

Associated Press

“Barnes Foundation breaks ground in Philadelphia”

by Joann Loviglio

November 13, 2009



Photograph by Matt Rourke/Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA -- The Barnes Foundation broke ground Friday on a new museum, the final chapter in its embittering quest to break its founder's will and move its multibillion-dollar art collection from the suburbs to downtown.

About 150 people, most of them from Philadelphia's arts and philanthropic communities, were on hand for the event, which took place under an enormous tent that blocked out the chilly rain - and the view of a group protesting the move.

Barnes board chairman Bernard C. Watson told the crowd of 200 guests that the move guarantees the collection will be protected and ends the legal wrangling in its "besieged suburban setting."

"None of the people raising their voices now in anger reached into their pockets to assist us in Merion," he said.

The new Barnes is slated to open in 2012 on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, near the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Rodin Museum and the city's science museum.

About 20 protesters outside the groundbreaking held signs reading "Crime Scene Do Not Enter" and "Toxic Area Tax Dump Site."

Evelyn Yaari of Friends of the Barnes Foundation, a group opposing the move, called the plan "a stupid attempt to recreate what we already have" and a pork barrel project that will destroy a unique cultural treasure.

"The very last thing we should do is dismantle it," she said, "and good practices tell us that we should conserve the authentic and not undertake actions that cannot be undone."

Albert Barnes, a pharmaceutical magnate, established the foundation in 1922 to teach populist methods of appreciating and evaluating art.

His collection includes an astounding trove of French impressionist and postimpressionist masterpieces and thousands of other objects in its 23-room limestone gallery by French architect Paul Philippe Cret.

Barnes died in a 1951 car crash, and his will instructed that his paintings, including 181 Renoirs, 69 Cezannes, 60 Matisse and 44 Picassos, "remain in exactly the places they are" after his death.

Half a century after his death, the foundation he started said it would go bankrupt if forced to stay in its out-of-the-way home, which was subject to township rules that severely restricted the number of visitors.

The foundation asked a Montgomery County judge in 2004 for permission to break the will and move near Philadelphia's more popular and more accessible cultural attractions.

Since the move was approved, the Barnes has raised \$150 million, including a \$25 million grant from the state and millions more from three charitable foundations, for construction and to establish an operating endowment. Its goal is \$200 million.

Mayor Michael Nutter and other local lawmakers at Friday's event said the Barnes will bring with it jobs, tourist dollars and prestige.

Barnes placed his paintings close together and grouped them with objects like metal hinges and wrought ironwork as a teaching tool to illustrate common aesthetic themes.

Officials have said those groupings will remain the same at the new site.