

The Mount Airy Museum of Regional History opened her doors for the first time in almost six months last weekend.

We scrambled to put spring decorations away in the gift shop; to set up hand sanitation stations; to shine up the stainless steel of the elevator doors; to make sure the exhibit spaces were fresh and dusted and presentable for our guests. We joked that we'd forgotten how to be open.

And we wondered if anyone would come. Would a history museum be on the list of places to go for the folks out and about for Labor Day?

We needn't have worried. Come Saturday morning, as we prepared to unlock the doors, there were folks waiting in the courtyard!

This year, 2020, was to have been the beginning of an exciting renovation for the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History. The first major overhaul and expansion of exhibits in more than a decade.

Work began in December 2019 and we were moving ahead slowly as the New Year's Eve Pajama Rama Party happened, followed by some birthday party rentals and a wedding. We were carefully packing artifacts away when COVID-19 arrived on American shores.

The work was just getting messy when Gov. Cooper closed museums in an abundance of caution. We hunkered down, determined to take advantage of the down time to barrel ahead with the work.

We got really messy when we had a crew cut through 110-year-old brick walls to make new pathways and doors. We've been frustrated the work hasn't progressed on the original schedule but with so many businesses closed out of safety for their employees or turned to making protective equipment for medical personnel, we understood.

We were, I will admit, caught happily off-guard when Gov. Cooper announced on Sept. 1 that museums could open for the first time since March.

There are more than 35,000 active museums in the US according to the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Most of them are historical societies, historic houses and sites (48%) and Surry County is blessed to have several from the Gertrude Smith and William Alfred Moore houses in Mount Airy to the Edwards-Franklin House out in the county.

Of that number, though, only 7.5% are history museums.

If you've never been to the museum or if it's been a while, we invite you to come back. We have four floors highlighting the stories of the women and men who built the communities in this region, took the risks to establish industries, raised tobacco and cattle, grapes and children.

Some of the earliest history here involves the Saura tribe of Native Americans who lived across the land we call Surry, Stokes, Forsyth, Wilkes, and Yadkin counties today.

Exhibits tell of the momentous industries; the granite quarry that has provided the materials for monuments, houses, and street curbs for 140 years; tobacco farming and manufacture of cigars and snuff that kept families clothed and fed; winemaking from colonial times until North Carolina was the leading producer in 1900; textiles that turned out long johns and baby onesies, socks and blankets that kept American soldiers warm through two World Wars and into Korea.

But there are exhibits here that speak of individuals, Donna's music, Andy's laughter, the Bunkers' resilience. We share the stories of the men who established a much-needed fire department and of the anguish caused by the tragic Flat Rock Elementary School blaze.

We're adding more stories as the renovation work progresses. Stories that were not as readily accessible when the museum was first conceived and for which we have precious few artifacts. But we know the stories of some of the very early families now who helped open the Great

Wagon Road from Philadelphia. We know the stories of some of the families who came down that road at great personal peril to carve the communities we live in today from the virgin timberland.

There is still a lot of history to learn and tell and we hope you'll help us do that. If you have items that tell the stories of this region, the families and businesses, we'd love a chance to scan and record them, to add them to our collection if you are so inclined. Come on out and visit us. We're so very glad to be open to you all again.

for the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History with 22 years in journalism before joining the museum staff. She and her family moved to Mount Airy in 2005 from Pennsylvania where she was also involved with museums and history tours. She can be reached at KRSmith@NorthCarolinaMuseum.org or by calling 336-786-4478 x228