

Oxford Historical Society mission: Save and restore town's last standing 1-room schoolhouse

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By Nicole Carter

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OXFORD — The one-room schoolhouse is a storied icon of American history. Generations of students were taught the “Three R’s” in poorly-heated and sometimes roughly built schools that were a mainstay of villages and outlying neighborhoods.

As of 1900 Maine had around 4,000 schools where peers from five to 18 years-old mingled together under the tutelage of school master or school mistress, according to the New England Historical Society.

But by the mid-20th century the public school model had shifted to multi-room central schools segmented into elementary, junior and high schools. As one-room school houses began closing to education the buildings often fell into disrepair, were passed on to local farmers, dismantled or left vacant. Some were eventually renovated as community clubs, museums and private residences.

A scant few remain as abandoned relics, and one of those stands at the corner of Route 26 and Rabbit Valley Road in Oxford, overgrown by brush and mature trees and vulnerable to the elements. Now, the Oxford Historical Society is in a race to rescue the structure, known as the Pigeon Hill Schoolhouse, from demolition, move it and utilize it as a living history museum on the grounds of its headquarters at the Kay House on Pleasant Street.

The Pigeon Hill Schoolhouse was built in 1867 and closed in 1940. It stands on land owned and farmed by three generations of the Thurlow family. Evan Thurlow, a former student of the school who died in 2018 at the age of 93, wanted the school to be donated to the town historical society.

The property, including the old farmhouse across the road, is under contract to be sold, and Thurlow’s family reached out to the society to make his wish a reality. The buyers of the property are supportive of the plan but expect the schoolhouse to be moved as soon as possible.

A tight timeline is not the only obstacle to saving the building. The two-story colonial Kay House Museum is headquarters to the Oxford Historical Society and owned by the town. When society President Patricia Larrivee first approached selectmen about accepting the gift, it raised questions on whether the town was required or even allowed to accept a gift for the society and whether voters must authorize it.

After reviewing property deeds, covenants the Kay House operates under, and consulting with the town’s attorney, it was determined the transfer would not require voter approval. However, selectmen still had questions and concerns about how the society would manage the project.

The society’s plan gained much-needed traction when the board voted 3-2 on July 7 to move forward with the project.



Trees and brush surround the 1867 Pigeon Hill Schoolhouse, the last standing one-room schoolhouse in Oxford. The Oxford Historical Society proposes to move it to its headquarters in the village and restore it as a living history museum. *Nicole Carter/Advertiser Democrat*



The 1867 Pigeon Hill Schoolhouse is seen from Rabbit Valley Road in Oxford. It closed in 1940. *Nicole Carter/Advertiser Democrat*

With the opportunity to finally take possession of the school, the society has a small window to raise money and move the schoolhouse.

Without a plan of action, some selectmen were leery of setting a ramshackle building on the grounds of the Kay House, in the middle of the village and next door to Oxford Elementary School.

"I don't support the town accepting the gift," said Selectman Sharon Jackson, referring to the confusion over whether the schoolhouse would become town property or an artifact owned by the society and permanently located at the Kay House.

"I'm not on board with the location, it being in view, either from the road or by the elementary school, without knowing how long it will take to fix up," she said.

Jackson added that while the society has pledged to raise money and apply for grants to restore the building, as of yet no steps have been taken. Her concern is the possibility that Oxford will become responsible for a public eyesore. She said in its current state the building has no value and she wants to see a plan before supporting the project.

Larrivee acknowledges it is putting the cart before the horse but counters that the organization needs to know the move is feasible to all parties before committing resources to pursue it.

"We have a donor who has indicated they will help fund moving it," Larrivee told selectmen at their July 1 meeting. She said she is working with Copp & Sons Building Movers in Cumberland to determine the scope of relocating it and the cost.

Larrivee said the society is also open to ways to move it. The most obvious answer is to move it by trailer, either whole or by separating the roof from the structure. But a second possibility is to dismantle the structure, map and blueprint the frame components, and reassemble it on a pad or foundation at the Kay House. That scenario would eliminate the need to have it sit in the open in its disheveled state and more methodically determine the best way to rebuild and restore it to be usable and safe.



The 1987 Pigeon Hill Schoolhouse on Route 26 in Oxford has no ceiling, broken plaster walls, broken desks, a stack of old windows and other debris. The Oxford Historical is trying to save the town's last standing one-room schoolhouse by moving it to its headquarters in the village and restoring it as a living history museum. *Nicole Carter/Advertiser Democrat*

She also enrolled the society in the 1772 Foundation, which grants money to nonprofit organizations in the form of 1:1 matching grants of up to \$10,000 for shovel-ready historic preservation projects. She is also pursuing grants from other historic preservation organizations such as Maine Preservation and the Davis Foundation.

The society is partnering with the Oxford Historic Preservation Committee, a group formed last year to identify and support preserving buildings of historic value. Members of the committee include Larrivee, Recreation Director Patty Hesse, Henry Jackson, Samantha Hewey, Heather Langelier and Kathleen Dillingham.

Larrivee's vision is to establish an interactive, living history exhibit that preserves Oxford's heritage of rural education. The schoolhouse would be a destination for visitors, a benefit for society members and, she hopes, become available for Oxford Elementary School's outdoor education curriculum.

Some of the schoolhouse furniture is part of society's permanent collection and will be reinstalled in the schoolhouse. It would also house a range of the society's artifacts in rotating topical exhibits.

Anyone who wants to support the project may contact Larrivee at [\[email protected\]](#)

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