

Douglas birthplace surpasses expectations

By Lucia Suarez

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BRANDON — A year after its opening, the Stephen A. Douglas Birthplace in Brandon surpassed the expectations of the historic site's organizers.

"In every aspect, the building has surpassed our expectations," said Janet Mondlak, executive director of the Brandon Area Chamber of Commerce. "Everything we wanted was completed."

The Stephen A. Douglas Birthplace open in mid-May last year after many renovations were to make it into a museum, community space and visitor's center. The historic building, as its name says, is the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln's friend and political rival Stephen Douglas.

Bernie Carr, president of the Stephen Douglas Board of Directors, said the goal of the site was to preserve the history of the building, which was owned by the Daughters of the American Revolution for over 90 years.

"We wanted to do more than just have it be about Stephen Douglas," Carr said. "We wanted it to be talking about the town."

The self-guided museum includes exhibits on Brandon's history including industry, business, architecture, tourism and immigration, the town's anti-slavery movement, the impact of the Civil War in Brandon and the story of Stephen A. Douglas. There is a growing collection of hundreds of old Brandon photographs donated by local residents.

"We are about to add more photos soon," Mondlak said. "The people who grew up in town like to look at the old photos."

Since it opened more than 1,200 people have visited the site, ranging from groups from local student groups, senior groups and visitors passing by.

"The biggest joy was seeing how many people came to visit," Mondlak said.

The busiest is the community room that is used by local groups for meetings and special events.

"We knew that the town needed more community space, but it wasn't until we looked at the calendar just how much," Mondlak said. "Just seeing these community groups, it's really rewarding."

"The fact that its become a community center is probably the most satisfying thing," Carr said.

The historical site is funded through donations, support memberships and the income from renting the community space and a commercial space on the second floor.

The site's Board of Directors are working to make the museum a more interactive space. This summer a new digital aspect will be incorporated for people who learn in different ways or do not have time to read everything on the walls, Mondlak said.

A small sound recorder was also purchased so they can record visitors wishing to share memories of Brandon's history that will be archived and available for visitors.

"It's a casual way to capture people, but a great way to capture memories," she said. "You never know who is coming in."

The Stephen A. Douglas Birthplace is located on 4 Grove St. in Brandon, at the corner of Routes 7 and 73. It is opened mid-May through mid-October, from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. or by previous arrangements. The visitor center is opened every day 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. For more information, call 247-6401.