

History stands at the corner of 11th and Maple streets.

It's called Light's Fort, the oldest building in Lebanon. Built in 1742 by immigrant Johannes Licht, the building has undergone significant structural changes but still stands, thanks to a group of citizens passionate about retaining a relic of the city's early history.

"This building is a gem in need of a little polish," said Sandy Jones, a founding member of the Friends of Light's Fort Committee, an organization affiliated with the Historic Preservation Trust of Lebanon County and devoted to preserving the structure's historical significance.

"A little polish" includes a number of challenging tasks for Friends of Light's Fort.

Many throughout the Lebanon Valley often overlook the structure when driving along Route 72 or never learn about its past, so the organization first hopes to raise awareness and educate the public. Also, in its 267-year history, Light's Fort has assumed a variety of functions, from a war shelter and distillery to apartments and restaurant. These changes have taken a toll on the structure's stability, requiring serious architectural work on its foundation and walls before the committee can begin restoring the inside to make it an educational facility.

And for the renovations to commence, the committee must raise a substantial amount of funds.

As demanding as the project appears, the dozen members of Friends of Light's Fort show no trepidation when it comes to saving a major piece of Lebanon's past.

"We're all very interested, we're very passionate about this, and we really want to see it restored," Jones said.

"A long and varied history"

Johannes Licht, who later Americanized his name to John Light, traveled from either southern Germany or northern Switzerland and settled in Lebanon Township, then part of Lancaster County, in 1719. A practicing Mennonite, he purchased the land that stretched from Seventh Street to the current Coleman Memorial Park and from Water Street to two miles north of Maple Street.

In 1742 he constructed the fort with indigenous gray stone in a traditional style of the early Pennsylvania Germans. The building, when first erected, was a large 30-foot- by-40-foot two-story limestone dwelling, complete with 2-foot-thick walls, a hip roof, and a vaulted cellar with an arched ceiling and fresh water spring.

Because the building was sturdy and surrounded by a stockade fence, the Light house provided shelter for families during the French and Indian War in the mid-1700s.

There was no fighting in the city of Lebanon, but there was fighting to the north. Up to 60 families found refuge in the fort at one time.

"Most of the things that are called forts during the French and Indian war era were private homes, and Light's home, especially with the stockade, became a safe shelter for many families," said Jones, whose maiden name is Light. After becoming involved with the project, she discovered that John Light is seven times her great-grandfather.

Since its first use as a fort, the Light home has served a variety of purposes.

"It's got a long and varied history," Jones said. "What has happened to this building is it has been standing here and there have been significant changes to the building."

In addition to serving as a private house and then a place of refuge, other main uses included a Mennonite worship meeting hall, a distillery, barn, grain-storage locale and restaurant. In the 1950s, apartments were created before the Cagnoli family sold the building and land to the Historic Preservation Trust of Lebanon County in the early 1970s.

A group of "Friends"

The Friends of Light's Fort Committee consists of 12 members and was founded six years ago. After reading an article in the *Lebanon Daily News* about the owner of a nearby building demolishing the fort because it was an eyesore, Jones and Esther Heisley attended a meeting at of the Historic Preservation Trust. Although the story's account proved false, they and a few other concerned citizens took the message as a wake-up call and formed the Friends of Light's Fort Committee in 2002 to advance the restoration process.

The group of friends takes its difficult task seriously but also has fun with the stimulating project.

"We're all people who are interested in history, and most of us are retired," Jones said. "We come from different backgrounds and offer different skills and thoughts to the group."

Tom Davis joined the group in October after retiring from his engineering job in late September, at the urging of his wife Sue, also a committee member. As project manager, Davis evaluates the structure's needs to remain standing

"There's definitely a self-satisfaction of bringing this fort back to use for the community of Lebanon," Tom Davis said. "I like the idea I can apply my skills and offer a little bit of help."

To educate the public about Light's Fort and its history, the committee holds an Open House, free to the community, twice a year. Sue Davis displays posters of old pictures and drawings, and she enjoys signing new people up to join the organization.

"I'm always amazed by how many people walked by and had no clue that the building was anything important," she said. "That's our main goal, getting people to appreciate this local history."

Also at the open houses, Heisley looks forward to talking to different people who share varying accounts and stories about the building's history, especially about the fabled tunnels that run under the city that supposedly ran from Light's Fort to Eighth and

Cumberland streets and 10th Street to Willow Street, perhaps as part of the Underground Railroad.

