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STAFF PHOTO BY NICOLE MARTYN
New director has grand plans for the Howard County Historical Society

By Judy Boman

These days, it’s impossible to drive down Frederick Road, in Ellicott City, and not notice the steel beams and brick towers rising alongside the Miller Branch Library.

On any day, you might even catch branch manager Susan Stonesiser documenting the goings-on with her camera.

“Those new beams going up, that’s the space where the Historical Center will be located,” a very excited Stonesiser noted.

A few miles down the road from the construction, Lauren McCormack is building her own foundation and deciding where to post her pillars, figuratively speaking, at the current historical society research library in the Ellicott City historic district.

Thirty-one year-old Massachusetts born and raised McCormack arrived in Ellicott City one month ago to take over as executive director of the Howard County Historical Society.

“This is a pivotal moment for the Howard County Historical Society,” said Society President Shelley Davies Wygant. The society, founded in 1958, is dedicated to an educational mission which includes not only individual research and public programs, but the preservation and display of those objects, manuscripts, books, artifacts, that so richly define the county’s history.

McCormack comes to the society from Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts where she served as assistant director of education and coordinator of program development, helping to manage more than 100 members of the Interpretation and education departments.

While there, she developed exhibits and interpretive programs, as well as educational offerings for the more than 65,000 students who visited the village each year.

Prior to her position at Old Sturbridge Village, she served as research coordinator at the USS Constitution Museum in Charlestown, Mass., as well as a Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities Scholar-in-Residence, studying the role of black sailors during the War of 1812.

“We knew we needed an exceptionally strong leader who was up for the enormous challenge of moving our headquarters and archives to the new Miller Branch Library facility,” Wygant said. “And we are very excited and confident that we have found that leader in Lauren McCormack.”

An executive director search committee spent three months reviewing more than 70 applications, and personally interviewing seven finalists, Wygant said.

“While all our finalists were very strong candidates, Lauren’s application immediately caught our attention because of her impressive professional experience and academic credentials,” Wygant continued. “Upon meeting her, we were further impressed by her professionalism, poise, intelligence and enthusiasm for tackling our upcoming move to the new Miller Branch Library and Historic Center. Perhaps most important of all, was that in her previous position at Old Sturbridge Village, she had participated in successfully guiding this nationally renown historic organization through a critical growth and revitalization process.”

History meets social media

In her role as executive director, McCormack will be responsible for the overall administration of the organization; operation, maintenance, and quality of collections; finance and budget; planning, implementing and assuring efficacy of membership program and growth; public relations; development; implementing an ongoing, strong volunteer recruitment; developing quality education programs for membership and the public; working effectively with community leaders, groups, organizations and the general public; she will also be spearheading efforts for the society’s landmark move to the new Charles E. Miller Branch Library and Historic Center, scheduled to open in December 2012.

She is also expected to put the society on the map in the online community using...

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Lauren McCormack, the new executive director of the Howard County Historical Society, comes to the nonprofit from her previous position of assistant director of educational programs at Old Sturbridge Village, in Massachusetts.
The View from the neighborhoods

social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter. She's up for the challenge.

"Using social media as a way for people to get to know and engage with one's institution is the future of museums and museum public relations," McCormack said in a recent interview.

"We have already tapped into Facebook, HoCoMoJo.com and the various Howard County Patch.com sites," she said. "We post event listings and the like to these sites. With Facebook, we also plan to implement weekly postings of objects, documents, and/or photographs from our collection to give the public a taste of the wonderful items we have in our collection, just waiting for people to use for research, genealogy, exploration, learning and so on.

We hope that people who do not know HCHS exists will learn of our presence through social media, and we aim to use social media to provide the public with various ways to form relationships with the society.

Past/Perfect

McCormack said her love of museums was fostered by her parents as she was growing up.

"They were amateur historians and family vacations always included visits to museums wherever we went," McCormack said, adding it seemed a natural thing to major in history when she attended Brandeis University as an undergraduate.

Mc Cormack earned a bachelor of arts degree, magna cum laude, at Brandeis University with a triple major in history, near eastern studies and theater arts, then went on to earn a master's degree in American history at Brandeis and a master's degree in American and New England studies at Boston University.

"I like the interdisciplinary nature of museums — my multiple majors work perfectly in that regard," she said.

Looking ahead

The next few months will be busy for McCormack as she plans to meet with the public and county organizations before the society's annual meeting in February.

She has a plan though. "I'm going to listen to the public, they are our audience. I'm going to do the listening and then translate that information into programs."

Her past work at Old Sturbridge Village has prepared her for this task, she said.

"Within the museum field, I have filled many roles and have a broad range of experience," she said. "I think that diverse experiences and knowledge is what a small institution like HCHS needs from an executive director. My work at Old Sturbridge Village was a great learning experience on how to approach change, both internally and externally, to lead a successful institutional revolution. My work with audience research and evaluation taught me the importance of finding out what our public expects and wants out of an institution. Meeting those needs and expectations is the key to successful and ongoing institutional innovation," McCormack said.

