

'Moving away from home': Institute won't become 'One Renfrew' with park

Amber South Chambersburg Public Opinion

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"One Renfrew" will not be.

The Institute at Renfrew announced this week that it is parting ways with its home of 30 years, Renfrew Museum and Park.

The nonprofit organization that aims to guide people of the Cumberland Valley to become "stewards of their natural and cultural worlds," will leave the campus in Waynesboro by the end of the week as final arrangements for a new location remain in the works, according to a statement by Tracy Holliday, executive director of the institute.

The move is the result of weeks of discussions between the Institute at Renfrew and the Borough of Waynesboro. The borough's goal was to bring the institute into the organizational fold of the Renfrew Committee Inc., which oversees operations at Renfrew Museum and Park. The borough called this initiative, "One Renfrew."

The institute was opposed to the plan because it would have meant giving up its nonprofit status and dissolving its own operations to become one with the Renfrew Committee Inc., which is also a nonprofit organization, Holliday previously said. Leaving the park gives the institute the opportunity to grow into its own.

"Thanks to the contributions of many who believed in and supported its mission over three decades, the organization has thrived, grown and matured," Holliday said in announcing the news. "'Moving away from home' is a natural next step to continue to grow."

Dade Royer, president of Renfrew Committee Inc. and a member of Waynesboro Borough Council, said he is "disheartened" that the institute decided "not to participate" in One Renfrew, but it was a choice they were free to make.

Still, he said the institute's departure will bring "big change" to Renfrew Museum and Park, as the organization's full state of activities and programs have long complemented the museum and park.

"I believe both organizations will continue to thrive on their own and, honestly, grow stronger in the long run," said Royer, who is also the former executive director of the museum and park and is a ninth-generation descendant of Daniel Royer, who built up the property in the 19th century.

For the institute, leaving its longtime home may lead to expanding its work throughout the community. The organization already hosts activities at Waynesboro schools and at other places in the area, such as Monterey Pass and Antietam Meadow Park, and its presence may increase, according to Holliday.

"WASD learners and staff have always enjoyed working with The Institute of Renfrew for many years at the beautiful setting of Renfrew Museum and Park," said Tod Kline, superintendent of Waynesboro Area School District. "We look forward to continuing our relationship with the Institute in the future wherever the setting."

Both Renfrews—the museum and park, and the institute—bring thousands of people to Franklin County, said Janet Pollard, executive director of Franklin County Visitors Bureau. To the vast majority, the arrangement between the organizations makes no difference.

"From the outside looking in, the public sees beauty, learns about culture and history, discovers pieces of nature, and enjoys themselves," she added. "The public wants to have a good time, so they are not focused on boundaries. In tourism, visitors don't ask: Is that Franklin County or Cumberland County?"

"It is ultimately about the overall experience for families, individuals, students, and our shared visitors. In working with both Renfrew Museum and Park and The Institute at Renfrew over the past thirteen years, I know both are focused on giving the public a positive, enlightening and enjoyable experience. I don't see that changing."

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Why 'One Renfrew'?

Eliminating confusion over the relationship between the entities sharing the Renfrew name would have supplemented the goal of One Renfrew.

The Borough of Waynesboro proposed the initiative in September after officials were advised by legal counsel that the presence of two operational structures at the Renfrew property put the borough's ownership of the land at risk.

This stone home was built in 1812 on the land that is now home to Renfrew Museum and Park.

The borough received the 107-acre historic site and nature preserve along Antietam Creek in 1973 as a bequest from Emma Geiser Nicodemus, the last private resident of the property.

Originally settled by the Scottish-German Renfrew family in the mid-1700s, German-American Daniel Royer took it over some time later and established two homesteads by the late-1800s.

In addition to stating that the property be used as a public park and that the 1812 stone house become a museum dedicated to early American life, the Nicodemus will stipulated that a seven-member committee have "sole management responsibility" over the campus, according to the borough. The Renfrew Board was created.

In 1990, the Renfrew Board created the nonprofit organization, Renfrew Institute for Cultural and Environmental Studies. Serving as the museum and park's "supporting arm," the institute was charged with developing, delivering and funding programs to teach students about environmental education and life on Pennsylvania's German farmsteads, according to Holliday.

In 1996, the Renfrew Board became the Renfrew Committee Inc. The borough created the committee as an independent nonprofit responsible for managing all operations at the site.

Since then, the Institute at Renfrew (which shortened its original name a few years ago) and the Renfrew Committee have supported the mission and vision of Renfrew Museum and Park by hosting programs and events. However, they remained separate, each with its own board and mission - something that could be in violation of the Nicodemus will.

"In having two autonomous nonprofits with separate missions operating on the property, the Borough was advised that their execution of the will under the current dual-organizational structure could possibly, if it was called into question, endanger the Borough's right to ownership of Renfrew Museum and Park," Becky LaBarre, executive director of Renfrew Museum and Park, said in a statement to the community.

The two Renfrews have faced "operational challenges" for years, Royer said, particularly related to competition for volunteers and funding. Confusion among the public over how the two organizations are related has sometimes exacerbated those issues.

"We felt that it was one of those situations where one plus one could have equaled four. We felt the two organizations -one mission would have been much stronger and could have served the community better than in the past," he said.

Royer noted that the Renfrew Committee itself was largely not involved in the discussions with the institute about One Renfrew, but rather the borough represented its interests. He is among three committee members on the borough council.

The institute may be leaving the park property, but the organization is open to keeping a relationship with the committee.

"Although we will be operating from a new location, we have invited conversations with Borough officials and RCI (Renfrew's governing board) regarding possible future Institute programming in an affiliate relationship on the Renfrew campus," Holliday said in a statement.

A representative of the Institute at Renfrew said neither Holliday nor Fleagle were available for interviews.

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