

# New museum features SRS history

The newest museum in Aiken recently opened its doors to the public after many years of planning. The SRS Museum, at 224 Laurens St. S.E., is dedicated to preserving and interpreting the heritage of the Savannah River Site with interesting and exciting exhibits and programs.

## SRS Museum – the past

The SRS Museum has been a work in progress since 2003; the Cold War had been won and the Department of Energy was dismantling surplus buildings at the Site. Local residents who were interested in establishing a museum for the Savannah River Site realized that if artifacts in surplus buildings were lost or destroyed, a future museum might have nothing to exhibit.

Citizens for Nuclear Technology Awareness (CNTA) established a committee to promote saving artifacts that were important in SRS history. Later, CNTA transferred responsibility to the SRS Heritage Foundation which was approved as a non-profit 501c3 organization in 2005. The Foundation planned for eventual use of a surplus Site building as the SRS Heritage Center. A preliminary design was commissioned in 2007 but financial support was not available and the Foundation began investigating possible locations in Aiken for the Museum.

In 2013 the Foundation joined the Aiken Together capital campaign to raise funds for the proposed SRS Museum as well as the Center for African-American History, Art and Culture and the Aiken Visitors Center and Train Museum. The search for a building was enthusiastically concluded when Aiken County gave the keys to the Dibble Memorial Library building to the Foundation in 2014. The Foundation began immediate building restoration and the formal ribbon-cutting ceremony was held October 14th. Fabrication of exhibits began immediately and occasional public visits were accommodated as construction work permitted.

## SRS Museum – the present

Initial construction work to install a fire suppression system and an accessible restroom and to restore the exterior of the original Dibble building began in June 2016 and was completed in January 2017 using Foundation funds and money from the Aiken Together campaign. Completion of this work allows unrestricted public access to the first floor of the building.

The first scheduled public openings began in March and are currently in progress. The Museum expects to have welcomed close to 1000 visitors by the end of the first year of



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unrestricted operation. Guests have included the Russian Plutonium Production Reactor Agreement team and tourists from Japan and Australia as well as local residents and visitors.

A large timeline depicting events at the Savannah River Site was installed in the Museum in 2015 and additional exhibits have been added as construction work continued. Current Museum exhibits include:

- A chronology of major events of the Cold War with the Soviet Union and its satellites, including a model and special exhibit of the CIA U-2 spy plane known as the "Dragon Lady."
- A simulated fallout shelter reflecting concerns about the possibility of a Soviet nuclear attack including the "Duck and Cover" video shown to school children during the 1950s and '60s.
- The construction of the 310-square-mile Savannah River Project with photographs and descriptions of Site processes.
- The underground counting facility used to detect very low levels of radiation, initially for the Site and more recently for national security.
- The Defense Waste Processing Facility, the nation's only site for stabilizing highly radioactive waste in a form suitable for safe, long-term storage and ultimate disposal.
- The SRS program producing plutonium-238 which generated reliable electric power and heat for US space exploration of our solar system and beyond, as well as the Mars rover Curiosity.
- Radiation in the world around us and safely working with radiation through shielding, time or distance.
- A simulated glove box providing a realistic, interactive experience in working with radiation.
- The Savannah River Ecology Laboratory, which began ecological baseline studies before the first production building was completed and has grown to be internationally recognized as the birthplace of the modern science



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From left are Dwayne Wilson and Carol Johnson of SRNS; Dave Moody, DOE manager; Walt and Paula Joseph of the SRS Heritage Foundation; Ronnie Young, chairman of Aiken County Council; and U.S. Rep. Joe Wilson, R-S.C.

of ecology.

In celebration of Nuclear Science Week, a major exhibit featuring robots has been installed at the Museum. The exhibit includes several robots on loan from the SRS Cold War Collection. The robot exhibit will be open from 1:00 to 4:00 each day of Nuclear Science Week. Weekday evening programs from 5:00 to 7:00 will showcase robotics teams from area schools. Participating students will discuss their projects and demonstrate their robots.

The Museum also sponsors walking tours of the former community of Ellenton on the Savannah River Site and has been active in other community projects, including identification of the Aiken fallout shelter in the Park Avenue median at Laurens Street.

## SRS Museum – the future

The next major project for the Museum is to replace the outmoded staircase to the second floor with a modern elevator and stairwell permitting handicapped access. A curation room for storage for the Museum artifact collection and upgrades to the heating and cooling system will be included in this project. Work will begin as funds from the Aiken Together campaign become available.

Preliminary designs of advanced exhibits has been completed and detailed designs will



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begin while construction work is in progress. The plan visualizes state-of-the-art interactive exhibits that will be exciting and informative for Museum visitors.

The public is invited to come watch the SRS Museum grow into an exciting and educational future.