

Published April 11, 2008

State to take over historic structure

Matt Batcheldor

Bigelow House

OLYMPIA — The city's oldest home, Bigelow House, is on its way to joining Washington's state parks.

State parks department officials toured the circa-1860 house Thursday afternoon, chronicling its inventory. The house served more than four generations of the Bigelow family before becoming a nonprofit museum. The state is finalizing the terms to take over ownership and upkeep of the property.

"It's hard to compare it to many sites," said Steve Wang, interpretive program manager for the state parks department. The state already operates some historic homes with local significance, but Bigelow House has statewide roots, he said.

Bigelow House soon will benefit from a three-way partnership. The state will own it and lend financial support and promotion.

City of Olympia maintenance workers will continue to maintain the grounds. And staff and volunteers of the Bigelow House Preservation Association will continue to give tours and raise money for the building.

"We still need community support through donations and memberships," said Shanna Stevenson, a board member of the preservation association.

Museum director Karen Johnson will remain in her job.

The preservation association has been looking for extra support to fix up the house, which has a rotting front porch. The house had been running on a budget of \$25,000 to \$30,000 per year.

The state budget that was recently passed includes \$100,000 for the museum.

"For people who are concerned about the longevity of the house as a public museum, it's the way to go," she said.

Johnson led the officials on a tour of the home, a tour available to anyone by appointment or on Saturdays and Sundays from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

Besides being locally significant, it's intertwined with the history of the state.

She told them the story of Daniel Bigelow, who came over the Oregon Trail during the 1850s to Olympia in what then was the Oregon Territory. He transported a huge wooden desk he used to help write the territorial constitution for Washington Territory, the predecessor of the state of Washington. He married Ann Elizabeth White and they raised eight children in the house, as an old photograph shows. It was the first of more than four generations of Bigelows who still live in the area.

Bigelow planted the Carpenter Gothic house on Glass Avenue, just off East Bay Drive.

"It's so important to Olympia on so many levels," Stevenson said.

"It's really essentially Olympia's history, too."

Matt Batcheldor covers the city of Olympia for The Olympian. He can be reached at 360-704-6869 or mbatcheldor@theolympian.com.