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New Heritage Center to tell 'Boro's colorful story

By Erin Edgemon, Post business editor

It is obvious to the casual observer that Murfreesboro's Public Square is picturesque — with its accent light posts, flags and hanging baskets — and has a long history apparent by the stately Courthouse positioned at its center.

But many newcomers and visitors aren't aware of its rich and colorful past.

The Heritage Center, opening before the end of October, will help tell the whole story of Murfreesboro's downtown from the fighting that occurred on city streets during the Civil War to the colorful characters who frequented Murfreesboro during the Jazz Age of the 1920s and '30s.



Laura Holder, Brian Heffron and Ashley Tate set-up displays for the Heritage Center Museum that is opening before the end of October.

Van West, director of the Center for Historic Preservation at MTSU, said the center opening at 225 West College St., the former location of Bangkok Cafe, will be more than a museum and more than a visitor center. It is a unified, graphically-told storyline of Murfreesboro and Rutherford County.

The Heritage Center will present the whole history of the city of Murfreesboro to residents and visitors that sites like the Stones River National Battlefield, Oaklands Mansion, Sam Davis Home and Bradley Academy can't. It will tie Rutherford County's many tourist attractions together — most importantly the Stones River National Battlefield, which attracts more than 200,000 visitors annually.

Walking tours and bike trails that will point out and identify historic sites along the Public Square and downtown are being organized by The Heritage Center.

"To me it is a living museum," West said. "There will be a lot of stories we will be able to tell for the first time."

One of these many stories is the city of Murfreesboro as a stop along the Dixie Highway. The highway — built and constructed from 1915 to 1927 — stretched from Chicago to Jacksonville, Fla. Around that time, casinos lined the Public Square, and it was said that known gangsters like Al Capone often stopped and ate in Murfreesboro.

The center, which will not charge an admission fee, will have at least two full-time trained staff, MTSU graduate students and other volunteers working there.

Some exhibits will be changed every few weeks, but the center will have three semi-permanent exhibits: The Occupied City, Murfreesboro and Rutherford County during the Civil War; What's in a Name? Explaining where the names of Rutherford County cities and streets originated; and Murfreesboro in the Jazz Age.

“The big hope of the Heritage Center is not only to reach tourists but residents,” West said of the educational and informative exhibits and tours.

Murfreesboro and Rutherford County finally has experienced enough growth in population, hotel rooms and retail to support such a venture, West said. And with the hotel/conference center slated to begin construction by Nov. 1 and the Rutherford County Chamber of Commerce's interactive welcome/visitor center to begin construction around the first of 2007, now was the right time to go forward with opening the center.

Main Street Murfreesboro/Rutherford County Inc., the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area, the Center for Historic Preservation at MTSU, the city of Murfreesboro, Rutherford County and State Farm are partners in The Heritage. The city of Murfreesboro purchased The Heritage Center location for \$675,000. Main Street contributed \$25,000.

Additionally, it is taking between \$150,000 and \$200,000 in public and private donations to get the center off the ground.

Janelee Wise, executive director of Main Street, said the center will have a tremendous impact on tourism in Rutherford County and will keep the heritage tourist, who spends more than the average tourist, in the county longer.

“It is a vehicle to encourage tourists to stay here longer,” West said, “and if they stay here longer they will spend more money.

West said the average heritage tourist spends \$100 a day if he or she doesn't stay overnight. That number jumps to \$300 a day if they stay at a hotel.

These additional tourist dollars boosts sales tax revenues and help keep property taxes low.

“We were excited to hear about the Heritage Center,” said Mona Herring, director of the Convention and Visitors Bureau at the Rutherford County Chamber of Commerce. “We think it is going to be a fabulous addition to downtown. It is going to allow us when we have the welcome center to bring people to the (Public) Square and have them go to a specific space where they can be directed to the areas of the Square that are of historical significance.”

According to data released by the Travel Industry of America, the economic impact of

tourism in Rutherford County was \$195 million in 2005, up 10.3 percent from 2004.

Herring said The Heritage Center will increase tourism even more.

“We think it is going to be a valuable asset not only to downtown but to our whole tourism program,” Herring said. “With all of our growth, with Medical Center Parkway and Thompson Lane, we don’t want to lose our uniqueness we have on the Square and our place of history.”

The Heritage Center will house the Main Street offices and be open during normal business hours and Saturdays. Hours could be extended depending on traffic.

Business Editor Erin Edgemon may be reached at 869-0812 and at eedgemon@murfreesboropost.com.