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Historic sidewalk 'lights' restored

BY HOWARD MCEWEN | ENQUIRER CONTRIBUTOR

NEWPORT - Walking through historic parts of Newport, it's easy to get a feel for what the older homes looked like and how they must have appeared. Sometimes smaller details tell more about how the people lived in late 19th century Newport - such as how dark it could be.

That's the case with the sidewalk outside 530 Washington Ave.

It's closed for renovation; when it's finished a series of small glass rounds will twinkle up from the sidewalk. They are vault lights.

ADVERTISEMENT "In the old days, before electric light, this was a simple way to allow daylight into a basement or vault chamber. They were very popular in New York, especially effective for getting light into the subway tunnels," said new owner Fred Breitfelder.

The vault lights capture sunlight that hits the sidewalk. It then bends the light to reflect into the basement of the structure.

It allowed owners to get some daytime use from a basement that would normally be pitch black.

The simplicity of adding wiring for electric lights eliminated the need for vault lights and many have fallen into disrepair.

"My vault lights are getting restored - sandblasted, primed, painted and missing lenses replaced. Vault lights are very rare around here. There might be some left somewhere in Cincinnati, but mine are the only examples that I am aware of in Newport," said Breitfelder.

This is not Breitfelder's first restoration project.

He rehabbed a two-bedroom in the early 1990s and was rehabbing an historic mansion on Fourth Street when buyers made an offer too good to pass up.

He then bought his current building - the old Johnston and Murphy Shoe Outlet across the street from Pompilio's restaurant.

Declining to disclose his budget, but describing it as "uncomfortably large," Breitfelder said his primary goal is to generate income for himself by making the first floor into a restaurant.

"The current parking lot will get a roof over it for additional dining space. The smaller cinderblock building - an addition I think built in the '50s on the north side of the main structure - will contain the commercial kitchen and the guest bathrooms. The second and third floors will be combined into one unit which will be my residence. I'll add a rooftop deck - the view of the city is really great from there," said Breitfelder.

Built in 1885, the building originally served as a pharmacy. Breitfelder has found many artifacts from that era.

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