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Flagler leads museum

by Marimar McNaughton

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Staff photo by Joshua Curry
Madeline Flagler has been named the director of the Wrightsville Beach Museum of History. She will assume her new role on July 6.

Next week, the Wrightsville Beach Museum of History welcomes its new director, Madeline Flagler fresh from the Bellamy Mansion, where she served as education director and volunteer coordinator for eight years.

Though the differences between the two historic home museums may be evident to some, there are many more similarities.

“They’re both museums that promote history and encompass Lower Cape Fear history in the larger sense. One of the goals, as always is to bring in a wider audience,” Flagler said.

Bringing people to the museum is one of her strengths, shared by former director, LuAnn Mims, who departed on June 30 to become the campus archivist for Florida Southern College.

Flagler said, “Being a museum is very rewarding, it’s educational, it’s something the whole family can do and you can plan your programming around that – reaching different people of different ages.”

She sees the museum as a porthole for tourists visiting Wrightsville Beach.

“People are coming with a more relaxed mindset. We don’t have formal tours. On the other hand we have people come on the porch and sit in the rocking chairs and walk around and feel comfortable,” she said. “Here you have a house that gives the experience of what it was like to come to the beach in a much earlier time period.”

Though she was reared in Alexandria, Va., as a child, Flagler spent summers in Wrightsville Beach from age 7 to 14, with her family and her grandparents at the pink houses, also known as the Sutton Apartments on the south end.

“I have very fair skin and I would get burned the first day,” she said. “The second day I sat in front of the fan.”

She also recalled catching a black sea bass off Crystal Pier.

“I was not a big fisher but I was fascinated that I actually caught something.” Historic preservation played a significant part in Flagler’s training – in Beaufort, North Carolina, and later in Hawaii – and will shape the way that she interprets the museum’s headquarters, the 100 year-old Myers Cottage.

“Some of my graduate work (in Hawaii) was in historic preservation. Many of their houses, because their climate is so mild, are built very similarly as these seasonal cottages. As soon as I come into a place like this I look at the beaded board and the colors that they’re using and I’m thinking ... ‘This is so different than their house would have been in town.’ The contrast is pretty stark. These seasonal houses have their very own, very special charm.”

The Meyers Cottage has been preserved by moving it to a safe place to observe its construction, its layout and its furnishings.

“From those things you find out a way of life and history and use all those things to interpret what it was like to come to the beach,” Flagler said.

For the next several months, Flagler will roll out the plan that was put in place by Mims and the museum’s board of directors, led by Marjorie Way.

“We’re very fortunate to find someone ... who has such a love and interest of the area to come and lead us,” Way said. “We always want to move on to another level. We feel like we’ve made great strides this year and I feel like now we’re ready to have Madeline who has had a great deal of experience in a bigger museum who will guide and direct the board. We will be a team.”

The museum has enormous potential Flagler said. “LuAnn’s done a great job in the year she’s been here.”

In addition to preservation, history, oral history, nature and natural resources will also be showcased.

She said, “All these are special parts of the beach experience. We still have people here who have very vivid memories of what it was like when it was very different than it is now.”