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COLLECTIONS STORAGE ASBESTOS ABATEMENT

By Sarah Newkirk, assistant director, Grover Museum

Like many small to medium sized historical organizations, the building our museum calls home was originally built for a different purpose. The [Grover Center](#), or Grover Museum as it was previously known, has operated out of a former Elks Lodge since 1981. While we are so grateful for our facility, its age and original layout have led to costly repairs, particularly a large-scale asbestos abatement project in 2018.

In the fall of 2015, the Shelby County Historical Society (SCHS) Board of Directors and staff began to work with the Indiana Historical Society and the Blue River Community Foundation to assess the structure, programming, and internal operations. Through these efforts, structural and organizational needs were identified and prioritized.

One of the first areas of concern was the possibility of friable asbestos in various areas of the museum. As it contains carcinogenic fibers, we understood the danger this substance posed to our staff and volunteers.

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Crumbling asbestos wrapping found on a pipe at the museum.

Built in 1951, our building had several rooms in the lower level of our facility with exposed piping wrapped in a paper-like substance. These spaces were originally used for storage and utility rooms when the building was owned by the Elks. When the historical society opened the museum, these areas morphed into storage rooms for our collections. More recently, we noticed the wrappings around the pipes were damaged and beginning to crumble. We consulted with a local contractor who advised that the substance we were seeing was likely asbestos.

While this was an obvious and immediate concern, we knew further evaluation was needed. Until that could be done, we prohibited volunteers from accessing the storage areas and limited the staff's access as much as possible. Additionally, barriers were placed to prevent people and objects from coming in contact with the pipes. After consulting with professionals, we learned that our health and the health of others was not at risk as long as the material wasn't disturbed.



Pictured here are some of the pipes above one of our storage rooms. A piece of insulation had detached from the wrapping and was hanging above a storage shelf.

Following this, we sought the advice of an asbestos abatement company which had been recommended by the contractor. We were informed that we were, in fact, dealing with asbestos and it was recommended we complete a full inspection of the building to determine if the substance was utilized elsewhere. We sought suggestions from local contractors and obtained quotes for an environmental inspection of the building and asbestos removal (abatement).

The cost of the project did not fit in our annual budget, so we applied for and received an IHS Heritage Support Grant, made possible by Lilly Endowment Inc., to complete the project. Our work began with a multi-day inspection that included a full asbestos investigation, asbestos air sampling, and air sampling for airborne mold spores. The countless samples were sent off to a lab for testing. Once the results came back, we were able to safely schedule asbestos abatement.



Close up of the asbestos fibers used in this particular type of wrapped insulation. We were particularly concerned with anyone coming into contact with this pipe due to the state of deterioration. We barricaded the pipe and only staff entered the room if absolutely necessary.

Going into this project, we knew there was potential for community members to feel uncomfortable visiting the museum if they heard we were planning asbestos abatement. We spoke at length with our chosen abatement company about the process they would use and the safety measures they would take. Even though we knew that guests would be safe to visit the main floor during the abatement process, we were aware they might question their safety if they saw individuals in hazmat suits exiting the rear of the building carrying hazardous waste bags. Therefore, we decided to close the facility while the work was being completed.

Originally, we planned to keep the artifacts in the rooms during the abatement process and have the company cover the shelving units before work began. We purchased a Nilfisk Vacuum with HEPA and ULPA filters and planned to clean each item as an additional safety measure after the work was completed. However, several puzzle pieces began falling into place earlier than expected and we realized an already planned remodel of these rooms could begin much earlier than expected. We made the choice to remove all the artifacts before the work began and complete the entire project, asbestos abatement and room remodel, over the course of the summer.

Once the artifacts were safely removed, the abatement company was able to begin their part of the project. They began by sealing a portion of our lower level with plastic and covering all vents so particles could not escape to other areas of the building. At this point, this area of our building was off-limits to anyone but the crew. Over the course of two days, the asbestos insulation was removed from our pipes. Clad in full hazmat suits, the crew wet small sections of the asbestos wrapped pipes and then cut the wet section away from the pipe. This mitigated the possibility of particles becoming airborne. Each section was placed in contamination bags and sealed. Each bag then went through a decontamination process before being removed from the building. Once the asbestos materials were removed, the crew cleaned the space with HEPA filtered vacuums and removed all plastic coverings before vacuuming again and turning the space over to us.



After the abatement and full collection storage remodel.

As rooms were repaired, cleaned, and painted over the following months, artifacts were housed in new storage containers thanks to an IHS Heritage Support Grants Mini Grant and stored on new metal shelves. A volunteer campaign was launched to build a base of volunteers to clean artifacts, complete condition reports, and properly store artifacts.

Without the support from IHS, through both advice and grants, we would have struggled to complete a project like this. The completion of this project not only ensures these spaces are safe for staff, volunteers, guests, and contractors, but also sets the stage for future projects.

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