

A KEY OLD BUILDING: WHAT'S TO BE DONE?

Rebuilding the future of the Carnegie Library

BY NEIL HOPWOOD

editor

nhopwood@newsandpress.com

At first the Carnegie Library appeared completely empty, though the front door was open.

A quick stroll through the first floor revealed the same tell-tale signs of water damage that had been there for some time—namely the gaping hole left in the floor under where the library's ornate tin ceiling had been eaten away by a

THE HISTORY

Carnegie library buildings in South Carolina

Between 1905 and 1916 sixteen cities or towns in South Carolina applied to the Carnegie Corporation for grants to aid in the construction of public library buildings.

Fourteen of the applicants received grants ranging from \$5,000 to \$18,700, including Sumter, Camden, Marion, Latta and of course, Darlington, whose building was opened in 1920.

Born to a poor Scottish family that immigrated to the United States, Andrew Carnegie (pictured) became a powerful businessman and a leading force in the American steel industry. He believed the rich had an obligation to help society.



use a fire engine to provide access to the roof, which was thought to be inaccessible.

The man calling out from the roof was Benjamin Sloop Whitener, an architect from Cummings & McCrady, Inc.

Elementary School where she taught music. The young Whitener grew up in Darlington, just down the street from the Carnegie Library.

Whitener, who spent much

library is one of the few Carnegie libraries left in the Pee Dee, and is on the National Register of Historic Places.

A big part of Whitener's job is prioritizing what needs to be done, especially since it's

ferred because it provides quite a stunning view of the city through the tops of the unique, period windows. But the sunken foundation also begs for water problems.

"There's no drainage sys-



Benjamin Whitener, an architect from Cummings & McCrady, Inc. Architects in Charleston, has been hired to assess what's needed to repair the Carnegie Library in Darlington, which has been vacant about 15 years, during which time the building has dete-

riorated. Whitener actually hails from Darlington, which gives him a personal interest in seeing the building restored for public use. He is pictured here on the library's roof overlooking North Main Street. PHOTO NEIL HOPWOOD

leaky roof.

A cursory examination of the bottom floor turned up nothing as well, except for the same debris and dust that make it hard to imagine that the patrons once quietly roamed it in search of the perfect book.

Back outside, a voice suddenly sounded from high above, and moments later a face peered over the side of the library's roof, which was quite surprising considering the city had planned that same day to

Architects in Charleston. His firm has been hired by the City of Darlington to assess what kind of repairs are needed to restore the once-stately Carnegie Library and help determine a logical plan of action to accomplish the repairs. Readers may also recognize his last name, considering that his father is Rev. Olin Whitener, formerly of Darlington Presbyterian Church, and his mother is Ruth Ann Whitener, formerly of Brunson-Dargan

of this past Thursday checking out the library for a second time, was rooting around when he found a hatch leading to the roof. Once on the roof, he determined that it was in pretty good shape. It had been installed by Darlington County to protect the library from further water damage.

The city has decided that saving and restoring the Carnegie Library is one of its priority projects, and a committee has been established to move the project forward. The

going to be quite a feat to find the money for the restoration. Probably first on Whitener's priority list is improving the building's water carry off systems, which in some areas are still allowing water to enter the structure and damage it.

"You have to make sure the water is staying out, because that's the worst harm for an old building like this one," Whitener pointed out.

By design the building was constructed on a sunken foundation, which Carnegie pre-

tem around the perimeter, so all the water is coming in through the walls," he said.

A second priority would be solving "life safety" issues, such as the gaping hole in the floor, or other troubled floorboards that could cause sudden collapses.

Considering the historic nature of the building, Whitener is also surveying the building's smaller details, such as materials used in its windows,

Darlington's old Carnegie Library in need of restoration

Continued from page 1B

bricks, and walls. Just doing that provides a bit of a history lesson, as parts of the library have been built and removed in different eras, leading Whitener to find walls inside walls, and multiple layers of paint, much of it peeling and falling to the floor.

