

Historic restoration planned

BY HARPER SCOTT CLARK

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SALADO -- Robertson Plantation is about to get a massive new metal roof to replace the one put on by its original owner in the 1850s.

Austin architect Gregg Free delivered what he called his annual state of the plantation address to members of the Salado Historical Society Monday evening during a potluck supper at the Salado Civic Center.

More than 100 showed and packed the second floor banquet room wall to wall to hear Free talk.

Some 851 acres of land, the plantation house and numerous outbuildings from the mid-19th Century have been in the same family for more than 160 years.

'It is the most intact structure of its era in Texas,' said Free. 'It was completed around 1860 during the antebellum period.'

Free said the long-range plan is to restore the house in five to 10 years. He talked about the process room by room including restoration beneath the floors, in the attic, the roof, under the roof and in the ground. He even discussed individual stones and boards to see what historical significance they may have.

'These objects can lead us to understand the true history of the building better,' he said.

The roof has developed pinholes, Free said. An authentic copy is being fabricated so that when it's in place it will look like the original. The replica will be terne-coated steel like the original. Terne coating is an alloy of lead and tin that has excellent qualities for corrosive protection.

'The roof will come off on the first pretty day,' he said. 'When we finish it will stabilize the building. As we remove the old metal we will re-deck with plywood where necessary.'

Free said a lot of the original decking is 18-inch by 20-foot boards milled from virgin Texas timber. Some still has bark along one edge. Much of this is still in good shape.

'We will take our time and do it correctly,' Free said. 'Every thing we do will be documented and photographed before we do it, as we do it and after we are finished doing it. We are keeping sections of metal roofing for their color and for the way the joints are put together because it is a part of the history of roofing in Texas.'

Free said the Historic American Building Survey of 1936 recorded every aspect of the house.

'It was a Works Progress Administration program to keep architects, artists, photographers and historians working,' he said. 'They picked the most important buildings in every state and Robertson Plantation was one.'

There were 17 sheets of drawings and 10 photographs made. Free said he is having the drawings converted to AutoCAD to bring the restoration process into the 21st Century.

Robertson heirs Ambrose Sterling and Cile Cowan of Atlanta, brother and sister, attended Monday's event. One year ago Sterling spoke to the society and asked its members to become involved in making the plantation a tourist attraction.

Since then the society has volunteered time cleaning the building and putting it on tour.

Past president Jim Bienski said he was amazed at Monday's turnout. The organizers expected 50-60 and had to begin bringing in extra tables for the potluck supper as the crowd grew to nearly twice that.

'You have to be careful what you wish for,' Bienski joked. 'You may certainly get it.'

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Cut lines to photographs follow:

Harper Scott Clark/Telegram

Architect Gregg Free speaks to the Salado Historical Society on Monday about renovations that will begin shortly on the Robertson Plantation house in Salado.

Telegram file photo

Sterling Ambrose, a Robertson Plantation heir, stands on the front gallery of the manor house in May. Architect Gregg Free said the structure is the best preserved of its type in the state. The house was built in 1860.