

City firm is restoring battlefield landmark

At around 9 a.m. on Wednesday, July 1, 1863, Lancaster-born Gen. John F. Reynolds drew rein at the Lutheran Theological Seminary just west of the town of Gettysburg.

“What’s the matter, John?” he shouted to Gen. John Buford from the cupola atop the seminary roof.

Buford had been anxiously watching as his cavalymen held back the long lines of Confederate infantry approaching the town.

“The devil’s to pay,” Buford called back and climbed down to confer with Reynolds.

Those were the opening moments of the Battle of Gettysburg. And while Reynolds would die two hours later, and Buford within six months, the building where they met, Schmucker Hall, still stands.

To ensure that the landmark structure maintains its historical integrity, a Lancaster firm is performing extensive restoration work.

“When we’re finished, Schmucker Hall will look just like it did during the Civil War,” said Danielle Keperling, who, with her husband, Jonathan, owns and operates Historic Restorations.

Since December, workers have been removing each of the four-story building’s 95 windows. The wood frames are rebuilt on-site, if possible, and then reinstalled.

Those with excessive rot are brought to the company’s shop at 334 E. Liberty St.

As each window is restored, it’s caulked shut to accommodate a luxury Reynolds and Buford never knew — air-conditioning.

The job includes several large fan-shaped windows in the roof area.

“The attic windows were the worst,” Keperling said. “We had to bring them back, measure them and make exact duplicates.”

Besides windows, banisters lining the front and rear porch steps were removed and repaired. In many cases, wood rot was concealed by layers of paint a quarter-inch thick, slapped on over the last century or more.

“We repaired what we could and are replacing others to match what existed,” Keperling said.



Photo courtesy of the Adams County Historical Society

This photo of the Lutheran Theological Seminary near Gettysburg shows the now-missing balcony on the Peace Portico. Historic Restorations, a Lancaster firm, is replacing that balcony as part of its renovation project.

A post-war iron railing at the rear entrance was replaced by a wooden railing built to match the few original sections found in storage.

A major challenge was restoring the Peace Portico, which was added in 1914, a year after the 50th anniversary of the battle.

The portico is a sweeping stairway at the front of the building that leads to a large, semicircular porch and overhead balcony.

“We took the portico apart in sections and brought it back to our shop,” Jonathan Keperling said. “Then we stripped it so we could see what rot or decay was in there. We started replacing what was rotten with wood patches, blended it, sanded it, then put it back together. It’s time-consuming. It takes a few weeks for each section.”

While the portico’s porch, railings and banisters remain, the overhead balcony, supported by six columns, disappeared years ago. No pieces of the balcony remain, so all the railings, columns and urn-shaped balusters were fabricated based on old photographs.

Inside the building, modern metal fire doors were replaced by wooden doors to match the Civil War period, but still meet modern fire codes. “That was a challenge,” Jonathan Keperling said. “We did a lot of research on it.” The solution was poplar wood.

Work is expected to conclude next month, Danielle Keperling said. She is the daughter of Chuck Groshong, co-founder of the firm started in 1995. The company initially did all sorts of woodworking jobs, but began to focus on historic restoration in 2003.

“It was something we found we liked,” Jonathan Keperling said. “It was more challenging, and it added more fulfillment to what we do.”

He admitted the work is not for everyone.

“It’s real hard to find people who are detail oriented and can actually do the hands-on stuff,” he said. “It takes a lot of thinking. Everything must be precise.”

Schmucker Hall, built in 1832, was a dormitory. After the three-day Battle of Gettysburg, it was filled with wounded soldiers of both armies.

The cupola Buford stood in was destroyed by fire after a lightning strike in 1913. The building is still owned by the seminary.