

Transformation is complete

By ALICE DuPONT

Times Editor

The old Bell & Bates Hardware store on the east side of the courthouse square continues to be a cornerstone of downtown. Only this time instead of making sure farmers and fix-it men get the essentials for a job which required physical strength, the community will be treated to essentials for the soul.

Gadsden Arts Center, which will officially open to the general public Sunday afternoon from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. is an amazing transformation. The spacious new main gallery is modernized and upscale but history is retained in the floors. The sky blue ceiling of the children's gallery offers spectacular views of the courthouse. The building also contains a gift shop the 1100-square foot community room with full kitchen facilities available, and floor-to-ceiling shelving for an art library.

The mission at the Gadsden Arts Center is to "foster understanding and appreciation of the visual arts to improve the quality of life in Gadsden County." In keeping with that mission, the center provides quality visual programming and educational opportunities in a rural county that is highly diverse culturally, racially and ethnically said Zoe Golloway, executive director.

However, the story of how the Gadsden Art center came to be is an interesting tale. The whole thing started with artist Beth Appleton and her husband David Harbaugh who were looking for a nice quiet place to live and work. The couple came to Quincy in 1988 and decided this was the place for them.

Downtown was losing stores and many storefronts were becoming vacant. At about the same time, several business people, elected officials, and community spirited volunteers were searching for ways to revive a dying downtown. Application was made and approved for Quincy to become a Main Street Community. That designation gave the financial and technical assistance needed to begin the transition.

Through Main Street Quincy, old infrastructure was replaced, sidewalks were replaced, historic experts were on loan to help with the transition. Everyone agreed that fine art could give the city the catalyst needed. Art is clean, it attracts people with disposable incomes, and there are numerous spinoff businesses associated with artists and the art community.

Many people in the community pitched in when Appleton and Harbaugh felt it was time for the project to expand in the city. "With the sponsorship of the Quincy State bank, Nesta Cumbie was the bridge to the art movement's continuing success as were a new generation of helping hands," said Appleton, adding that she and her husband "were approaching some personal goals as well."

Community volunteers organized and manned the fine art shows over for several years. Galleries were created out of loaned space that included former dry goods' stores, bank installment loan departments, drug stores and the like. In 1993 the volunteers realized that the exhibit was well worth the effort, but that permanent space was needed to create a gallery.

In 1994 a non-profit corporation was created called GadsdenArts, Inc. this entity would sponsor Art In Gadsden and eventually provide ongoing visual arts programming in a permanent location.

The appropriate papers were filed and the non-profit organization became a reality. The group found and purchased a building in Quincy originally built in 1904 to serve as a Catholic mission. Individual gifts and a state historic preservation grant paid for the building. While the facility provided a stable location, there was no room for growth.

In 1996 Mark Bates offered the Bell and Bates building to Gadsden Arts, Inc to be transformed into a permanent arts center in the downtown area.

Zoe Golloway, a woman full of energy with a vision for the community and a love of art was hired as the executive director. Under her leadership Art in Gadsden really began to take shape. At the end of the first year, not only were operations funded, but close to \$800,000 had been acquired toward refurbishing the building.

Once the work began it moved rapidly. Phase One of the massive renovation project began in August 1999 and was completed on time and on budget. Phase Two began in March 2000 and was finished in mid-July.

Friday night's gala and Sunday's grand opening are a culmination of the efforts of a lot of people.