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Henning museum project honoring author Alex Haley finally gets funded by the state

BY MICHAEL SHEFFIELD

Askew Nixon Ferguson Architects is handling design work for a \$1.26 million museum behind the boyhood home of Alex Haley in Henning, Tenn.

The project, after nearly 12 years of inactivity, is scheduled to break ground sometime in October. Louis Ponders, who is working on the project for Askew Nixon, says it will take about 10 months to complete.

“It should be ready to open next summer,”

Ponders says.

In addition to Askew Nixon, Memphis firms Allen & Hoshall, Jamnu Tahiliani & Associates, Thompson Engineers and Engineering Design Consultants will team up on the engineering needs, while Jefferson, Ind.-based Natural Concepts Exhibits will work on the museum side.

The project has been on the drawing board since 1994, two years after Haley’s death, when Ponders performed some preliminary design

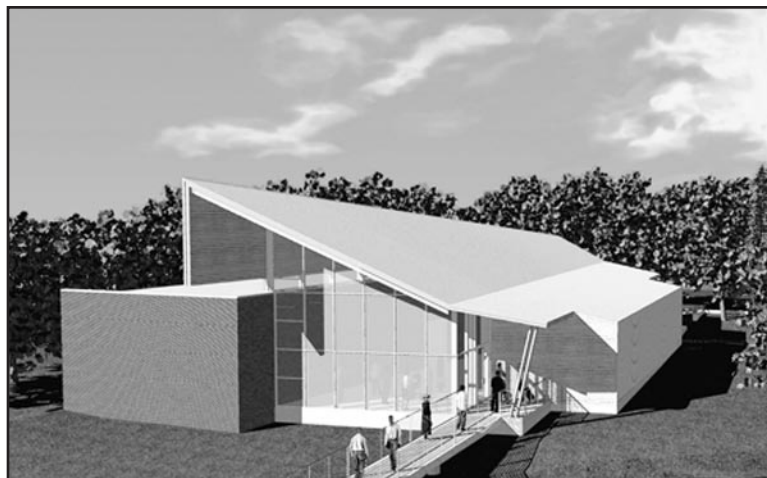
work. When the project was recently reactivated, he was asked to do some new concepts.

“The state added more money and came back to us,” he says.

The 6,500-square-foot museum will have an interpretive center that will include Haley’s Pulitzer Prize and other artifacts from the life of the author of *Roots* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

Troy McCormick, a consultant with Natural Concepts Exhibits, says the museum will focus on different parts of Haley’s life leading up to the research and writing of *Roots*.

It will include a recreation of the front porch and voice-overs of the stories Haley heard growing up. There will also be a recreation of a slave ship.



Rendering of proposed Alex Haley Museum in Henning, Tenn.

“That part of history needs to be told, so we want to build the ship and show what slaves dealt with,” McCormick says. “We want to get people past wishing that it hadn’t occurred and tell them what happened. It is part of the story of West Tennessee.”

Haley spent a significant portion of his childhood in Henning with his maternal grandparents, who built the house. He is buried in the front yard.

Ponders says the house is in great shape and will not be altered. The new museum will be built to match the house.

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a true tourist destination.’**

Louis Ponders

Askew Nixon Ferguson Architects

“The brick we chose is the same as the brick in the house and there are discussions about adding floodlights,” he says.

Lola Potter, public information officer for the Tennessee Department of Finance and Administration, says state budget woes in recent years delayed the project.

“The original budget was insufficient and throughout the ‘90s, that administration didn’t see the project as a priority,” she says.

Potter says funding was added to the project periodically and the current administration made a commitment to get it done.

Ponders says he is glad the project is finally moving forward.

“The exhibit can be a true tourist destination,” Ponders says. “Haley always said hearing his relatives talk about the family history on the front porch of that house inspired him to research their genealogy when he wrote *Roots*.”