

Monterey' First Theatre nets federal grant

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The First Theatre of Monterey has received a grant to help with much needed renovation. (Dennis Taylor – Monterey Herald)

MONTEREY — One of Monterey's most visible historic buildings that has been shuttered for roughly a decade just got a financial boost for badly needed restoration.

California's First Theatre, a Monterey State Historic Park, received an infusion of \$194,360 from the federal Save America's Treasures program, a grant that was matched by The Monterey State Historic Parks Association, a nonprofit that serves as a collaborating partner with California State Parks.

The \$388,720 total will go toward critical renovation projects that will eventually lead to the reopening of the theater and its attached tavern, said Nicollette Eason Trottier, who serves on the board of directors for the nonprofit association.



The tavern

attached to California's First Theatre. (Dennis Taylor — Monterey Herald)

The grant was one of only three awarded in California. A rough estimate puts the total needed at around \$2 million.

The State Historic Park includes part or all of the Monterey Old Town Historic District, a historic district that includes 17 buildings and was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1970. In addition to the First Theatre, the park is also home to the Monterey Customs House, where the American flag was first raised over California.

The First Theatre adobe was built by Jack Swan around 1846 as a lodging house and tavern for sailors. It began its history as a theater in 1850 when U.S. Army officers began producing plays as a money-making venture. Swan built a small stage and provided benches, whale-oil lamps, candles for footlights, and curtains made of red and blue blankets. Tickets sold for \$5 each. First night receipts totaled \$500.

With few exceptions, the adobe has stood as a playhouse ever since. But a decade ago the structure began to suffer from damage caused by moisture that spawned mold that made the air inside unsafe for visitors.

Trottier, who recalls seeing plays at the adobe as a child, said one of the first projects the grant money will fund will be to install a French drain to redirect rainwater that washes down a hillside

behind the adobe and is one of the culprits of the moisture damage. Another top priority is installing a fire suppression system.

Additional grant money includes \$20,000 from Monterey Peninsula Foundation that was matched by the Parks Association for the fire suppression system and \$50,000 from the Community Foundation for Monterey County that was also matched by the association for drainage and general renovation.

The nonprofit has one key fundraising event each year, Christmas in the Adobes, that raises money for work services it provides the community, such as bussing children to the park and putting on a summer camp, Trottier said. With costs hovering around \$2 million for needed repairs, she said the board will likely plan for additional fundraisers specifically for the First Theater restoration.

The federal Save America's Treasures is a collaboration among the National Park Service, in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the National Endowment of the Humanities, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Since 1999 \$340 million in grants have been awarded to 1,300 recipients.

