The Mount Airy Museum of Regional History will kick off its summer season Memorial Day weekend with expanded hours, the return of the Ghost Tours and two new programs offering unique ways for local residents and visitors to engage with local history. One new program will be a downtown history and architecture walking tour. “It’s a great opportunity to learn about the evolution of architecture in this community,” said Matthew Edwards, museum director. The tours will depart from the museum at 6 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays. Tickets for the approximately 90-minute tours cost $11 including tax and will be available for advance purchase at the museum and online.

The tour, currently clocked at about 3/4 of a mile, highlights architecture both in the downtown business district and nearby residential areas. “We’re still tweaking the route,” Edwards said, referring to the early stages as “beta-testing.” Tour guides have been training over the past several weeks, and a group from the visitors center will take the tour on Wednesday. Combining both business and residential areas provides a way to tie in the stories of the buildings with the stories of the people who built them. “Many people who built our historic district today lived within sight,” Edwards explained. He gave the example of W.E. Merritt, the owner of a local brick yard who built the museum building and lived in a house on Main Street. The tour also places the Mount Airy specific elements within a broader context. “The architecture follows the trends happening throughout the south between the 1880s and 1920s, with a push towards modernization and urban renewal in the 50s and 60s that dramatically altered things,” the director said. “Recently, there’s been a little more interest turning them back to their original aesthetic, which is not just happening here, it’s happening all over the country.”

Costumed guided tours offered

Museum visitors will have the option to take a guided tour led by a costumed character from the area’s history on Saturdays. For $4 added to the admission fee, the 1.5 hour tours will depart from the museum’s front desk at 11, 1 and 3 p.m. The guides, some of whom are trained actors, come armed with a “ton of stories,” each offering a different perspective on the exhibits and history. “Everyone has their areas,” he said. “There’s one-and-a-half hours of personal narrative and interesting stories.” “I think it’s going to be a neat little add on,” he said. “I’m excited about it. You may get me one day,” the museum director said without disclosing which historical character he would portray. Edwards noted that new programs reflect an ongoing effort to find creative ways to engage folks with history and diversify the non-profit organization’s revenue stream. “My hope is it’s going to go really well,” he said. “You just never know until you try it.”

Perennial favorites return

On the don't knock it 'till you try it note, Edwards admitted he was not an early supporter of the ghost tours. "I'm happy to say I can be wrong," he said, noting that more than 4,000 people have taken ghost tours since their inception in 2011. "It's been a strong and consistent revenue stream for us, and a tremendous asset to the museum." The ghost tours will also resume Memorial Day weekend, as the website states, "dearly" departing from the museum at 8 p.m. each Friday and Saturday. Tickets cost $13 and can be purchased in advance at www.haunted mayberry.com.

This year the tours will be capped at 2o people per tour. With tours in past years sometimes drawing up to 50 people who "may have been missing out on some of the experience at that point," Edwards said, adding that if the smaller sized tours fill up, "we've booked additional tour guides to add tours." The director noted that the content of the ghost tours is continually evolving. "We have more stories in our arsenal than you can fit into a given tour," he said. "Each guide has their own little spin, and each time someone takes the tour they get something different." Beginning Memorial Day weekend the museum will be open seven days a week, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday, and from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. on Sunday. For more information or to purchase tickets call 336-786-4478 or visit www.northcarolinamuseum.org.