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Stewards of Jonathan Clark House to step down

By Lisa Curtis

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MEQUON — Nina Look can be forgiven if she wakes up some mornings feeling like the matriarch of a family of eight — and sometimes two handymen — living snugly in a seven-room compact home of the 1840s.

Look has so committed to the role of Mrs. Jonathan Clark for the past nearly 10 years, that one is just as likely to find her wearing a cotton farm dress and bonnet as they are a pair of jeans.

As executive director of the Jonathan Clark House since 2012, Look has fully committed herself as an ambassador to the Clark family's legacy and the period in which they thrived.

Always by her side is her husband, Fred Derr, who serves as preservation manager, but like Look, also takes on duties far beyond the scope of his title.

Together they have been devoted stewards of the home at the corner of Cedarburg and Bonniwell roads, but also the Clark family history, their role in growing the fledgling town of Mequon and their daily life without electricity, plumbing or really any amenities we now take for granted.

But soon Look and Derr will be stepping back from their official roles. They want to be spontaneous again, to visit more with friends and relatives.

Both will stay on as curators out of respect for what has become a part of them.

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Fred Derr and Nina Look stand in the kitchen area of the Jonathan Clark House in Mequon.

Photo by Mark Justesen / News Graphic staff

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That respect the couple have shown to this piece of Mequon's history is evident in both the authenticity of the museum they helped build from scratch and the enthusiasm with which they share the Clarks' story.

The Greek revival two story home made of fieldstone and limestone had been the office of dentist George "Sandy" Custer from the mid-1980s until he retired in June 2011. Then mayor Curt Gielow said at the time that he could not "abide not trying to seize the opportunity to get one of the best-looking historic buildings in town," and they worked to find someone generous enough to purchase the building. That person was Jerry McGinnis, the retired founder of Embassy Homes of Mequon.

Soon after, the Friends of the Jonathan Clark House group was formed and ownership of the home was transferred to the group.

Gielow tasked Look with transforming it into a museum that preserves Clark's history, and how it relates to Mequon's early beginnings.

"We believe this is the last chances our community has to preserve a historic building," said Look, who grew up 1 mile west of the museum and has always been interested in the history of what is known as the Bonniwell Settlement. "This is one of the few remaining links to this area's early settlers."

Clark's history

Jonathan Clark was born in 1812 in northern Vermont along the Canadian border. At age 21 he enlisted in the U.S. Army. He was stationed in what is now Green Bay.

His future wife, Mary Turck, was born along the Hudson River in New York state. When her family came to Wisconsin, they were among the first white settlers in Mequon.

Clark settled in Mequon in 1839, and he and Turck were married the next year.

He bought 80 acres around the area of Cedarburg and Bonniwell roads, and later another 80 acres. They built their home in 1848, the same year that Wisconsin became a state.

Clark was a farmer, businessman and a leader. Together with his father-in-law, Peter Turck, and friend, William Bonniwell, they worked hard to

develop the new township of Mequon. One of their most important accomplishments was creating the area's first public school.

As an archivist of the Ozaukee Historical Society, Look scoured the materials looking for anything she could find related to the Clark family. One particular treasure was a ledger of items Clark purchased at the old Cedarburg mill store, including whiskey, tobacco, coffee, nails and shoes. Look also found an original Clark family land patent tucked in between two other historical documents.

The couple has toured the country over the years, visiting other museums for ideas on how to best engage the community on the Clark and Turck histories. They have scoured flea markets, antique stores and everywhere in between to furnish the home with pieces that authentically represent the period.

They even visited the small community of Derby, Vermont, where Clark was raised to get a better understanding of the man.

Not only have they never been paid for their positions at the museum, they often invested their own money. They work closely with local groups and residents to secure donations, not necessarily sizable gifts, but \$100 here and \$1,000 there from many groups and individuals in the community.

Passing the torch

With the help of docents and other volunteers, the museum has generally kept regular hours on the weekends. They host many children's groups, where kids learn from hands-on experiences what living in the mid-19th century involved, like making rope and grinding coffee beans by hand.

But beyond the weekend hours, Look and Derr's nearly constant presence at the home has encouraged many passersby on Cedarburg Road to stop in and see what the house is about.

On one particular afternoon, as cars streamed north toward the Strawberry Festival, Look figured she ought to lure some of the travelers in by walking the grounds of the house, dressed as an 1840s Mary Clark, a role she maintains as she educates schoolchildren, Scouts and other visitors.

"Nina and Fred have been an absolute blessing to the Jonathan Clark House. Without them, we wouldn't be who we are," Gielow said.

The museum is now looking for a part-time executive director to fill all of the duties that Look has over the years. That includes fundraising, grant writing, organizing programming and special events, working directly

with the board of directors and managing day-to-day operations, among other things.

Gielow is hoping to start an endowment to help pay for the director's salary and other operations.

To learn more about the museum, how to donate or how to help establish the endowment, go to [https:// jonathanclarkhouse.com](https://jonathanclarkhouse.com) or call 262-618-2051.

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— **Curt Gielow**

former Mequon mayor