

Historic Building Booms Again

For more than three years, the “Boomtown Building” has been looking for a home.

It is but one casualty of the devastating 1997 flood in Grand Forks, North Dakota. It is one of the city’s oldest and historically important structures. And it had to move—to make way for a new \$350 million dike that will be built along the Red River to protect the city from the threat of flood.

The problem, though, was where to put it. After all, you can’t just pick up a 112-year-old building and plop it down anywhere.

So local urban development and historic preservation officials worked... and worked... and worked to find a place where the Boomtown could live out its second century.

Their perseverance finally paid off. A new site was found across and down the street from the Boomtown’s original home on the banks of the Red River. The building already had been moved once to a vacant lot to allow for construction of a temporary levee that will be in place until the permanent dike is completed. Once the Boomtown’s new home was found, it took only about two hours to actually move the structure.

Built in 1888 on Third Street, Grand Forks’ main commercial area at the time, the building got its name because of its rectangular “boomtown” façade.

Since its construction, the building has been used for a variety of small businesses including offices (1888), a china and fancy goods shop (1892), a harness shop (1897–1901), a hairdressing shop (1906), a tobacco shop (1912), and a lunch counter (1916). Several other businesses have occupied the building in the following years. Just before the flood, it was a laundromat. In 1982, it earned a designation on the National Register of Historic Places.



The Boomtown Building, one of Grand Forks’ oldest structures, rests on a pallet base until it can be relocated to the site where it will begin its second century.

Preserving the Past

“The Boomtown was always an important building to the community,” said Peg O’Leary, coordinator of the Grand Forks Historic Preservation Commission. “We are really looking forward to getting it settled and rehabilitated. It can be both a beautiful old building again and usable.”

Even in its new location, the building remains in the floodplain. Normally, building or moving a structure into a floodplain only can be done if certain disaster-resistant actions are taken. But historic structures can be exempt from those requirements if special local variances are secured.

To preserve the Boomtown’s historic register designation, officials could not elevate the building or set it back from the sidewalk. Nor could they move it far from the original site. They could, however, build a new foundation without a basement. And so they did.

The city spent about \$80,000 to acquire the needed real estate, a package that included the site and an adjoining lot with a building. Additional costs will be incurred to pay for the move and to rehabilitate the structure. The project is being funded with special flood-recovery Community Development Block Grant funds. The city then will sell the building with the intent that there be a first-floor office or retail use with an upper floor apartment.

Preserving and protecting historic properties from future damage is but one of many issues facing a disaster-stricken community during the recovery process. Other historic structures in Grand Forks also need new locations outside of high-risk flood areas and efforts to re-site these structures are ongoing.