

# Renovation Work Begins On Historic Marconi ‘Hotel’ Building

by Tim Wood

CHATHAM--- Once, the large brick building overlooking Ryder’s Cove bustled with activity. Men shot pool in a large billiard room, community meals were prepared in a spacious kitchen, and radio operators, military men and dignitaries bunked on the second floor.

But since the end of World War II, the building has been largely silent.

That changed this week when the Chatham Marconi Maritime Center signed a lease for the town-owned Hotel building on the Marconi Wireless campus, one of several historic buildings on the property. On Monday, volunteers began clearing debris from the long-vacant building in preparation for renovation work that will convert it to additional display, classroom and meeting space for the Center’s adjacent museum.

The stately building, constructed in 1914 like the other structures on the campus, has suffered both neglect and vandalism over the years. While community preservation money funded the restoration of the exterior a few years ago, inside walls have been smashed by vandals and piles of dust have accumulated on old bathroom fixtures.

Yet the interior remains a snapshot frozen in time. A heavy brown door with the words “Ice Box” on it leads to just that – a large room where perishable food was once kept. A section of wall now covered over was once used to load food and ice from the outside. Above each of the 12 individual bedrooms on the second floor – each outfitted with a sink – are transoms that swing open.

“That was their air conditioning,” said Marconi Center Vice President Richard Kraycir.

The Center’s plans call for renovating the 4,000-square-foot first floor and stabilizing the 3,000-square foot second floor, said Vice President Frank Messina. The group initially only wanted to lease the first floor, but the town nudged them into taking the entire building. Eventually, they’d like to find tenants for the second floor; its warren of former bedrooms, closets and storage spaces lend themselves to offices, ideally marine or communications related, Messina said.

For now, Marconi Center officials are focused on work that will convert the former living room, with its elegant staircase, into a conference room with additional displays, extensions of the displays on the history of wireless communications in the adjacent operations building.

“We’re going to make this a two-building experience,” Messina said.

The former dining room will be converted into education space for the Center’s STEM program and other education activities, including its summer camp. A new kitchen will also be built.

An important aspect of the project is construction of a handicap-accessible entrance. Because the structure is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the front facade needed to remain historically accurate. So the new entrance – ostensibly the building’s main entrance – will be at the rear. There will also be a new code-compliant staircase (the front stairs don’t meet code,



The Marconi Hotel building, now being renovated by the Chatham Marconi Maritime Center. TIM WOOD PHOTOS

Messina said, but the building department allowed them to remain to preserve the building’s historical integrity) and an elevator. Overall, the Marconi Center will put \$340,000 into the improvements – including \$50,000 for an elevator shaft – and May’s town meeting will be asked to appropriate \$110,000 in community preservation funds for the elevator and a fire suppression system.

The Center has a fairly aggressive renovation schedule. A building permit for the work was issued in February, and contractor Rick Roy, who did the renovation work on the operations building, was awarded the contract last month as well. Framing will be done this month, with mechanical systems installed in April and May. Finishing work and site improvements are anticipated to be completed in July. They hope to be able to hold education programs in the new space by August, Messina said.

Space on the third floor and in the basement – which held a workshop

and a billiard room, which was relocated from the first floor to make way for office space at some point – will not be renovated at this time, although there is the future potential for restoring the workshop, which still contains some original tools.

The project will bring life back to the old building, which began its existence as exactly what its name denotes – a hotel. Kraycir said before World War I, the



The original fireplace in the Hotel’s common room was recently uncovered. For years it was masked by a bookcase.



Marconi vice president Frank Messina with the Hotel’s old annunciator panel.

rooms were rented to employees of the wireless station as well as visitors. It was a gathering place where community meals were served and workers could relax with a game of pool or sit by the fire.

“We don’t really know about World War I,” he said, but until World War II, when the Navy took over the station and its buildings, the Hotel continued to be used that way. Visiting engineers from RCA, which owned the station at the time, stayed there, as did RCA officials and corporate clients. The rooms could also be rented for “a couple bucks a day.”

During World War II, Navy personnel were billeted in the Hotel, apparently three to a room. A small rectangle of paper still affixed to one room door bears the typewritten names of three men and their crew assignments.

After the war, the building was used for storage and possibly administrative offices. It no longer housed station workers or visitors. “By that time, the people working here had their own lives,” Kraycir said.

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