

Life Below the Floodplain

Acacia Lodge undergoes repairs, renovations after second flooding in three years.

By **Derek B. Johnson/The Connection**
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These days, the Acacia Lodge in Clifton is sitting just behind its regular spot these days, lifted up 3 feet high next door on property owned by the Clifton Betterment Association.

A small construction fence outlines the crater where the house once stood, as crews continue the work that they began shortly before Tropical Storm Hanna rolled through Northern Virginia, swelling local rivers which topped over to areas of land below the floodplain.

The Acacia Lodge was situated in one such area, and when Hanna was finished soaking the region, it left the outside and inside of the Masonic lodge flooded with water for the second time in three years. A similar incident happened in 2006, prompting the Masons of Acacia Lodge No. 16 to plan for over \$110,000 worth of renovations and repairs to the historic house, which was built in the 1800s. Ironically as work began several weeks before Hanna hit, the contents of the house were moved out to accommodate the repairs, saving them from flood damage.

"Part of our incentive for saving this building is because it's a valuable asset to this town," said Joe Jones, senior warden for the Masons who meet at the lodge.

THE BUILDING'S foundation had not been on a firm footing since being moved to its current location in 1920. Back then, Jones said, workers didn't have any code to follow in terms of the foundation. In order to keep the wooden beams at the bottom of the house from touching the soil and rotting, workers put large rocks underneath the new spot before rolling the lodge over it with tree trunks and a team of horses.

Over time, the stones sank into the ground along with the home. The end result was that after construction crews got a look at the beams they would be repairing, it was difficult to differentiate the damage caused by the recent floods from the damage caused by the sunken foundation and a century and a half of wear and tear.

William Baumbach, chairperson for the lodge's building committee, joked that his job up until the renovations consisted of making sure the light bulbs were changed. To save money on this job, Baumbach and some other Masons served as general contractors for the work.

"Once we get this major construction out of the way, it will probably be done with Masonic labor, too," he said.

The work itself was divided into two phases. Work on phase one, currently in progress, is designed to protect the lodge's foundations from any significant flood damage in the future. After a more solid foundation of concrete is poured into the lodge's original location, floodgates specially designed to let water in underneath the house then drain it out after the water recedes are being installed to prevent future flood damage to the house. A bathroom addition is



Photo by Derek B. Johnson/The Connection

Joe Jones and the Masons of Acacia Lodge No. 16 are having their meetings at the Henry Lodge in Fairfax while repairs and renovations are done to their regular meeting place.



Photo by Robbie Hammer/The Connection

The Acacia Lodge next to the railroad tracks in Clifton was built in the 1800s. It has been flooded periodically by storms, most recently in 2006 and 2008.



Photo by Robbie Hammer/The Connection

Tropical Storm Hanna left 2-3 inches of water on the lodge's first floor.

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also planned.

"Essentially what phase one does is keep the lodge from falling down," said Jones, who said he'd like to see the job completed before the new year, though he called that notion "ambitious."

Baumbach said because the money was coming in bit by bit, renovations would have to be staggered as funds became available. Though he said he hoped to have the building back on solid ground in the next few weeks, it would be some time before their work was completed.

"There's not a defined completion date. We'll never be complete for the next five to 10 years because we're piecemealing a lot of this out," said Baumbach.

PHASE TWO is designed to both replace some of the existing utilities of the lodge as well as several renovations and additions that the lodge's owners had been planning to do. Electrical wiring that was estimated by Jones to be from the early 20th century will be replaced. Nearby power lines had to be reconfigured and moved for safety reasons.

"When we get done with this, we want it to be a facility that is appropriate for other organizations to use," said Jones.

Last summer, the Masons started the Acacia Lodge Foundation to raise money to pay for renovations to the foundation and first floor to make way for a museum detailing the history of the Masonic lodge and the greater Clifton area. Brant Baber, counsel to the Acacia Foundation, said members would be reaching out to local businesses and groups like the Clifton Betterment Association and the Fairfax County History Commission for help in the next few weeks. The foundation itself has raised over \$13,000 for the project while members of Acacia and other Masonic lodges have raised approximately \$85,000. Parking cars during the Labor Day Car Show and selling barbecue and drinks during Clifton Day were two examples Baber gave of activities that members participated in to raise funds.

The museum itself would celebrate some of the historic aspects of both the Town of Clifton and lodge that has stood next to the railroad tracks for 88 years. Throughout those nearly nine decades, members say the history of the lodge is Clifton's as well. According to Baumbach, it was the first building in town to have electricity and a former member of their lodge went down with the Titanic.

"We don't have any definite plans about the museum other than it's going to contain very significant old Masonic free mason related artifacts," he said. "We definitely want the Town of Clifton to supply us with some Clifton stuff [as well]."

In the meantime, members of Acacia Lodge No. 16 meet at Henry Lodge in Fairfax, waiting for their old lodge to touch ground and open its doors again. When asked why the members decided to spend over \$100,000 in renovations for a 19th century house, Baber said lodge members could have sold the house and shared a lodge with another Masonic group. In the end, a combination of financial issues, the historic presence of the building and its Masonic connections won out.

"We investigated tearing down the building and then realized that it was a contributing factor to the historic buildings in town," said Baber. "We guesstimated what the cost would be to fix up the historic building versus selling it and buying something else, and we determined that the most cost effective avenue was repairing the building. We could have easily sold it and done what other lodges do which is share a building, but since we've been so

tightly connected with the Clifton community the past 87 years, we decided to stay there if we possibly could."



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