

WHEELING – A homecoming of sorts was held at Elmhurst, The House of Friendship in Wheeling on Tuesday, when a portrait of a family patriarch was delivered to the mansion he once called home.

Samuel S. Bloch was co-founder of the Bloch Brothers Tobacco company in Wheeling. The company he founded in 1879 with brother Aaron is best known for its Mail Pouch chewing tobacco that is still produced today by Swisher International, which operates offices and a manufacturing facility out of the former Bloch Brothers Tobacco Works buildings in South Wheeling.

A member of the Wheeling Hall of Fame, Bloch built his stately Victorian summer home along National Road in what is now known as the Pleasant Valley neighborhood near Woodsdale around 1891. Bloch died in 1937 at the age of 87, and the mansion, dubbed Elmhurst, was donated by his heirs in 1940 to the Home for Aged Women, which became The House of Friendship – a retirement community that to this day operates out of the historic building.

Many artifacts from the original Bloch mansion still remain, along with portraits of the family members – but none of Samuel Bloch ... until now.

A framed portrait of the local tobacco baron was one of many treasures salvaged from inside the former Ohio Valley Medical Center. After the hospital closed its doors in 2019, the campus was acquired by the city, which is currently finalizing an agreement with WVU Medicine to build a new, state-of-the-art cancer center at the site.

Since the buildings on the former hospital campus are expected to be demolished, the city has allowed local historians and

organizations to save many of the historic gems that remain inside the buildings.

“There’s a lot of local history associated with OVMC, because it served the local community for over 100 years,” Wheeling City Manager Robert Herron said. “It’s obviously been announced that the buildings will be demolished, so the city has made historical artifacts, plaques and paintings available to the community to preserve the legacy of the facility.”

Officials from the Ohio County Public Library have become stewards of many historical records from OVMC and its school of nursing, hospital board minutes and other documents from the vacated campus. The library also came into possession of the Samuel Bloch portrait, but library officials took action to have the painting gifted to a much more appropriate recipient – those at the former Bloch mansion at Elmhurst.

“We have a lot of the historical material at the hospital – including the first minute book – but we also have a lot of portraits and plaques and things like that,” said Laura Carroll, assistant director and archivist at the library, who reached out to Elmhurst about assuming ownership of the portrait. “Sometimes, those things are better off in other places.”

Carroll said the Bloch portrait will now have the perfect new home – back where he lived and raised his family, and actually where he passed away.

Jamie Crow, executive director of Elmhurst, The House of Friendship, said it was very exciting to be able to add the portrait of the mansion’s patriarch to the facility – especially since that was one thing missing from the array of treasures there.

“Samuel Bloch’s family actually gifted us the mansion in 1940,” Crow said. “We have pictures in the living room of his son and his son’s wife, so to be able to add Samuel to that arrangement in the living room means a lot because it’s our history and who we are. We are ecstatic and thrilled. We do not have any large pictures of Samuel Bloch – just small pictures and photos in frames on our history wall.”

Crow said the board at Elmhurst, The House of Friendship – which has a 132 history with roots as deep in the community as those of the Bloch family – have continued to maintain the Victorian mansion’s architecture through a number of expansions over the decades. In the early days of the retirement community’s 132-year history, Samuel Bloch himself served on the board of directors.

“We have a long history, and we wouldn’t be here in Woodsdale if it wasn’t for the Blochs,” Crow said. “They gave so much to the community. They were very philanthropic.”

In 1929, Samuel and his wife, Bertha, donated \$20,000 to Ohio Valley General Hospital – which later became Ohio Valley Medical Center – in Wheeling for the development of a pediatric center at the hospital. Later, the Bloch children gave \$250,000 to construct the nurses’ residence at OVMC.

Pieces of history from the former hospital continue to find a home thanks to the library, the Friends of Wheeling and other entities that work to preserve precious artifacts from the city’s storied past.

“OVMC was a beloved facility in this community for a long time, and the city is happy that its history can be preserved throughout the community,” Herron said.

The Ohio County Public Library has also been a key player in getting these pieces of history into the hands of those who treasure them – whether they be items from OVMC or other locations.

This past week, the library also returned one of its most unusual items to a family member. The Ohio County Public Library has housed the death mask of William P. Hubbard for several years. The death mask – a cast of a person’s face made to preserve their likeness soon after they’ve passed – was found in a home in Wheeling and donated to the library.

A relative of William Hubbard – Cindy Hubbard of Wheeling – reached out to the library to ask if she may be able to acquire the mask. The library and the mask’s original donor were happy to return it to her family.

Hubbard was a notable statesman, legislator and Civil War veteran who lived in the Elm Grove area. Library officials said Cindy Hubbard had done a tremendous job of collecting her family history, and the mask is now – most appropriately – in her family’s possession.