"There are major paint

trical, mechanical and plumbing systems would probably have to be completely rebuilt. A look in the 60-ampere fuse box proves that point—the fuse box looks like something Thomas Edison could have designed.

"You could have that on display in a museum," Whitener



This hole is the most obvious example of what's going to take money to fix in the Carnegie Library. The hole was the result of a leaky roof that pooled water in one spot on the top floor for years. The roof has since been replaced but the leak damage remains.

chemistry problems throughout the building," Whitener said. "There were paints used in the early 1900s that you would buy in a powder and mix them onsite. It was great paint but what nobody knew was you were supposed to wash it off if you painted over it. Nobody did. It gets kind of difficult to remedy."

Despite the many problems, Whitener was thrilled with the level of craftsmanship apparent throughout the building. A front area lined by built-in book cabinets could awe the public once again, he said.

"People used to have pride when they built public buildings," he said. "This shows you that pride. The building has such an awesome character. Just look at the baseboards. It's a three part baseboard—you don't see that anymore. It's great craftsmanship."

But just about everything in the building needs major work. For example, the building's elec-

trical, mechanical and plumbing systems would probably have to be completely rebuilt. A look in the 60-ampere fuse box proves that point—the fuse box looks like something Thomas Edison could have designed.

trical, mechanical and plumbing systems would probably have to be completely rebuilt. A look in the 60-ampere fuse box proves that point—the fuse box looks like something Thomas Edison could have designed.

trical, mechanical and plumbing systems would probably have to be completely rebuilt. A look in the 60-ampere fuse box proves that point—the fuse box looks like something Thomas Edison could have designed.

trical, mechanical and plumbing systems would probably have to be completely rebuilt. A look in the 60-ampere fuse box proves that point—the fuse box looks like something Thomas Edison could have designed.



Council member Gloria Hines, Darlington City Planner/Assistant City Manager Howard Garland, Mary Demetrious of the St. John's Heritage Foundation and J.C. Daniel Center, and architect Benjamin

Whitener in front of the Carnegie Library this past week. Hines and Demetrious are in favor of transforming the library into a fine arts center and/or museum. PHOTO NEIL HOPWOOD

perhaps its greatest asset but would also contribute to the final cost.

"There's a lot of work, I'm not going to lie," Whitener said. "It's a big job but it's doable. Every surface has to be touched a few times."

Garland was interested in the final cost because the city will be applying for grants to pay for the restoration. He suggested the city could keep costs down by carefully selecting its expenditures.

City Council member Gloria Hines joined the tour at some point, and repeated her stance that the library could best serve the community as a fine arts center or museum. The time for

planning is over—it's time for action, she said.

"The deterioration will get worse and then it will cost more money [if we continue to delay]," Hines said.

Mary Demetrious of the St. John's Heritage Foundation and J.C. Daniel Center, who is also a committee member on the Carnegie project, said that a fine arts type center would greatly complement the adjacent J.C. Daniel Center, new library, St. John's Elementary School grounds, Dargan Memorial Amphitheatre and other assets.

"We want to create an educational, cultural district," Demetrious said.

Infighting over what would be the best use for the library has delayed the project for years, she said, and that needs to stop. Others have proposed using the building as a restaurant or private office space. She pointed to Florence, which recently built a new library and then quickly moved forward with plans for its own fine arts center.

"We were talking about doing that 18 years ago, how much time have we lost?" she asked.

Later, back on the roof, this time accompanied by a reporter, Whitener discussed the roof's drainage system and some water problems along the edge

of the roof. But he then turned his attention to the beautiful view of downtown Darlington, and remembered his university thesis, which dealt with the former B.C. Moore's building and its potential to serve as mixed commercial/residential space.

At the time the idea fell on deaf ears, but ironically the city has since embraced the concept and entered into a long-term relationship with a private developer to establish loft style apartments, in some cases above commercial space.

"I grew up here and I'd love to see it come back to life," Whitener said.

That's one sentiment everybody can agree on.