

Saving Haverhill's past

By Mike LaBella Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, January 14, 2016 4:20 am

The Buttonwoods Museum is looking for space to house portions of the downtown's historic F.W. Woolworth Company lunch counter and stools while it raises money to refurbish pieces for public display.

Dating back to when the store opened in 1949, the counter where people were served food and ice cream was salvaged before the Woolworth building was demolished last year to make room for the new Harbor Place development.

Last year, a section of the lunch counter and four chrome-backed swiveling stools were shipped to the Smith Robertson Museum and Cultural Center in Jackson, Mississippi, for an exhibit focusing on a 1963 civil rights sit-in.

The rest of the roughly 60-foot-long counter and more than three dozen stools were given to the Buttonwoods Museum/Haverhill Historical Society by the Greater Haverhill Foundation. The foundation is local development group that bought the Woolworth building in partnership with the Planning Office for Urban Affairs and is building Harbor Place.

Peter Carbone, president of the board of the Buttonwoods Museum/Haverhill Historical Society, said one section of counter and 10 stools were refurbished at no cost by local carpenter Phil Lacroix, while the rest of the pieces were placed into a storage space donated by Peter Rosengard of Rosengard Moving Systems.

"Rosengard donated the space for more than a year, and we'd like to store the pieces somewhere else so he can have his space back," Carbone said.

The restored pieces were on public display in November as part of the HC Media float that was in the 51st annual VFW Santa Parade. Since then, those restored pieces have been stored at HC Media on Elm Street.

"We felt that we could help by storing the pieces temporarily until they find more permanent storage," said Darlene Beal, director of HC Media.



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MARY SCHWALM/Staff file photo Carpenter Phil LaCroix is reflected in a mirror as he removes it from behind the soda fountain counter of the old Woolworth building. The city is looking for a place to keep a piece of the counter and stools that were removed from the building before it was demolished.

The Santa Parade also featured a float by Career Resources Corporation that recreated the days of the old Woolworth soda counter.

The Woolworth store opened in 1949, closed in early 1970 and was vacant since then. It was demolished earlier this year to make way for Harbor Place, a sprawling downtown redevelopment project that will include a UMass Lowell satellite campus.

Carbone said the goal is to find a location where the refurbished Woolworth counter and stools can be on permanent display in the city. Some sections of counter and stools may have to be sold or auctioned off to pay to restore other pieces, he said.

"This counter top, in the big picture, is part of Haverhill's recent history," Carbone said.

Carbone said the pieces are heavy and that an ideal storage area would provide 500 to 750 square feet of space and be accessible to Lacroix, whose work to refurbish the other pieces may take more than a year.

"First floor or walk in is preferable as the pieces are very heavy," Carbone said, adding that other items in storage include a few mirrors from the Woolworth counter and some art-deco style decorative metal pieces.

Carbone said the restoration would take place in Lacroix's workshop because the counter comes in pieces.

Carbone said Lacroix plans to work on each eight-foot section at a time so he would need access to the storage area, which could be in Haverhill or a nearby community.

"And we'd like to pay Phil for his time, although so far he's done the work for free," Carbone said. "We'd like to keep some of the refurbished pieces for permanent display and more than likely we'll have to sell the rest, but we have not decided yet. We know we will have to sell some of it to make some money to restore the rest."

Anyone interested in donated storage space for this project is asked to contact Carbone at peteracarbone@yahoo.com or at 508-320-7710.

PIECES OF THE PAST

One section of counter from the lunch area of the old Woolworth building

10 stools that people used to sit at the counter

The counter and stools were refurbished at no cost by local carpenter Phil Lacroix.