"It's fascinating to talk to people with different stories who come from all corners of the world," Heisley said. "It truly is an interesting project."

Putting a dent in preserving

Because no drawings, sketches or blueprints exist of the original building, Jones and the other committee members realize they probably cannot restore Light's Fort to the way it looked in 1742.

"We have to use imagination and the best of our knowledge to restore it as closely as possible, but it will never look exactly as it did back in the 1700s," Jones said. "We can restore to it the best of our ability with what's here for us to work with."

The committee has set its eyes on a 1910 postcard that illustrates a rustic barn with a stockade fence. Parts of the building, including the symmetrical windows and hip roof, provide clues to its original Germanic style, but without earlier documentation, the group has decided to work with the postcard.

"It's a black ink sketch with a rider on a horse coming toward the building, and that's what we're going to try to replicate," Heisley said. "Hopefully we'll see it in our lifetime."

According to Tom Davis, the first step must be restoring the exterior.

"We have to start with the walls and foundation before we can even begin restoring the inside," he said.

Last year the committee had a local architect and structural engineer, who volunteered their time and experience, draw up a renovation plan. Their first suggestion was to stabilize the walls. On the exterior, the most recently added mortar (there are no documents showing when changes were made) made with cement all needs to be removed.

"What's happened here because there's cement in this new mortar it's too heavy for the walls and the building's walls are bowing," Jones said. "All of the mortar has to be taken out and other mortar added. We have to find masons who not only could do the work but who know how to mix the old mortar."

Jones added that beginning the restoration on the outside will also allow people to see that steps are being made.

How long the renovation will take will depend on how many contracting firms offer bids,

Davis said. He believes construction is currently at a standstill, which may work to the committee's advantage since a firm may take on the project to keep its crew together in the economic downturn.

"This is going to be a work in progress for many years, but little by little, we can put a dent in preserving it for many more years," he said.

Spring or no spring?

The fort's "most valuable asset" is the vaulted cellar with an arched ceiling, according to Jones. Tradition has it that a freshwater spring ran through the basement at

one point. However, with no blueprints and no recorded information, it's difficult to verify such a claim.

"It was very common for old houses to be built over springs, so in case of an attack or any sort of emergency, water was easily accessible," Jones said. "But back in the 1700s, nobody actually wrote anything down, although a number of writings claim that is the original basement. There's a lot of misinformation."

Because of misinformation, Tom Davis questions if there was a spring in the basement when the structure was built. He recently read in one of a few of the building's reports that pipes run below the fort, but he's not sure when they were created, although he suggests they were placed when the structure served as a distillery.

"Unfortunately we're not privy to any historical documents, since John Light pre-dates factual records" Davis said. "We're still digging, but no one knows for sure."

To find any kind of historical support or archives, Davis said he and a few other members of the committee will visit libraries and historical societies in Lancaster County and Philadelphia over the coming months.

Help wanted

In order for the committee to begin stabilizing the fort's walls, a substantial amount of funds must be raised, Jones said.

"We all know economic times are difficult, but every \$5, \$10, or \$25 helps," she said.

Although donations of all sizes are appreciated, it will be quite a while until they add up to \$100,000, she added. Even with city, state and federal assistance grants, Friends of Light's Fort is far from possessing the money required for its objectives.

"What we really need to find is a well-to-do benefactor," Heisley said. "The more people are subjected to information about this place, I think we can raise the funds, but it's going to take time and effort and commitment."

Funds are not all the committee seeks. Once the money is secured, it will need architects

and masons privy to historic restorations to sign on to the project.

Anyone with pictures, drawings or other information is also asked to share it with the committee to help rediscover the building's full history.

After funds are secured and the structure stabilized, many members of the Friends of Light's Fort Committee would like to see the building become an educational facility where children can visit on field trips and tourists can learn about Lebanon's early history.

According to Jan Morrisey, president of the Historic Preservation Trust of Lebanon County, another idea on the table is using the building as a meeting place for the preservation trust, which also owns the Monroe Valley Chapel in Swatara Township and Chestnut Tree Log House in Lebanon. The organization does not currently operate from an office.

All friends of the fort agree that, regardless of the exact nature of the building's future, what matters most is that it continues to stand and be used for historical use.

"It's history and we just want to keep these historical places from being bulldozed down like other buildings in the county," Morrisey said. "I don't like old things torn down. Some things can be replaced, but Light's Fort cannot be replaced."