



Mike White, left, Tim White, and Jon Pashong, at the Wilson House on Saturday, March 31, 2018. (John Hickey/Buffalo News)

New owners strive to preserve historical integrity at 1844 Wilson House

By Teresa Sharp | *Published April 7, 2018*

The heartbeat of a community reverberates within the walls of its most historic buildings. If a community is fortunate, its generous sons and daughters step up to preserve and protect these precious gems, virtual showcases for timeless skills and visions. The Town of Wilson, celebrating its 200th anniversary this year, is one such community and it has found dedicated residents willing to reclaim and rejuvenate an 1844 icon, intent on preserving its historical integrity.

The White brothers, Tim and Christopher, along with longtime family friend Jon Pashong, will tentatively reopen their Wilson House Restaurant and Inn at 300 Lake St. on April 20 after a year and a half of painstaking renovations.

“This far exceeded our expectations,” Tim White said. “We didn’t have an architect or an exact plan in mind when we started, but the building kind of spoke to us. The history was there – it was just a matter of showcasing it. That’s what it’s all about, bringing this building back to life. We’re very excited.”

About 30 workers from the local trades gathered recently for a photo and to check the cohesive progress their individual contributions had helped make possible. Several more were involved, but unable to make the impromptu meeting.

“They all had a hand in it at one time or another,” said White.

“Everybody from painters to electricians to masons to woodworkers. They were all happy to have had a hand in putting this place back together. Some we called to help, and some just popped in.

“We wanted to keep the integrity of this building, the history of it – that became the theme, to tie the old in with the new,” White added. “We wanted to showcase what’s here in Wilson now and

what's been here. So many people have brought in old, beautiful photographs. We'll be showcasing quite a few of them, too."

The building was constructed in 1844 as the home of Luther Wilson, eldest son of Wilson founder Reuben Wilson and it became the Wilsonian Club in the 1920s and a restaurant after World War II.





The historic Wilson House has long been a popular bar and eatery. (John Hickey/ Buffalo News)

John Cracchiola and Caren Ashkar operated the Wilson House for a decade, closing it down in December 2015. They had leased it from Norm O'Brien, who had owned the building for nearly three decades. O'Brien sold it to the two Whites and Pashong for roughly \$200,000 in 2016. White said they have spent at least double that amount renovating it.

The closure adversely affected this small lakeside community where not only tourists, but local residents dined, imbibed and hosted banquets at the Wilson House and various community organizations held their meetings throughout the year.

Family patriarch Mike White said, "Everybody is anxious for it to be opened. We've got some bookings already for parties. "We had a lot of friends come in to help. Just about everybody in town's stopped in. This has been a cornerstone of the town for years and suddenly, it was closed. Everybody's anxious for it to be opened."

Tim White said last week, "We have a punch list with several small items to do, but most of the major work has been completed. We're in the home stretch."

Plans call for the restaurant to be open for lunch and dinner, and a late-night menu will also be offered, he said. The establishment will be open until 10 p.m. Sunday through Wednesday, and until midnight Thursday through Saturday, year-round. The menu is described as “traditional American,” under the guidance of chef Brandon Salvatore.

“We’ll be a little more involved (in the management) and it brings a new excitement for us,” White said. “We’ll have a few people who have quite a bit of experience in the restaurant business here and we’ll be there for support.”

He said people have been booking banquets, parties, etc., already, by calling 751-9188.

Tackling the outside renovation work on the iconic, cobblestone structure was made easier by the family’s background. Mike White, a Wilson native, started M.H. White Siding and Roofing Co. Tim White said the renovation called for new siding, roofing and gutters.

“We also put a new deck on the back, off the kitchen, for upstairs ingress,” he said. “We’ll have dining on the porch in front, and plan to put heaters out there to extend its use from spring through fall.”

White said they started renovations Thanksgiving weekend of 2016. They started by cleaning up the basement and turning it into a fully functioning area, and simply worked their way up, first making the whole main flooring level and installing new electrical and duct work.

They took the former bar area on the north end of building and

turned it into a dining room, which seats 40 to 50. They carpeted this room, but preserved old maple flooring in the new bar area.

“We moved the bar area to the middle of the building, and created a 35-foot bar of red oak which winds through a new stone archway and then makes a turn into the former banquet room,” White said. “The bar was kiln-dried on site and it took several months. Some local guys put it all together.

“We got rid of the French doors that used to separate the dining room from the banquet room and now the bar ties the two rooms together. We divided the old banquet room with three French doors that can be closed for private parties or opened to expand the space. I’d say we can seat about 40 in the new bar area and 50 in the extension and another 75 in the private banquet room.”

The inn portion of the establishment includes 7 rooms upstairs, each with its own bathroom. One room even has 3 beds.

“When you’re looking at the building from the outside, you don’t realize how big it is upstairs,” White said. “We painted, carpeted, put in new tiles, new furniture and a flat-screen television in each room. We tried to make it comfortable and homey.”



Over the bar, you can see the exposed original cobblestone wall from 1844 that has been preserved. (John Hickey/Buffalo News)

While the tentative opening day is April 20 for the general public, the restaurant hosted its first banquet Saturday when the Wilson Historical Society celebrated its sold-out Bicentennial Kickoff Dinner with more than 150 guests.

It was a fitting start for a newly renovated, 175-year-old building.

In the throes of renovations, “We started poking holes in the inside walls and found the original structure,” White said of one of their most profound discoveries. “We said, ‘Wow. Look at this. Let’s showcase this.’ The walls had been beautifully preserved.

“We just opened up more and more of the old walls and knew this was the original structure – stone and wood and brick, with original wooden lintels above the doors and windows that had been covered up,” White recalled. “I wouldn’t call the stones

‘cobblestones’ because they’re larger than that. They were whatever they could find locally, from the beach or the farm fields. They were in surprisingly good shape and we cleaned them up with sandblasting and put on a layer of clear lacquer to make them pop.

“One thing led to another,” he added. “Ideas evolved. We never had an architect. We had a lot of people involved here, and with their experience, it all came together.

“When you’re dealing with such an old building, as you work, you try and preserve this, try and save that,” White said. “It’s a 175-year-old building. Trying to keep the old but bring in the new was a challenge, but a fun challenge.”

While White, his brother Christopher and longtime family friend Pashong are the owners, White said his entire family has been very supportive, including parents Mike and Loretta and brothers Kevin and Michael.

“And, we had an enormous amount of support from the community,” he added. “Everybody’s excited about this.”