

# Sneak peak at history

Underground Railroad Center in Oberlin opens doors for look at transformation

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OBERLIN - The future home of the Oberlin Underground Railroad Center opened its doors yesterday for a look at progress in its transformation from a 19th century utility storage to a 21st century activity center.

The Oberlin Gasholder Building, a circular brick structure with a conical roof, was built in 1889 to store coal gas, a fuel for lights and heat in the 19th century. It has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1998.

But by the end of 2011, it will house the Oberlin Underground Railroad Center, where visitors can park their cars to ride their bikes on the North Coast Inland Trail and learn about Oberlin's role in helping escaped slaves find freedom.

About 150 people attended yesterday's event, which included a performance by students of Oberlin Conservatory's jazz program, according to George Abram, chairman of the team stewarding the Oberlin Underground Railroad Center.

"It's a pretty strong building, but the rood was in bad condition," Abram said. "There is also a floor beneath the ground floor, which needs to be cleaned and repaired because the building took on a lot of water over the years."

Architectural renderings showed what the building will look like when done, Abram said.

Plans call for restrooms and performance areas to be added. A staircase will be build to the basement and a balcony will be added below the roof, according to Abram.

Jessie Reeder, a retired music teacher in the Oberlin public schools, led children in singing, and a Civil War cannon was on display, Abram said.

Margaret Christian, a history enthusiast, spoke about the Underground Railroad system.

The Oberlin Underground Railroad Center is being built with a grant from the Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency, local fundraising and federal funds.