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# Sultana museum set to build new center

## \$6M raised to replace old Marion location

PAIGE EICHKORN  
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

MARION — The Sultana Disaster Museum is ready to break ground after raising \$6 million for a new, expanded museum.

The former Marion High School gymnasium and auditorium at 54 Military Road will be renovated to house the exhibits, which seek to tell the story of what has been recognized by congressional resolution as the greatest maritime disaster in U.S. history.

The speakers at a ground-

breaking ceremony that also commemorated veterans Friday read like a who's who of the Sultana museum project: John Fogleman, a former judge and president of the Sultana Historic Preservation Society; Mayor Frank Fogleman; State Sen. Keith Ingram; U.S. Rep. Rick Crawford; U.S. Sen. John Boozman; former U.S. Secretary of Transportation Rodney Slater; and Mayor-elect Tracy Brick.

The new, expanded museum — which will replace a smaller, existing museum at 104 Washington St. in the

northeast Arkansas town of Marion, about a 15-minute drive from Memphis — is projected to have a direct economic impact of over \$3 million and an indirect impact of just over \$6 million, according to studies by the preservation society.

Lisa O'Neal, a real estate agent at Crye-Leike Realtors, helped create the first pop-up exhibits for the museum with her mother-in-law and father who collected "trinkets from the Sultana." Former Mayor Frank Fogleman aided in

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**John Fogleman**, president of the Sultana Historical Preservation Society, speaks during the groundbreaking for the Sultana Disaster Museum in Marion. (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/Paige Eichkorn)

# Sultana

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opening the existing location for the small museum, she said. Then John Fogleman retired and started fundraising for the new location.

"It's going to be an amazing center once we get it up and going and self-sufficient," O'Neal said.

Brick said the city historic preservation society will have to raise another \$4 million for the installation of exhibits once the new museum is built.

"Having a U.S. senator and a U.S. congressman was very good for us. They have both been very instrumental in helping us with some grants and I'm really encouraged," Brick said. "I think people in town are starting to get excited about it now that they know it's coming to fruition, and one of the most important things is there is no city tax money involved in this, it's all through donations and grants."

The Sultana was a Civil War-era paddle wheel steamboat which exploded and burned on the Mississippi River on April 27, 1865. The disaster has been recognized by congressional resolution as the greatest maritime disaster in U.S. history. The Sultana had a capacity to carry 376 passengers and crew, but was overloaded with more than 2,100. More than half of the soldiers and crew were

killed in the explosion and fire that sank the boat near Marion, across the river from Memphis.

The Sultana has been overlooked in history due to other significant historical events like Gen. Robert E. Lee's surrender and the assassination of then-President Abraham Lincoln.

John Fogleman has family members who aided in the rescue efforts for survivors of the disaster, and it motivated him to be involved in the preservation society.

"We will be the hub of a Delta museum trail, beginning down in Lake Village at the Lake Port Plantation," he said. "You've got the Delta Cultural Center in Helena ... the Lee County Museum in Marianna, our museum, then moving up the river, you've got the Hampson Archaeological Museum ... the Johnny Cash museum, the Pfeiffer-Hemingway house in Piggott, and then the [Blytheville] Cold War museum that's coming in. So there will be a whole trail on the Delta."

"Not only does this museum tell a very important story, but it also will provide cultural opportunities to a lot of kids around here for field trips and things that they wouldn't get otherwise."

The original museum had visitors from all U.S. states and 14 foreign countries. John Fogleman said the renovated facility is projected to draw 50,000 visitors a year to Marion.

Slater, a former transportation secretary, said Friday that he's always been interested in the Sultana disaster and how few people knew about it. His speech at the ceremony delved into the history of April 1865 in which many historic events took place. He noted President Lincoln wasn't there to boost the morale of the disaster's survivors or help pick up the pieces.

"I'm just so proud of the effort to finally do what the survivors wanted to do, to have some recognition of it," he said. "And really to know the story of how people in this region put aside all of the drama of the war and really reached out to human beings and sought to save them. I mean, I just think that's a powerful story. And I think it's very consistent with Lincoln's challenge to us all to be guided by the best angels of our nature."

Sen. Boozman also noted the significance of hosting the groundbreaking event on Veterans Day.

"What a better way to celebrate veterans in the sense of remembering that ultimate sacrifice that really had not been recognized," he said. "This project is so exciting. The other thing about it is, it's such a great example of everybody coming together from different walks of life and different political persuasions and to get a big thing done. So it's a great celebration for lots of different reasons."

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