

Artist's vision of museum at old Moncure school grows

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MONCURE — A local artist is on his way to turning a painful reminder of a fatal fire into a museum of art for the town — and he's getting much more of a museum than he had planned.

A bright new sign proclaims the site of a crumbling old building on Old U.S. 1 as the "Future Site of Moncure Museum of Art."

The building, built in 1927, was Moncure High School, and for decades, it drew pupils from far-flung rural hamlets such as Deep River and Brookhaven. At one point, there were at least two additional buildings on the property — a "teacherage" and an agricultural school.

Moncure High closed in 1958 when a new school opened nearby, and for a time, the building stood abandoned until it eventually was converted into a private residence.

In 1999, a fire took the lives of a mother and daughter living in the old school. Local residents now drive past the remains of the building and shudder at the eyesore, the safety hazard and the gruesome reminder.

Artist Lyle Estill wants to change all that. Estill, who has a studio about one-half mile from the old school, has long been interested in turning Moncure into an artistic Mecca.

Five artists work in his renovated roadside gas station, dubbed The Moncure Chessworks, in every medium from canvas to concrete.

Estill makes huge chess sets from scrap metal, with the pawns typically about knee-high and the kings and queens about shoulder height.

Campaign for funds

For several years, he has been refurbishing old houses in the area and renting them to artists.

The old school stands at the center of his efforts, and Estill persuaded the husband of the deceased woman to deed the 2.2-acre property over to the Moncure Museum of Art.

Then he launched a campaign to raise some funds.

"I was out trying to raise money for my little 1,200-square-foot country crossroads museum that I wanted to build," Estill said, "and I needed about \$100,000. I'd raised \$13,000 so far, so I had another \$90,000 to go. And I was calling foundations."

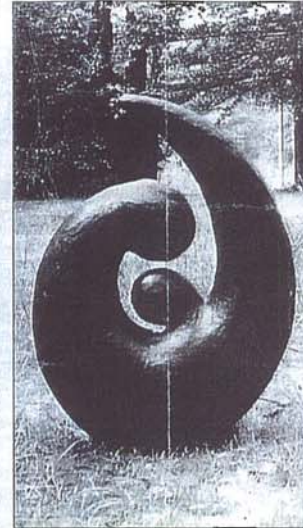
Estill called the School of Art at N.C. State and got a pledge for a type of contribution he hadn't expected or solicited. A permanent exhibit was suggested for the new facility, one that expanded the scope of his vision considerably.



"The project went from my little idea to a 4,400-square-foot monstrosity," he said, "but it's a better idea. It has more sustain-

ability."

The exhibit to be housed under the new roof — whenever a new roof can be had —



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

A sculpture, "Mother and Child" (above), will be erected in front of the new Moncure Museum of Art to commemorate the mother and daughter who were killed in a 1999 fire at the building. The piece was created by Molly Sawyer, an Atlanta-based sculptor, out of steel and concrete. "The Pharisees and Sadducees" (at left) is part of the Annie Hooper Bequest currently being stored in Raleigh, which will become a permanent exhibit.

is the Annie Hooper Bequest, a collection currently in storage in Raleigh.

The collection is in storage because it comprises 5,000 pieces of driftwood — driftwood that's carved, dressed, covered in putty, seashells and cement and painted to represent scenes from the Bible.

Biblical scenes depicted

Annie Hooper spent most of her life — 1897-1986 — in Buxton near Cape Hatteras on the Outer Banks. During her childhood, her house bustled with people as she was one of 13 children and her family took in 14 foster children.

In adulthood, she had one child, who grew up and moved out. And so for the last 35 years of her life, she filled all the rooms of her house and one outbuilding with biblical scenes and characters made from driftwood that she picked up from the

beach.

Hebrews followed Moses and the pillar of fire from Hooper's sun porch to the promised land. Dancers and musicians at Belshazzar's feast reveled beneath the Handwriting on the Wall in an upstairs bathroom. Daniel prayed among 20 lions in an outbuilding. The golden calf was worshiped in the middle of the kitchen floor.

In order to walk around in the house at all, Hooper created pathways through the teeming masses and lined them with herds of sheep and flocks of angels. She separated the scenes with strings of tinsel and bouquets of plastic flowers. When the floor was full, she put figures on top of and underneath furniture, in closets and hallways and down the stairs.

"You have to look at these pieces," Estill said. "They have eyes and eyebrows and 10 fingers. Each one is an individual sculpture. You look at these and they look back at you."

Scale model shows exhibit

Estill has built a scale model showing how the pieces will be exhibited — far more comfortably, it is hoped, than in their original showcase: Around the walls of the room, he has posted small signs, "Exodus," for example, and "The Resurrection and Ascension." A mountain in the center of the floor will be built for the Sermon on the Mount.

"The Sermon on the Mount alone has 300 pieces," Estill said.

All told, Hooper illustrated about 300 stories and lessons from the Bible, and it remains to be seen how much of that will be accommodated by the planned facility. The newly created board of directors is taking this one step at a time.

Phase 1, to be completed in about two years, will restore the school to its original size and dimensions. It will be opened for local art exhibits and for public use as community space.

Phase 2 will be considerably larger and will house the Annie Hooper Bequest, or at least most of it. Estill's model assumes about 3,500 figures. Current projections call for completion of that phase in about five years.

One piece of artwork already has been obtained for the project. A concrete and steel sculpture from the Art on Weaver display will stand in the yard in front of the new museum.

Called "Mother and Child," it will commemorate the two who were killed in the fire that destroyed the school. The purchase of the sculpture was made possible by a grant from Chatham County Travel and Tourism.

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