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Exciting changes at Cortland Free Library

Renovation, new computer center in works

By KATIE HALL
Living and Leisure Editor

Kay Zaharis was tickled when construction crews tapped into the 1836 foundation of the Cortland Free Library — site of the former Cortland County Courthouse — unearthing huge boulders that held the building in the 1800s.

Zaharis, the library director, finds herself in a unique position — veering into the past as the 1926 building is renovated for a new elevator, and at the same time looking ahead as she sees a new public computer center being launched in January at the 32 Church Street library.

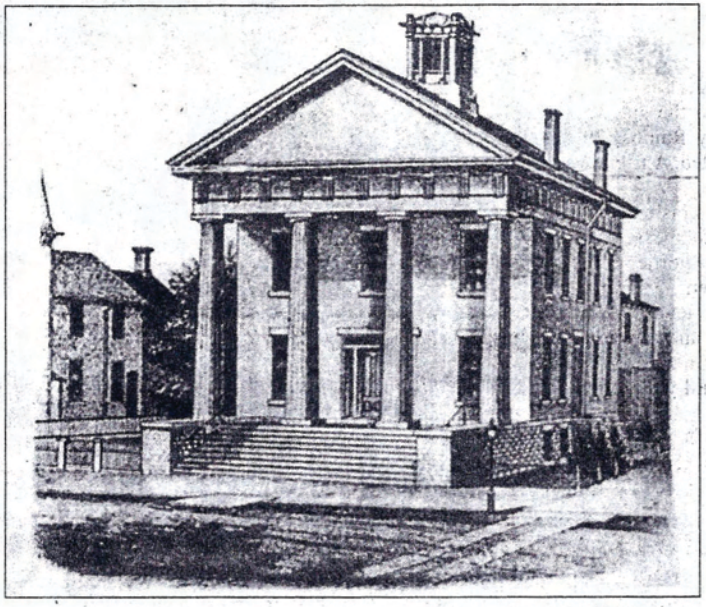
"This is a happening place. They say the library is the hub of the community and I am looking forward to that," said Zaharis.

Zaharis got a peek into the original foundation as 15 massive stones, 30 inches by 30 inches, were removed as construction workers made way for a new entryway into the Children's Room. The stones were part of the 1836 foundation of the former Cortland County Courthouse, that once stood at the current library locale at the corner of Church and Court streets.

"I like history," Zaharis said, pointing to a drawing of the courthouse from the Cortland County Historical Society. The courthouse burned down in 1924 and the Cortland Free Library was built there in 1926. Zaharis saved three of the boulders that will be displayed at the library's lawn.

"I'm just proud that I am in charge of this building. It's got so much behind us and I can see so much ahead of us," she said.

The Cortland Free Library, currently in the midst of a ten month renovation, will see a new elevator shaft, elevator and walkway installed adjacent to the Children's Room wall. Two public bathrooms will be added and two existing bathrooms will be renovated. Several windows along the back wall will be replaced with energy efficient windows and motion detector lights will be installed in the hallway leading to the elevator.



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The Cortland County Courthouse, depicted here in 1876, used to sit on the site of the Cortland Free Library. Part of the foundation of the courthouse has been uncovered during renovations to the library. The courthouse burned down in 1924.

"I think it's been very interesting," said Zaharis, as she unzipped plastic walls leading to construction zones and opened wooden construction doors to basement sites. Men from Paul Yaman Construction of Cortlandville were busy as staff and members of the public shared the space. "They have taken away like one third of the building," said Zaharis.

The project started in September and will be done in June. Architects Crawford & Stearns of Syracuse designed the project, which will cost $714,000. It is being paid for by a $392,000 grant from the New York State Library Construction Grant Program, $20,000 secured from Senator James L. Seward, and the remainder from the J.M. McDonald Foundation and various library investments and donations.

Library officials needed to install the elevator because the ramp, located outside the front of the building, is deteriorating and becoming dangerous, said Zaharis.

The parking lot also will be be redone and a lighted walkway will run from the parking lot to the Court Street entrance where the elevator will be. The entryway to the Children's Room is also getting a makeover, with its lift coming out and the glass foyer being replaced with a new door.

Diane Ames, president of the Board of Trustees, said the project doesn't include taking away the ramp at the front of the building. Library officials are researching ways to pay for that future project.

"Aside from this elevator project, something else new is coming down the pike ...We have received federal stimulus money to create a public computer center," Zaharis said.

The center, which is not part of the renovation project, will offer free basic to advanced computer training that will include introduction to the Internet, how to help with job searches, resume-writing workshops, development of interview skills, help with using Microsoft Word and other programs.

Called the "tech/KNOWLEDGE public computer center," it will offer high speed Internet access, via the classes, starting in January, with eight new laptops, and eventually seven more, that the public will use. The $244,000 project will go through September 2012, Zaharis said.

The library was one of 30 libraries in New York awarded the grant, administered by the Education Department through the New York State Library, with approval by both the state Senate and Assembly, according to a release from the library. The grant money created three jobs, including that of Mike Sheppard of Cortland, who will manage the center.

"It will offer video conferencing at one point," said Zaharis. "Someone could come in here and do a job interview with (an employer in) California."

People are welcome to visit the library to sign up for classes.

The last renovation at the library was done in 1997, when the Young Adult Room was created from an original coal bin area.

"That whole basement had 60 years of broken stuff, stored stuff, musty stuff," she said, that had to be cleared out. She held a garage sale for the unwanted items. Microfilm for magazines like Atlantic Monthly and Education were discarded.

"In the seven years I have been here, no one has looked for it," said Zaharis. "So much of this now is on the Internet. Universities have digitized this information."

If someone needs a 1950 Life magazine, they can find the material online, she said.

Staff did keep microfilm records for the *Cortland Standard* and other local newspapers, back to 1840.

Computers had to be moved, new phone jacks installed, a new fax machine put in.

"It's been stressful, chaotic, exciting. Very interesting. We are working in very cramped offices, but its all temporary," she said.