

The Museum of Northern Arizona (MNA) was founded by Dr. Harold Colton and his wife, Mary-Russell Ferrell Colton, who moved to Flagstaff in 1926. The early museum collections were located in rented spaces in town; there were no existing museum buildings or a campus at that time. In 1928 Dr. Colton built the Birds Nest (named for a triangular bird house affixed to the west side of the structure); its purpose was as a residence for summer visitors, primarily from his family, and was designed by his brother Ralph, an architect. Over time the land on which the building stood became part of the museum campus; thus the Birds Nest is in fact the first building built and subsequently used by the museum.

The original Birds Nest was an 854 sq.ft. two-bedroom structure with vertical exterior wood siding (“board and batten” style). Apparently sometime in the 1930s, after the founding of the museum in 1928, it was converted for use as staff housing and the original front porch was enclosed. In 1953, when Dr. Colton was still Museum Director and Chairman of the Board of Trustees, the Birds Nest was modernized for occupancy by the museum’s Assistant Director, with two additions made in 1954 and 1955, enlarging the building to 1518 sq. ft. At that point the building in no way resembled the original 1928 appearance, having been enlarged and remodeled, changing the original footprint, with the dark wood vertical siding replaced by light colored horizontal asbestos siding. That is the appearance as it is today. The Birds Nest has not been used as a residence since the 1990s and since then has been used only for storage. Because the structure has considerably deteriorated and its condition makes it unsuitable for human occupancy or other use, it has been considered for future demolition. The thickness of the original walls and roof framing would also make it extremely difficult to remodel the structure to meet current energy codes, and the foundation, floor, and roof framing also do not meet current structural codes. These issues lend further weight towards the decision to demolish and rebuild.

The museum has grown incrementally over the years, with various of its 39 existing buildings incorporated or constructed from the 1920s to the 2000s. However, none of the buildings has been designed with space designated for conferences and meetings. As an example, the Board of Trustees meetings have had to be held at one of four locations throughout the campus, depending on availability, and staff meetings are similarly constrained. Thus it seems not only a logical but a very desirable project to combine the rescue and restoration of a historic building—the Birds Nest—with the attainment of a space designed specifically for a number of administrative and educational uses, such as board and staff plenary meetings, committee meetings, staff training, educational programs, interviews, etc. all with the capability of remote access.

The goal of this project is to achieve this objective, with restoration of the Birds Nest that honors the original 1928 design and appearance, while allowing for some enlargement and modification to provide adequate space for the designated needs, as well as meeting current codes and using fire-wise building materials. The building “footprint” would roughly follow the original, including the later main living room addition to the north. The exterior materials would recapitulate the vertical siding and roofing as originally used.

While not listed on the historic register, MNA would like to honor the intent of Flagstaff's historic preservation goals, while bringing new life and use to this part of the campus.