"We need to embrace the fact that we are all Howard County. I want the Howard County Historical Society to be the premier organization," she said.

Stonesifer, the Miller Branch manager, met McCormack when she was introduced at the society's board of directors meeting earlier this month and observed firsthand her talent for connecting with the public and her enthusiasm for the job.

"Lauren is already an invaluable asset for the historical society," Stonesifer said. "She understands the meaning of lifelong education, not only for Howard County Library customers, but also for everyone who will be delighted at discovering the resources of the historical society."

For more information about the Howard County Historical Society, go to www.hcsmd.com.

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Historical Society's Holiday Tour

Six historic homes and buildings, some of Howard County's finest examples of preserved historic construction, will be open Dec. 12 for the Howard County Historical Society's 34th annual Holiday Tour.

The tour locations are: Bloomsburg, in Glenwood, circa 1830; Linwood Farm, in Glenwood, circa 1865; Burleigh Cottage, circa 1829; Bon Air Manor Gatehouse, 1871-1878; Rock Hill, Ellicott City, 1899; and Oliver's Carriage House, in Columbia, 1810.

All the buildings, except Oliver's Carriage House, are private residences not open to the public. The holiday tour offers the public a unique opportunity to tour the interiors of these architectural and historic gems.

"One of the great things about the society's annual holiday tour is to see the great lengths owners have gone to in order to preserve the architectural and historic integrity of these buildings while making sensitive updates that make the necessities of modern living completely compatible with the charm of the past," Historical Society Board President, Sheldon Wygant said.

In addition, for the first time this year, the tour is open to nonmembers of the Howard County Historical Society.

"We wanted to allow all Howard County residents and interested individuals the opportunity to tour these beautiful and historically significant homes," historical society Executive Director Lauren McCormack said.

The bus tour leaves from the Court House Parking Lot off Court Avenue, in Ellicott City, Dec. 12 at 1 p.m.

Ticket prices are $35 for members, $40 for nonmembers and $50 for the general public, which includes a 2011 membership to the Howard County Historical Society. Call 410-750-4370 or e-mail at info@hcsmd.org.

About the tour destinations:

- Bloomsburg — Known by many a historian as the James B. Matthew's House and Holly Rock Farm, Bloomsburg is one of Glenwood Village's landmarks. Constructed in 1830 by members of the Dorsey and Warfield families, Bloomsburg is rich in history and features a carefully reconstructed original house with 12- to 15-inch stone walls and a beautiful blend of new architectural detail in its several additions. Through the efforts of its dedicated and visionary owner, Stephen Walker, Bloomsburg has gone beyond its stately colonial status and into an historic estate.

- Burleigh Cottage — Located on the grounds of one of Howard County's hidden treasures is this picturesque English garden and historic cottage home dating to 1829. The 1700s private estate and hunting retreat backdrop is Burleigh Manor and its gatehouse, Burleigh Cottage, has been a widely admired and rarely toured house and property. Designated as historic by the Howard County Bicentennial Commission and the Maryland Historic Trust for its original log home and stone frame additions, Burleigh Cottage has been maintained and improved by present owner George Floyd.

- Bon Air Manor Gatehouse — Bon Air Manor and its eclectic gatehouse were constructed between 1871-1878 on what was originally a 268-acre farm known as Benson's Park. Significant as one of the few authentic Italianate homes in Howard County, the gatehouse features an original stone tower and cornice that is classic to its Romanesque architecture. Present owners Brad and Marie Fox have enjoyed making their mark at the gatehouse.

- Linwood Farm — Commissioned by the Patapacco Female Institute in 1865, this charming board and batten cottage-home likely served as the caretaker or guest cottage to workers and visitors of the school. Hidden from view behind tall trees and overgrowth for nearly 30 years, the cottage has been completely reconstructed and improved by its present owner, Thomas McKnight.

- Rock Hill — Among the charming historic homes of scenic College Avenue in Historic Ellicott City is the lovely Queen Anne Victorian known as Rock Hill. Once a thriving bed and breakfast inn known as the White Duck, Rock Hill c. 1899 has been home to many a traveler, and is now a private residence. Current owners, Jeffrey and Shelley Wygant, are sensitive stewards and have preserved original features and have blended modern addition with style.

- Oliver's Carriage House — Built in 1810 to serve as the stables and gateway for nearby Oakland Manor, Oliver's Carriage House now hosts church and community services and activities under the direction of the Kittamaqundi Community Church. Purchased by the church in 1960, Oliver's Carriage House has undergone renovations and improvements, however, the structure has been maintained and has retained much of its architectural and historic integrity.

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