feltner museum

Posted: August 10, 2016

By Amy Alonzo

The Winchester Star

CAPTIONS TO PICTURES IN THE ARTICLE

Shenandoah University President Tracy Fitzsimmons (left) talks with Helen and Wilbur Feltner before a 2011 gifting ceremony at 9 Court Square in Winchester. Wilbur Feltner and family gifted the Wibur M. Feltner building to Shenandoah University. Feltner helped bring the college to Winchester in 1960. (Photo by Ginger Perry/The Winchester Star)

The Wibur M. Feltner building (right) is seen in 2011 on the Loudoun Street Mall in Winchester. (Photo by Ginger Perry/The Winchester Star)

Some of the Wilbur and Helen Feltner collection of whale oil and kerosene lamps. (Photo by Ginger Perry/The Winchester Star)

Original paintings by Mort Kunstler hang in The Feltner Museum at 9 Court Square in 2011. These three paintings have the Feltner building in them. From left are “After the Snow,” “The Palace Bar,” and “Iron Horses, Men of Steel.” (Photo by Ginger Perry/The Winchester Star)

This plaque is in the parking lot south of the Wilbur M. Feltner Building. (Photo by Scott Mason/The Winchester Star)

ARTICLE BEGINS HERE

WINCHESTER — The Feltner private art and antiques collection — loaned in 2011 for 10 years to Shenandoah University for public display and educational purposes — is being dismantled, and some pieces have been sold at auction.

The Feltner Museum at 9 Court Square in downtown Winchester, which housed the pieces and was once open to the public on a limited basis, is no longer open.

SU officials declined to give a reporter a tour of the former gallery space. School officials also declined to comment on the Feltners’ decision to sell the artwork and antiques. The Feltners also declined to comment.

Public access to the collection was part of an agreement when the Feltner Community Foundation deeded the property, valued at $4 million, to SU on April 1, 2011, according to previous articles in The Winchester Star.

The collection was amassed by Clarke County native and former bank executive Wilbur Feltner and his wife, Helen. It included original paintings, some depicting downtown Winchester, by Mort Kunstler, whose work has focused on the Civil War.

"It really isn’t a museum to see anymore," said an SU employee who answered the phone recently when asked about arranging a tour. "For the most part, the rooms are empty now."

Feltner, a 1938 Clarke County High School graduate, was one of the local community leaders who worked to move SU to Winchester from Dayton in 1960. He went on to serve with SU’s board of trustees from 1964 to 1992.

At the time, Feltner’s gift of 9 Court Square to SU was the single largest property donation in university history, according to information on SU’s alumni association’s website.

In a speech accepting the donation, the context of which was published on The Star’s editorial page on April 4, 2011, SU President Tracy Fitzsimmons said, "Shenandoah looks forward to working with the Feltner Community Foundation, who will maintain ownership of the collections, on finding new ways to share this art in our academic program and with the community at large."

Fitzsimmons later added in the speech: "I accept this astounding gift and offer our promise to steward these resources as you would expect."

She also said the university was committed to maintaining the integrity of the Feltner Museum.

According to previous articles in The Star, SU’s Office of Alumni Affairs moved into 14 offices on the second and third floors of the building.

Basement space was designated for meetings and conferences, and the first floor was reserved as a museum for the Feltner collection boasting about 350 beer steins from around the world, a similar number of glass oil lamps, miniature tea sets, wooden nutcrackers, a room dedicated to Civil War memorabilia and nine original Kunstler paintings.

The paintings include "Iron Horses, Men of Steel" (depicting the outside of 9 Court Square in 1861) and "The Palace Bar" (one of the seven buildings of the original 9 Court Square complex).

In an April 7, 2011, interview in The Star, Fitzsimmons was quoted as saying the university would work closely with the Old Court House Civil War Museum, Museum of the Shenandoah Valley, Shenandoah Valley Discovery Museum and Shenandoah Arts Council, so they would know when the museum was open to the public.

Recently, however, local museum and tourism agency workers were surprised to hear the museum is now closed.

A man at the Old Court House Civil War Museum, who declined to give his name but identified himself as the director of interpretation, said he was unaware of the gallery closing. He said he remembered "being very impressed both with the content as well as the presentation."

Shenandoah Arts Council Executive Director Tammie Limoges, Shenandoah Valley Discovery Museum Executive Director Mary Braun, museum Deputy Director of Community Relations Julie Armel, Downtown Manager Jennifer Bell and Winchester-Frederick County Convention & Visitors Bureau Director Justin Kerns also recently said they were not aware of any changes in the building’s status.

"To my knowledge, it’s a museum that’s open on limited hours," Bell said. "I hadn’t heard that anything had changed."

Winchester-based Headley’s Auctions listed several of the museum’s pieces for sale at its Dec. 3, 2015, auction.

"Our December 3 auction features many items as The Museum at 9 Court Square in Winchester, Va., does a deaccession of several collections that include two Mort Kunstler oil paintings, John Chumley watercolor, other original art and prints," according to an advertisement the company ran in The Star.

Joe Headley Jr. said recently that the Feltners have been selling items that were housed at the museum "for a while."

"Even though it was a museum, it was the passion of Mr. and Mrs. Feltner," Headley said.

9 Court Square comprises seven buildings dating to the 19th century that were combined to form one 17,600-square-foot building during a $2.8 million renovation in 1997.

The project started in 1995 when Feltner, then president of Farmers & Merchants Bank-Winchester, announced the renovation as part of a "larger goal to keep Old Town Winchester a hub of local commerce and activity," he is quoted as saying in an April 2, 2011, article in The Star.

9 Court Square sits on the first public lots surveyed by James Wood in 1744 in what was then called Frederick Town. The seven buildings that comprised the complex included the first part of the Frederick County Records Room, built in 1832; an addition constructed in 1940; The Palace Bar, a Federal-style building constructed between 1830 and 1840; and the home of The Winchester News, as well as a power company, retailer and print shop, according to an April 2, 2011, article in The Star.

In 1994, the 9 Court Square buildings — which once housed Frederick County government offices — were primed for demolition by the county government as it sought to build a new office complex, according to an Aug. 17, 1994, article in The Star.

"F&M Bank acquired the properties as part of a three-way land swap that prevented the demolition of the buildings and kept the Frederick County government offices in Winchester," according to an April 2, 2011, article in The Star.

"In the deal, the county government moved its offices to their present site at 107 N. Kent St., the city government gave the bank two parking lots, and the bank took ownership of the former county office building," the April 2, 2011, article states. "The bank also acquired the former J.C. Penney building (since demolished), the parking lot behind Rouss City Hall, and a city parking lot on North Cameron Street in exchange for the land on Kent Street."

"During the two-year renovation, the seven buildings and their four sections were joined for the first time," the April 2, 2011, article states.

The property’s assessed value now stands at about $4.6 million, according to city records.

— Contact Amy Alonzo at aalonzo@winchesterstar.com