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## Volunteers Race to Ready Museum for VIP Visitors

The Dora Nelson African-American Art & History Museum in Perris has undergone major upgrades in time to welcome high-profile visitors from all over the country who will visit the site next month.

The repairs include replacing a leaking roof with a brand new one, new flooring, interior and exterior painting, sewer improvements, plaster work for interior walls and plumbing. The publicly-owned strip of land in front of the museum also got an upgrade that includes mulch and river rock to augment the existing palm trees. Museum administrators and City officials want to spruce up the Nelson museum for a visit in August from representatives of the Washington D.C.-based Association of African-American Museums. The group is holding its annual convention in Riverside, the first yearly gathering ever on the West Coast, and will travel to Perris for an Aug. 3 private reception.



Lovella Singer, executive director of the Dora Nelson African American Art & History Museum and Perris City Councilman Mark Yarbrough stand in the main room of the newly refurbished structure on East Seventh Street.

Perris City Councilman Mark Yarbrough, who has worked on the improvements for several months, estimated the costs of upgrades to the Nelson museum at about \$100,000. Much of the work was done by volunteers, saving many thousands of dollars in the process.

"It is important to our City Council, the community and our municipal staff to preserve the culture and history of the Perris Valley," Yarbrough said recently from the Nelson museum. "Perris is a melting pot that is culturally diverse. I am glad to be part of this project."



The Dora Nelson African American Art & History Museum has been upgraded with a new roof, new interior and exterior painting, new walls, flooring and plumbing. The museum will host an August 3 reception from the Association of African-American Museums.

The Nelson Museum is named for former slave Dora Nelson, who moved to Perris from Indiana and in 1924, established the First Baptist Church, the City's original African-American congregation at Seventh and F Streets. Little else is known about Nelson, who died in 1930.

Alberta Mabel Kearney purchased the church's dilapidated and abandoned building for \$25 from the City of Perris and supervised its demolition in 1970, taking care to preserve the Victorian-era doors. She learned after it was torn down that the structure held significant meaning for the City's African-American community.

Disheartened, Kearney began a lifelong pursuit to collect artifacts that told its story. She purchased the steamer trunk once owned by Nelson for \$3 and also obtained a blue-and-white dresser owned by Nelson.

Other artifacts include a copy of an 1833 slave auction, a collection of shoes from local to national figures who made a difference in race relations and painting of Kearney by artist Karl Marshall depicting her sitting in the museum. Private museum tours are available upon request.

Kearney, 95, was honored in May by the Center for Social Justice and Civil Liberties in Riverside, where she is featured in an exhibition to "Women Game Changers." Shortly afterward, she suffered a stroke and is undergoing rehabilitation in Riverside.



The public strip in front of the Dora Nelson African American Art & History Museum has been improved with the addition of river rock and mulch.

### Rising to the occasion

Dozens of volunteers have donated their time and talent to upgrading the Nelson museum.

Project manager Dawn Fiscus, who is on loan from the City engineer's office, said volunteers supplied the materials and painted the exterior fence, repaired wood trim around windows and repaired interior and exterior doors, donating numerous hours in the process.

"There has been so much work done, it's getting difficult to remember who did what and when!" Fiscus said.

The youngest volunteer, Daniel Fewkes, 13, worked over the course of five weeks to improve the Nelson museum. His efforts include sanding, rebuilding a door and general cleanup of the museum lot. It's all part of his efforts to earn his Eagle Scout ranking while displaying civic pride. Daniel starts Perris High School later this year.

"I want to help my community," Daniel said.



Daniel Fewkes, 13, is earning his Eagle Scout rank by donating his time to help renovate the Dora Nelson African American Art & History Museum in Perris.

### Ready to relaunch

The museum currently stands empty of artifacts and exhibits.

Executive director Lovella Singer, the daughter of Alberta Kearney, said she hopes the renovations, plus the upcoming visit by dignitaries from Washington, spurs renewed interest in the Dora Nelson museum.

The museum has no professional archivist or permanent staff. Singer said that with the help of the City, volunteers and high-profile visitors, the museum founded by her mother "will rise to another level."

"One chapter has ended and a new one has begun," Singer said. "We remain committed to educating the public about African-American history and culture. I am very excited about the conference, the museum and the future."

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