

LOCAL

No yawning allowed: Samuel Slater Experience interactive museum opens March 4 in Webster

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WEBSTER — Chaperoning children through a history museum won't generate the same level of enthusiasm as a trip to the Magic Kingdom, which is what the Samuel Slater Experience intends to correct.

Opening March 4 after five years of planning and construction, the \$6 million facility on Ray Street represents the vision of Christopher Robert, founder and president of Webster Museums Inc., who donated 95% of the cost to create interactive displays aimed at young learners and their 21st century attention spans.

Samuel Slater (1768-1835) is considered the father of the American Industrial Revolution, yet most people don't know who he is because history lessons are lacking in both depth and appeal, according to the 81-year-old Robert.

"I visited boring museums growing up in Minnesota and in many other locations in the USA," he said. "But I was actually most impressed with how Disney used technology to teach in its parks, and concluded there is an opportunity to use this idea to improve the education process."

Robert introduced 4D digital technology to the telling of Slater's story, a 21-year-old mill apprentice in England who in November 1789 brought the secrets of cotton manufacturing to the young colonies, breaking British law in the process and earning the moniker "Slater the Traitor."

“My goal is to educate children to history in such a way they actually remember what they learn,” he said.

Disney-like experience

Located in the old National Guard Armory at 31 Ray St., the museum comprises more than 20 immersive exhibits that are synergistic and artifact-based.

The Savannah-based firm dmdg2 designed the exhibits and Boston Productions Inc. created the digital media.

The results match the goal of an informative, interesting and Disney-like experience, said Robert during a recent tour.

He gestured toward a 35-foot-long, 20-foot-tall video wall that puts a visitor onto the ocean with young Slater, whose life-size hologram describes a storm-tossed crossing.

There’s ocean spray, the smell of salt air, thunder, lightening and a cargo vessel replete with billowing sails. The multimedia production anchors guests on a moving surface where a seasick Slater expresses his doubts, boredom and ambitions during the 66-day journey.

“Sam Slater transformed America’s agrarian society from farming to mill work,” said educational consultant Timothy Prouty, former principal at Tantasqua Regional Technical High School, who developed school curricula for the museum.

“His near-photographic memory of the Arkwright loom meant he could replicate the manufacturing secrets of spinning cotton first in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, and later in Webster,” he added.

Prouty described Slater as a “paternalistic benefactor,” who was concerned with the lives of his workers and introduced the family system of manufacturing to New England.

“He wanted to be sure there was enough housing for his workers, so he built cottages,” Prouty said. “He employed entire families. This was before there were child labor laws. And he established the first Sunday school in America to benefit mill children.”

Exhibits unique in scope

Marketing Director Barbara Van Reed called the exhibits unique in scope, with the 17,000-square-foot space divided into two parts.

The first half is dedicated to Slater's youth, arrival in America and establishment of six textile mills. There's a full-scale replica of a working waterwheel that rumbles as it powers the machinery. Looms spin and a multimedia production tells the stories of workers who left their farms for the mills, followed by waves of immigrants.

"These artifacts allow guests to experience the inner workings of a cotton mill, hear its deafening sounds and meet the mill 'hands,'" Van Reed said.

The second half is devoted to boomtown Webster at the turn of the 20th century. The "clang, clang, clang" of a 1903 trolley car provides a virtual tour of Main Street, transporting passengers to Lake Chaubunagungamaug.

There is a 250-foot replica of the historic Maanexit Hotel, the Liberty Theater is showing "The Great Train Robbery" and the Webster Times office allows visitors to take a photo and draft their own news story.

A speakeasy, disguised as a post office, features a holographic thug who tells young visitors to "scram" through a door panel if they dare to knock.

Webster Superintendent of Schools Ruthann Goguen felt as if she "entered a time machine" during a recent tour.

"You are able to see, hear and feel the past. We are truly excited about having this museum as a partner and resource in our backyard. Many school districts, students and teachers will be in awe of this interactive experience," she said.

Webster-Dudley Historical Society archivist Curtis Cleaves said the town has benefited from the renewed interest in the industrial revolution and Slater's contribution to it.

"The Samuel Slater Experience is truly one of a kind, unlike any other historical exhibit and collection," he said. "The care, research and passion that has gone into its creation has

made it an invaluable resource.”

To purchase tickets or for more information, go to samuel Slater Experience.