and eating in the restaurants. I think this building is a perfect example of the rich heritage here in Smithfield."

Maurer, who plans to lease the building as office space, is asking folks for their help during the renovation project. He is trying to find photos of the building before 1960. If you can be of assistance, contact Maurer at 829-4969 or at david@maurerarchitecture.com.

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Antonio Rojas shovels roofing debris.



Ronnie Brockington, at bottom, takes a measurement while Johnny Green paints the trim.

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