

HISTORY

TOWN HISTORY

Oberlin and Oberlin College were co-established in 1833 as a college town. Both quickly gained a national reputation as bastions for civil liberties and rights. Oberlin is well known for its role in promoting the end of slavery and has been called the “town that started the Civil War.”

Oberlin was long an important stop on the Underground Railroad for slaves seeking freedom, and as “Stop 99,” which is believed to be the final stop for fugitive slaves seeking freedom in Canada.

As a progressive community, a local gas company was established in 1858 and Oberlin was one of the first towns in the area to have gas-lit streetlamps.

THE GASHOLDER BUILDING

Built in 1889 for the storage of coal gas, the Oberlin Gasholder building is a unique remnant of Oberlin’s industrial heritage and the only known surviving Gasholder structure west of the Appalachian Mountains. Its cylindrical shape, conical roof and open interior offer exciting potential for use of vertical spaces, making it an ideal candidate for adaptive reuses as exhibit and assembly space.

The Oberlin “Gasholder House” building eventually ceased to be used for the storage of coal gas (it may have remained vacant or underutilized once production ceased near the end of World War I, and it then continued to be used for industrial purposes as part of a lumber yard operation in the 1930’s). Clark Brothers Construction Company owned the building since the 1960’s (until it was officially gifted to the City of Oberlin in October 2007).

After a community effort to save the historic structure, the Oberlin Heritage Center had the Oberlin “Gasholder House” placed on the National Register of Historic Places, in October 1998, for its significance in both the history of the industry and architecture.

ADAPTIVE RE-USE OF THE GASHOLDER BUILDING

In the late 1990’s, the Oberlin community identified that the “Gasholder House” should be rehabilitated and transformed into a building that, once again, serves the needs of the neighborhood and City. In this regard, the celebration of Oberlin’s important role as part of the “Underground Railroad” is seen as being of importance beyond the community and the “Gasholder House” was

deemed appropriate in being adapted to use as an Underground Railroad center. In addition, because Oberlin is undoubtedly one of the most bicycle-friendly cities in Ohio, there will be a multi-modal transportation center, which enhances modal choices by prioritizing bicycle travel. For cyclists who utilize the Don J. Pease Memorial Bike path through Oberlin on North Coast Inland Bicycle Trail (which runs between Kipton and Elyria and will eventually go all the way to Toledo), this is a major component of this adaptive re-use plan.

Therefore, based on these considerations, the Gasholder House will be renovated for public use as an interpretive center for the Underground Railroad, as a node on the North Coast Inland Bicycle Trail, and as a welcome center, starting visitors on their tour of Oberlin's many cultural features. The site will be developed with both auto and bike parking, picnicking and pedestrian amenities, and a public restroom building.

The firm of Moody-Nolan, Inc. has been charged with developing design and construction documents for the Oberlin Underground Railroad Center and Park-and-Ride, which will be an adaptive re-use of this historic Gasholder Building on South Main Street. Such a transformation will, however, only be possible with outside financial assistance.

CURRENT FUNDING

To date, the City has secured a congressional earmark of \$200,000 (2003) thanks to the support of then-Representative, now Senator Sherrod Brown and Representative Marcy Kaptur for the design phase of the project. The City also secured a \$1,147,000 Federal Transportation Enhancement (TE) grant (administered through NOACA [Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency]), which is an 80-20 matching grant – meaning that \$917,600 are actual TE grant dollars and \$229,400 needs to be raised in order to ensure these grant funds are not lost.

In September 2010, Oberlin's City Council committed \$50,000 to this project for fiscal year 2011, which will be allocated to partially meet the 20% match requirement. In addition, a silent fundraising campaign was started the past winter (2010). Currently, the fundraising sub-team needs to raise approximately \$2 million to complete the ~ \$3 million Oberlin Underground Railroad Center Project.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

To accomplish this end, the City completed a public engagement process (in fall 2009) which involved obtaining citizen input through a series of public meetings and working in conjunction

with the Underground Railroad Center Design Team to understand and to address the Community's vision for the project. The community defined the project's Mission and Vision Statements:

Mission Statement: Serving as a tourist gateway and transportation hub, the Underground Railroad Center celebrates Oberlin's rich history in the anti-slavery movement and honors African American heritage to promote a better understanding of the past and provide a pathway to our future.

