

History Center renovates to make the past ‘not boring’

The Atlanta History Center has raised over \$32 million to restore and build a new home for “The Battle of Atlanta” painting.

They want more company. To show it, they’re getting a new front door.

And a lot more.

The Atlanta History Center has begun a dramatic renovation of its West Paces Ferry Road facilities that will create a new entrance for its museum building, a new display of Atlanta history, add an historic log cabin to its collection, and, if the city of Atlanta signs off, could provide a new home for the historic Cyclorama painting.

The center plans to bring more than \$50 million worth of construction projects and new programs to its Buckhead campus over the next few years.

“It’s definitely an exciting time,” History Center Vice President Hillary Hardwick said. “It’s a great time for Atlanta and it’s a great time for the Atlanta History Center. We used to say we were one of Atlanta’s best kept secrets — and we didn’t say that proudly. We want to open up.”

The \$21 million construction project now under way will provide a new entry drive off West Paces Ferry, move the front of building closer to the street, create a new entry façade for the museum, double the size of the building’s atrium, add a central hallway connecting the exhibits, and add a coffee shop/gift shop/bookstore.

History Center officials hope that the work will make the facility seem more inviting, and will help change the way Atlantans view history. “One of our big goals is changing the perception of history and the Atlanta History Center,” Hardwick said.

What do they hope to convince people about history? “It’s not boring,” History Center President and CEO Sheffield Hale said. “It’s fun. It impacts their lives.”

In the past, he said, history “was taught so badly that people thought it was names and dates and dead folks, and had no relation to them.” To change that, Hale and Hardwick say the center is opening up both physically and philosophically.

“The first thing I did when I got here was take down the fences,” Hale said. “The reaction I got was far beyond anything I thought I’d see. ... Who wants a chain-link fence in their front yard? Those kind of

symbolic things matter. The architecture matters. The way this old building looked to people, they didn't know what it was and they didn't come in."

Hale says the new bookstore/gift shop/coffee shop planned as part of the renovation will provide one way the center can become more welcoming to the public. He hopes it becomes a place where the center's neighbors will come for coffee or to relax. The shop will offer places to sit and Wi-Fi connections, he said.

"It's not going to be like any other museum bookstore," Hale said. "It's going to be a community living room. What I want it to be is the coolest bookstore/café/living room you're ever been to."

The center used focus groups to determine what people wanted to see. Audience feedback said one thing museum goers wanted, Hale said, was coffee. "Coffee and a chair," Hardwick said.

As the building gets a new entrance and façade, the center's main exhibit showing the history of Atlanta is being re-tooled, too. The exhibit, which hadn't changed since it was installed in 1993, has been removed, and center historians are reworking it. They intend for the new exhibit, scheduled to open in 2016, to be more interactive and to do a better job of bringing Atlanta history to life.

"We're going to talk about your neighborhood," Hale said. "One week it could be Morningside, the next week it could be Old Fourth Ward. Everybody loves to talk about their neighborhood. ... We think that construct of 'neighborhoods' might be a disciplined way for us to get out into the community."

And Hale wants the History Center to get out more. He thinks the nonprofit center should have a greater impact on the community.

"When we started this project, one of our goals was to really change the way people feel as they walk onto this 33-acre campus," Hardwick said. "We're changing. ... All of this helps reinforce that. It mirrors the organization we're becoming."

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