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FINAL EDITION**SECTION:** LOCAL; Pg. 1B**LENGTH:** 810 words**HEADLINE:** To prepare for the reopening of the Baltimore Basilica, local artisans are restoring figures discovered in the historic church;

Two angels return to grace

BYLINE: MATTHEW HAY BROWN, SUN REPORTER**BODY:**

Older Catholics from the area might remember the winged figures that once flanked the marble altar at the Baltimore Basilica. The pair stood sentinel through the celebration of the Eucharist for more than a century of Sundays before they were removed in the 1940s. Now, after decades in storage, the angels are returning to America's oldest cathedral. At a pair of workshops in Hampden, local craftsmen are peeling off 17 layers of paint from the figures, repairing cracks in the original basswood and resculpting missing parts to restore them to their 19th-century appearance. "You're not a nurse or a doctor, but you're bringing something back that's going to be functional, that's going to serve a group of people, that's going to survive beyond your own life," said Edward Milburn, a gilder who is working on the pieces. "You're connecting with something bigger than yourself." Work on the angels is one element of the two-year restoration of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, intended to return the first Catholic cathedral built in the United States to the original vision of Archbishop John Carroll and his architect, Benjamin Latrobe. This year marks the 200th anniversary of the start of construction; the \$32 million restoration project, which is being funded by private donations, is to be completed in time for a bicentennial reopening in November. "You can almost feel the basilica smiling, because it's finally getting this attention," said Mark J. Potter, executive director of the basilica historic trust. Workers have uncovered and replaced the 24 skylights of the great dome and restored interior walls to their original palette of pale yellow, blue and rose. They have opened access to the crypt that holds the remains of Carroll, Cardinal James Gibbons, Archbishop Martin John Spaulding and other church leaders, and excavated the undercroft to create a lower-level chapel. It was in the undercroft that the angels had been stored - and largely forgotten. After nearly 60 years of neglect, they suffered from chipped paint, open seams between pieces of wood and, in the case of one, missing feet. The historic trust turned to James Adajian, a woodworker who restores, conserves and reproduces furniture, and Milburn, who has done work on the U.S. Capitol - Latrobe's masterwork. Adajian, working out of what was once the machine shop of a sailcloth factory, received the angels about four months ago. He has realigned wooden pieces and closed up seams, and is carving new feet and other missing pieces. "We're using traditional materials, with the same kinds of tools that were used 200 years ago," Adajian said, indicating an array of razor-sharp chisels. Milburn, meanwhile, is using scalpels, picks and chemicals to remove layers of paint as thick as an eighth of an inch. The difference in the weight of a wing that had been peeled bare and another that retained its paint was noticeable yesterday. Once Milburn brings the surface down to the original gesso - a traditional surface preparation for gilding or painting - the figures are to be coated with an oil-based paint to echo the white marble of the altar. The sharply defined features of the bare wing offered a hint of the level of detail that will be visible when the pieces are completed. "They were meant to be seen at a distance," Milburn said. "This will allow natural light to create shadows and contrast." Other artwork that will be visible when the basilica reopens includes four fresco paintings depicting Matthew, Mark, Luke and John that had been walled up since the late 19th century. New paintings of the Assumption of Mary and the Ascension of Jesus will also be seen, in the saucer domes above the sanctuary. Workers also have replaced the electrical, plumbing and heating and air-conditioning systems and brought the building into compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. The historic trust is planning more than a week of activities in November to celebrate the reopening of the basilica, culminating with a procession of the nation's bishops and a Mass on Nov. 12. Nineteenth-century depictions place four angels in the basilica - the two on the altar, and

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two more, now lost, that flanked the central aisle. Who created them is unknown, but theories abound. Ambrose Marechal, archbishop from 1817 to 1828, was in the habit of requesting pieces from his native France. These figures, however, are more typical of the German work of that era. Or they could have been carved by a Fells Point marine sculptor. "The important thing is that we have them, and they're going to be returned to the church in excellent condition," Potter said. "We are pleased that we could go to local craftsmen. This is a national restoration, but we didn't have to leave the city to bring these angels back to life."matthew.brown@baltsun.com

GRAPHIC: Photo(s)

1. Woodworker James Adajian (background) is using traditional tools to return sculpted angels to their former glory. 2. Craftsmen have peeled away 17 layers of paint off the angels that sat in the Baltimore Basilica before their removal in the 1940s.

1. - 2. JED KIRSCHBAUM : SUN PHOTOGRAPHER

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