

NORFOLK POLICE, FIRE-RESCUE ARTIFACTS

2 museums under 1 roof set to open

By Matthew Bowers The Virginian-Pilot

You like badges? They've got badges, starting with one from about 1875, hand-engraved "Norfolk Police 4."

You like guns? They've got guns, cases of them, even an 1813 militia musket with bayonet.

You like old photos? They've got them, too, including reproduction mug shots of a dapper man in a bowler hat. His alleged crime? Stealing chickens.

The new Norfolk Police Museum and Norfolk Fire-Rescue Museum – two museums under one roof – are scheduled to open in the next few weeks in what was a downtown visitor center at 401 E. Freemason St., near the Moses Myers House.

"What we're trying to do here is have something for everybody," said Jim Melchor, a retired government oceanographer and volunteer curator of the police museum for a decade.

"If you like patches – most people like patches – over there we have every patch Norfolk police have ever had."

The 213-year-old police department has had a museum since 1919. But it has been closed since June 2008 because of construction at its previous location, the downtown police administration building on Brooke Avenue. This will be the first public fire museum, although artifacts were displayed at the department's training facility.

Melchor and Lt. Jim Bailie, a city firefighter for 13 years, have felt called to tell the story of public safety in the city, and they've been working for free since October to get the exhibits in shape.

Charles Knight, a curator at the MacArthur Memorial, whose staff will manage the site, has been helping.

That site will have two sides: police on the left, and fire and rescue on the right.

On display will be uniforms, news clippings and shelves stacked with equipment: saddles and parking meters, bootlegger flasks curved to fit around thighs and a type of rattle that preceded police whistles, old band instruments and a recreated "watch room" from where fire alarms were issued.

Of course, there's also a fire pole.

Also planned is a horses' stall to remember Thunder and Lightning, the last two horses to pull equipment before motorized apparatus appeared in 1911.

"We hope to make this an interactive museum," with videos and slide shows, Bailie said.

Together the two sides have spent \$13,000 to \$15,000, the men said, including \$7,000 on security measures, especially for the gun cases, but nothing on labor.

The money comes from donations and asset forfeitures collected by police. There'll be no charge for visitors, but donation boxes will be set up, they said.

Bailie urged retired firefighters or their families to send in any items they might be holding onto, so that they can be displayed properly. "I know there's more stuff out there," he said.

Bailie would love to find a horse-drawn steam pumper – he already has a matching horse collar.

Melchor longs for one of the high-collar uniforms Norfolk police used to wear.

"They're here, in somebody's closet or attic," he said.

"Probably all moth-eaten – I don't care."

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BILL TIERNAN | THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT Displays on the wall of the Norfolk Police Museum include weapons used over the years and a jail cell. The museum will open soon at 401 E. Freemason St.





BILL TIERNAN PHOTOS | THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT



Above The Norfolk Fire-Rescue side of the museum includes a "fireman" climbing up the wall of the museum toward the window. Left This police badge was carried by three generations of the Grant family who served from 1912 to 1977.

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