

## Breathing life into home where Lincoln died



Chuck Groshong, left, and Jonathan Keperling look over a door made for the Petersen House, below.



People know of Ford's Theatre, where on April 14, 1865, John Wilkes Booth shot Abraham Lincoln.

Fewer people know of the Petersen House, where the stricken president was carried and treated, and where he died the next day.

Now, a team of Lancaster County woodworkers is toiling to restore the federal-style rowhouse in Washington, D.C., which has fallen into decline.

"The National Park Service ... wants to save it from falling apart," Chuck Groshong, co-owner of Historic

### County shop key player in Petersen House renovation

Restorations at 341 E. Liberty St., said. "There had been some repairs down over the years that were shortsighted. There were a lot of Band-Aid solutions. Now they have a plan."

The Petersen House, built in 1849 by a German tailor, is owned by the federal Department of the Interior and is maintained as part of the Ford's Theatre National Historic Site. The house has been closed for repairs since September and is scheduled to reopen this summer.

"These days, a lot of money is being spent on restoring old buildings," Groshong said. "We're specialists, and we fit into that niche."

The family owned Lancaster business, which was contacted by the federal government's project overseers because of its reputation for restoration workmanship, began shifting beams and prying up floorboards Feb. 7. Groshong said he expects they'll wrap up their portion of the project by late May.

In addition to Groshong, the team consists of: son-in-law Jonathan Keperling; wife Lois Groshong; daughter Danielle Groshong-Keperling; and employees Jonathan Yuninger and Joseph Wagner. Additional help was subcontracted locally through Highline Construction of Christiana.

Indicating a couple of black locust beams in his Liberty Street workshop, Groshong said, "These all came out of the old porch. And they'll go back in. We had to make extensions because the wood was rotted."

Nearby, porch doors were being built of mahogany to match the original specifications, using highly detailed mortise-and-tenon joinery.

Most of the windows in the structure were restored and reinstalled, except for some in the rear that had to be resized to accommodate new Americans with Disabilities Act access regulations. Original pine flooring was taken up, restored and replaced.

"It was a major concern of the parks department that we save as much of the original wood as possible," Groshong-Keperling said. "So, we've had to come up with a lot of custom solutions."

Nearly 4,000 board feet of original wood has been restored, she said, and about 1,000 board feet of new wood has been customized to replace wood "that had deteriorated to the point that restoration wasn't possible."

The job also included removal of a lot of lead paint, Groshong said.

"A lot of the work is being done on-site," Keperling said. "A lot of the new wood is being milled there, too."

He estimated that about 75 percent of the company's work time has been spent in D.C. Work there is challenging, Groshong said, because "there's very limited space down there." For instance, he said, "we had to get 20-foot-long ceiling joists into the attic. There were tons of mechanicals in the way, plus a sprinkler system and the like to deal with. ... It took awhile to figure out how to get a 20-foot piece into a 16-foot space."

"Some of what they're asking for — well, it borders on the impossible," he said. "We just work and work on it until it becomes possible."

Also challenging, Groshong said, is the "government structure" of the work site.

"There's a lot of insulated management. A lot of redundancy. And government inspectors are in there every day," he said. "It slows the work down when you're dealing with so many processes and working through so many layers."

On the plus side, he said, the parks department spent the past decade preparing for the job, including having a thorough set of new blueprints drawn up for the house.

"That's rare," he said. "And it's allowed us to do a lot of work in the shop and be confident that the numbers are right."