

Collinsville's 'little house' reopens at 171 years old

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Something good has finally happened to "the little house," the home of Collinsville's first mayor and its first government: it's open again.

The Daniel Dove Collins House reopened to the public Saturday after more than 18 years of efforts to renovate, repair and restore the house, and 171 years since its initial construction for the Collins family.

Built in 1845, the house was home to D.D. Collins, the first mayor of the city and possibly related to the Collins brothers who founded the city - or so historian Lois Metzger believes. "We have not definitively proven it," Metzger said, but she

believes it to be so.

Collins was also a Madison County judge, farmer, contractor, road commissioner and school board president. The first city council meetings were held in his house, which has been moved twice to its now-permanent location in the new Collins Park on West Main Street. It has been described as one of the few Greek revival-style cottages in the state, a popular architectural design between 1820 and 1850.

The house was falling apart in the 1980s when the late historian Irving Dilliard purchased it and donated it to the city, hoping to save it. His daughter, Mary Sue Dilliard Schusky, said saving the house was important to her father because his own family home had

been demolished to make way for a housing project.

"I think he felt good about the use of (the property), but always felt bad about his family house being demolished," Schusky said. "He thought (of the Collins house), 'This is something to save.'"

It was 1988, and Dilliard was 94 years old. He bought the house for \$45,000 before it went to auction, and thus began decades of attempts to restore the house - including removal of asbestos tiles, controversy over the public investment, and the eventual decision to relocate the house for the second time and build Collins Park around it as an entry to the city.

Meanwhile, the house earned a place on the National Register of His-

toric Places in 2002.

Schusky said the project has always been important to her family. "You can't have a history of a community without the people and the places," she said. "It is basic to Collinsville history... People always said, 'I want something good to happen to that little house.'"

It eventually took an investment of \$2.3 million in public funds, which included the purchase and demolition of a condemned apartment building and dilapidated warehouse, as well as years-long delays in relocating the warehouse tenants and asbestos abatement. The nonprofit Historic Preservation Commission raised the rest of the funds through grants and donations, restoring the house and furnishing it as it would have been in

1845.

Key to that project was Bill Iseminger, head of the Historic Preservation Commission and assistant site manager at Cahokia Mounds, Schusky said. A longtime advocate of historic preservation, Schusky praised Iseminger's calm manner, patience, hours of physical labor and dedication as a major reason for the project's success. "What Bill has done can never be measured in hours," she said.

Indeed, Schusky referred to "sweat equity," frustrations, delays, "countless hours of meetings and more meetings," as well as the fundraising and continued patience of the volunteers who worked on the project through so many years.

"In our complicated lives today, it's very hard to have heroes," Schusky said. "I want to say, my hero today is you, Bill."

And at that, the room burst into applause.

The house was officially reopened in a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Saturday, preceded by a

historical presentation at the Collinsville Public Library. Mark Badasch, retired director of the Collinsville Area Recreation District, appeared as Collins himself, complete with suit and top hat, and Mayor John Miller spoke prior to the ribbon-cutting.

"The wheels of government roll very slowly, as you all know," Miller said. "It's been a fantastic journey, an up and down journey.... We need to look back and hold that history dear to our hearts, because once it's gone, it's gone."

The house will now be maintained as a museum, and its grounds as a park welcoming visitors to the Main Street business district.

"Something good has happened to the little house," Schusky said. "I think, and I hope the town will think... that something good has happened for the community."

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