Vision Statement: Pride in African American heritage is restored, cultural experiences enhanced, good citizenship and social justice promoted; making Oberlin an internationally and nationally recognized cultural center and tourist destination.

CURRENT EVENTS

To date (June 2011), the exterior stabilization and rehabilitation efforts have begun. Construction documents are in the final stages and the bidding process for the new conical roof is anticipated to begin in August 2011.

The next major step in this process is the development of a *Program of Requirements* (a written document which describes the necessary components of a building project and defines its goals) for the building and site, as well as supporting analytical documents that will aid in the overall planning and direction, based on the community's prioritization of the project. This program will be based on the adaptive reuse of the Gasholder Building.

CONSTRUCTION PHASING OPTIONS

Following is an outline of potential options for phasing the project. This is to be considered in the event that complete funding of the total budget has not been secured at the outset of construction.

Phase I: Stabilization and restoration of building shell

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| a. | Replace slate roof | (Summer/Fall 2011) |
| b. | Repair and paint existing eaves, rafter tails and fascia | (Summer/Fall 2011) |
| c. | New gutters and downspouts | (Summer/Fall 2011) |
| d. | Infill non-original openings in exterior wall with new masonry to match existing | (Spring/Summer 2012) |
| e. | Repoint/repair existing brick masonry | (Spring/Summer 2012) |
| f. | Restore existing windows, if possible, or replace with new to match existing per the Secretary of the Interior's Rehabilitation Standards | (Spring/Summer 2012) |

- g. Partial or complete demolition of non-original interior floor systems (Spring/Summer 2012)

(Comment: This work could be accomplished without having building design work completed.)

Phase II(a): Installation of basic interior and exterior infrastructure

- a. Site utilities (Spring/Summer 2012)
- b. Water, electric and gas service entrances; sanitary sewer service connection(s) (Spring/Summer 2012)
- c. Vehicular access drive and parking (Spring/Summer 2012)
- d. Limited walkway paving (Spring/Summer 2012)
- e. Elevator (based on funding)
- f. Floor structure (Spring/Summer 2012)
- g. Egress stairs (based on funding)
- h. Building entrance (Spring/Summer 2012)
- i. Restrooms (Spring/Summer 2012)
- j. Mechanical and electrical rooms and equipment (Spring/Summer 2012)

(Comment: This would require a complete building design [minus exhibits]. The end result would be shell space ready to be fitted with final partitions, finishes, mechanical electrical distribution.)

Phase II(b): Interior finishing

- a. Partitions defining programmed spaces (based on funding)
- b. Ceiling (if any) (based on funding)
- c. Finishes (based on funding)
- d. Utility Installation
 - a. Lighting and power distribution (Spring/Summer 2012)
 - b. HVAC distribution (based on funding)
 - c. Water/sewer plumbing distribution (Spring/Summer 2012)
 - d. Gas distribution (based on funding)

Phase III: Exterior site amenities

- a. Bus stop *(Spring/Summer 2012)*
- b. Bike path connection *(Spring/Summer 2012)*
- c. Picnic / bicycle shelter *(Spring/Summer 2012)*
- d. Interpretive garden infrastructure *(Spring/Summer 2012)*
- e. Water feature infrastructure *(Spring/Summer 2012)*
- f. Site paving and walkways *(Spring/Summer 2012)*
- g. Site lighting *(Spring/Summer 2012)*

(Comment: This could be completed before Phase II(a) or partly or completely combined with Phase II(a).)

Phase IV: Displays and exhibits

- a. Interior permanent exhibits *(based on funding)*
- b. Traveling exhibit amenities *(based on funding)*
- c. Exterior permanent exhibits *(based on funding)*
- d. Interpretive garden *(based on funding)*
- e. Water feature *(based on funding)*

