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Vesterheim Plans New Forging Studio for Folk Art School

DECORAH, Iowa —In January 2024, Vesterheim, the National Norwegian-American Museum and Folk Art School, purchased a building to support its folk art education programs and operations, including a new forging classroom. Located at 418 W. Water Street, across Mechanic Street from Vesterheim’s Westby-Torgerson Education Center, this building recently housed the Northeast Iowa Montessori School, which has relocated to a property on South Avenue in Decorah.

Preliminary engineering analysis has been completed, and when the Board of Trustees met in early May, they approved a spending authority request to support completing the final design work for Vesterheim’s forging classroom. The forging space will be located on the lower level of the building, which features high ceilings and concrete floor, walls, and pillars. Remodeling work plans are set to happen in 2024 with the goal of opening the remodeled space for forging classes in 2025.

Plans for the upper level of the building are still in development and will be announced once finalized.

The project to create an ideal space for forging classes at Vesterheim has been in the works for years.

Knifemaking and forging have always been part of Norwegian and Norwegian-American culture and handcraft. The first knifemaking classes at Vesterheim began in the 1980s, taught by Norwegian instructor Håvard Bergland, who often demonstrated forging techniques in classes held outdoors.

Forging at Vesterheim came into its own in 2015, with a handful of opportunities held in Decorah, but due to space limitations, mostly off site in South Dakota, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

Vesterheim forging classes have been taught by skilled blacksmiths including Brian Fuhrmann, KJ Groven, Morten Håkonsen, Tom Latané, Kelly Ludeking, Olav Mortenson, and Gene Tokheim.

Over the years, Vesterheim Folk Art School staff has gone on research trips to other forges and considered several options for how to best offer metalworking classes in Decorah.

Vesterheim Director of Folk Art Education, Andrew Ellingsen, said, “We are thrilled to create this ideal and safe place for forging classes at Vesterheim, and we are grateful to the instructors who helped establish and continue Vesterheim’s metalworking program as we worked on plans for a new home for forging classes!”

Vesterheim, the National Norwegian-American Museum and Folk Art School, welcomes people of all ages and backgrounds to engage in the conversation of the American immigrant journey through the lens of the Norwegian-American experience. Vesterheim offers innovative and interactive exhibits, classes, and programs, both at the dynamic campus and park in scenic Decorah, Iowa, and online at vesterheim.org and Vesterheim social media. For more information on exhibits, classes, programs, tours, membership opportunities, and ways to donate and volunteer, connect at vesterheim.org, (563) 382-9681, and Vesterheim, 502 W. Water St., P.O. Box 379, Decorah, IA, 52101-0379.