

National Native American Hall of Fame gets OKC headquarters

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The Native American Hall of Fame is establishing its headquarters inside a historic property in Oklahoma City called the Sundial Mansion. DOUG HOKE/THE OKLAHOMAN

A historic mansion in Oklahoma City will serve as the new home for the National Native American Hall of Fame.

The Sundial Mansion, a Mediterranean-style villa built in 1919, is now the permanent headquarters for the organization dedicated to preserving and celebrating the achievements of contemporary Native Americans who have made lasting impacts on their communities and the nation. The mansion was previously purchased in 2025 for \$1.2 million, according to the Oklahoma County Assessor.

The property at 4000 N Kelley Ave. carries a rich history. It was built by John Sinopoulo, a native of Sparta, Greece, on a 20-acre tract of land for his

wife, Katherine de la Montaigne, and has become a distinctive architectural landmark in the area.



James Parker Shield, the founder of the National Native American Hall of Fame is pictured on March 16 inside the Sundial Mansion, which will become the headquarters for the organization. DOUG HOKE/THE OKLAHOMAN

The home, added to the National Register of Historic Places in April 1979, spans 5,000 square feet and features 14 rooms across four levels, with a twostory core running north and south. It also features a curved staircase and white columns and balustrades.

James Parker Shield, founder of the National Native American Hall of Fame, didn't have a specific vision in mind for what the organization's future home would look like. Their offices were at the First Americans Museum, as well as their displays on a 2.5-year lease, but the group knew they needed a permanent location.

They had established a capital campaign committee and developed a plan to raise funds, but the right opportunity came quickly when fundraising efforts weren't quite off the ground.

The Sundial Mansion was listed on a realty site, and Shield's reaction was immediate.

"I thought, 'I have to go see it,'" he said.

He contacted a realtor, toured the property, and knew instantly the historic house would be perfect for the organization.

But they still didn't have the money to get it, yet. Shield said the effort that followed was his own take on 'the art of a deal.'

"I think we could have taught (Donald Trump) a few lessons," Shield said.

The effort to acquire the property involved combining organization money on hand with funding from other sources, a majority of it from financing because doing months of presentations to get pledges from various tribes and foundations wasn't possible given the short timeline.

"I have to get that money fast," Shield said. "So I thought, 'well, you just do it the same way everybody else does when you're buying an ordinary house. You finance it.'" Shield said Sovereign Bank, owned by the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, provided the financing, and additional money came from other tribes in the U.S., including in California.

'We had a great deal of help from Citizen Potawatomi Nation, and in California with the (Picayune Rancheria of) Chukchansi Indians, the Pechanga (Band of) Indians, and the Soboba (Band of Luiseño Indians),' Shield said. 'It was touch and go. We didn't have the last piece of money in place until four minutes before closing.'

On the day of closing, Shield stood with a banker at the Bank of Oklahoma in downtown Oklahoma City, watching a screen that would show the moment when the wire transfer from the California tribe's bank would arrive. Meanwhile, the selling realtor and two representatives from Sovereign Bank waited at the title company.

“As soon as it dropped, the Bank of Oklahoma already had a cashier’s check made out and then handed it to me, and I ran out the door and drove really fast up to the title company,” Shield said.

When he arrived, he got straight to business, flipping pages and signing numerous documents. After the signatures were complete, the two representatives from Sovereign Bank presented Shield with a Pendleton blanket, wrapping it around him before taking a group photo and receiving the keys from the previous owner.

“I had to, of course, share the exciting news and everything with the board, and you know, I think they’re still in recovery,” Shield said.

Shield founded the National Native American Hall of Fame in Montana, where he’s from, in 2016. As the organization grew, he began thinking strategically about where a permanent facility should be. “We need a facility where we can have our displays and our exhibits and collections, and it needs to be central in the U.S.,” Shield said. “Montana is my home, and I love it. But the reality is, it snows a lot there.”

Oklahoma, widely considered the heart of Indian Country, was the natural choice, he said.

“We get a lot of support from the tribes in Oklahoma,” Shield said. “And we do have members of the Hall of Fame that are from Oklahoma tribes.”

The Hall of Fame honors Native Americans, who, through their achievements, have made significant impacts on the lives of Native Americans. The organization recognizes excellence across 16 different categories, including medicine, politics, athletics, culture, education and art. It honors achievements from all the tribal nations in the U.S., and even creates educational curriculum for schools. Monuments at the Hall of Fame will span different states, and events will happen on a national level.

‘Our reach is national, but our home is in Oklahoma City,’ Shield said.

Plans for the mansion

Shield said the new headquarters won’t be a tourist attraction like a museum, but it will still be open to groups and organizations that want to come see the displays it will house.

In addition to exhibits, it will be a place where visitors can learn about the legendary Native Americans who have been inducted. The organization holds an annual induction ceremony, typically at the First Americans Museum, but the Sundial will be where the collections live.

The Hall of Fame will also be available for symposiums, workshops and meetings for the tribes, legislators and businesses.

Despite being built in 1919, Shield said the building was in great shape, but some updates were necessary.

All the hardwood floors were sanded, stained and finished. A local carpet company installed carpeting on the impressive curved staircase on the second floor, where the administrative offices are now located. A tile contractor retiled all the verandas, restoring their elegance.

One challenge is the swimming pool. Shield said it “looks great,” but he told his board it sends the wrong image.

“If we’re out there trying to raise funds for an exhibit, and people are saying, ‘well, it looks like you guys don’t need (help), you’re probably sitting by the pool smoking cigars,’” Shield said. “That’s not the impression we want to have.”

The plan, Shield said, is to eventually fill in the pool and convert it into a theater to show extensive footage, as well as interviews and documentaries to visitors. It could also serve as a venue for speakers, panels and other programming.

Further down the road, Shield said the Hall of Fame plans to build additions to the mansion to accommodate more exhibits.

“Right now we have displays, but we want to have full-blown exhibits on each of our inductees, and that takes space, takes walls,” Shield said.

The National Native American Hall of Fame has set June 6 as the date for the grand opening. The VIP list is already substantial and growing.

Oklahoma City Councilman James Cooper has already toured the property. Mayor David Holt, who attended the organization’s induction ceremony in October, will be invited. The guest list is expected to include tribal leaders, representatives from the public and private sector, and even the contractors who worked on the renovations.

Shield said he looks forward to the future of the organization in Oklahoma City.

“We’re just going to be a nice neighbor, and a good addition to the area,” Shield said.