



Staff photo by Greg Gilbert

The Neely Mansion in Auburn, an 87-year-old landmark, is undergoing a three-phase restoration.

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When and why did an old brass bedstead, a doll, a Chinese rice bowl and shards of pottery become mixed in the dirt under the historic Neely Mansion in Auburn?

The 87-year-old landmark is being weatherized as part of a three-phase restoration. The relics came to light when workmen removed a foot-thick layer of dirt under the building while preparing to place the structure on a new foundation.

Devin Sallee, who is in charge of the work being done by the Harris Brothers Sound Construction Co. of Puyallup, said the finds came mostly from the central part of the house near the base of the chimney.

At first, there was conjecture that the material might in some way be related to the 1856 Indian attacks against early settlers in the Auburn area. But this was discounted by Roberta Morley, Auburn city historian, and Mrs. Ed Reiten of the White River Historical Society.

Both say it is doubtful that the artifacts had anything to do with the attack. There was too much of a time lag before the house was built, and until the Neelys settled on the site, there is no record of previous white inhabitants.

"And by the time the Neelys

Relics uncovered during restoration of historic mansion

moved there," said Morley, "the Indians were pretty peaceful. They used to come there to ferry people across the (Green) river by canoe. Before the mansion was built, there was a little house on the site with a cookhouse in the back. The pottery couldn't predate to the massacre."

What has become known as the White River Massacre occurred October 28, 1856, when Indians attacked and killed settlers in what now is Auburn.

The likely possibility is that the artifacts mark the period of the Neely occupancy of the mansion from the 1890s through World War II, after which the house was occupied by renters and, in the latter days of its deterioration, by transients.

The building, at the intersection of Highway 18 and the Auburn-Black Diamond Road, now is owned by the Auburn Arts Council

and is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. It was built by Aaron Neely, a son of David A. Neely, a former plantation overseer from Tennessee.

The Neelys came West by wagon train in a five-month journey that took them over Naches Pass in 1854. They settled in what was called White River, Washington Territory, in the vicinity of Auburn.

The Neelys became well-to-do hop farmers. And after they built the mansion, it became the site of fashionable gatherings and grand parties attended by notables from a wide area around Auburn.

Art Skolnik, project architect, said no formal archeological study is being made of the artifacts. "All we are doing is proceeding with the architectural work."

The three-step project is funded by King County block grants totaling about \$50,000. The first

phase, Skolnik said, was ensuring structural stability of the building, making the new foundation, clearing and erecting a fence around the site.

The second phase, now under way, provides for overall restoration of the exterior. The third phase will be restoration of the interior and rehabilitation of the structure.

"This is the most significant restoration in King County outside of Seattle," Skolnik said, and when the final phase is completed, "the public should be prepared to see the building painted in the original colors, white with a dark-green trim."

"The building is nearly 100 years old, and we want to put it into condition to last for another 100 years."

Mrs. Ron Craig, president of the Arts Council, said original estimates for completion of the project were made before costs skyrocketed, but those figures have been thrown out.

She estimated the interior work will require at least an additional \$75,000, but since there is no money available from either the county or the state, "we will have to depend on donations and volunteer labor for the remainder of the work."

She said the second phase of the work should be completed by the fall.