

Keeping Schoolhouses in the Finger Lakes Region of New York State

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For over two hundred years, most American children attended one-room country schools. The number of these schools increased to over 200,000 in the early twentieth century* but by the late 1950s, school consolidation resulted in the closure of most of these modest structures. Today, country school buildings are decaying into dust, but some local citizens throughout the nation are transforming them into beautiful monuments. Chris Manaseri, who first became intrigued by country school restoration projects when he was a school superintendent, explored thirty-eight preservation sites in the greater Finger Lakes region of the State of New York and interviewed sixty people involved in the projects. From these data, he developed a taxonomy of volunteers' motivations, types of connections the volunteers had to the projects, and categories of schoolhouse presentation. His research provides useful information and insightful reflections on schoolhouse restoration and the volunteer preservationists engaged in such projects.

—Ed.

*David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot, *Learning Together: A History of Coeducation in American Public Schools* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1992), 47-48.

The preservation of one-room schoolhouses is a relatively unique yet widespread phenomenon, representing an intriguing intersection of public history, educational history, and architectural preservation. This study focused on the people and places involved in more than three dozen such projects in a particular region of upstate New York called the Finger Lakes. The area has a specific history, as do all regions of the country, this one involving the procurement of Native

American lands by both the state and federal governments close to the conclusion of the Revolutionary War. Within decades of independence, these governments had decided on a Many operated for a century or more before succumbing to the predominant trend in school organization of the twentieth century, consolidation. Waves of consolidation efforts during the Depression and World War I and II eras found communities throughout the Finger Lakes region contracted, as population shifts and changing patterns of transportation and technology forced localities to reconfigure the schooling offered to their children and to abandon in many cases the country schools that had been the backbone of nineteenth-century school provision.¹

For a number of communities in this study, the emergence of centralized schools that marked the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s accompanied seismic shifts in community organization and power. Crossroad villages disappeared, canal settlements prospered, railway patterns shifted settlements, and highways replaced byways. By the 1950s, when most centralization of schools had taken place, abandoned school buildings were being reused as community centers, refurbished as private residences, or left to decay on abandoned sites. By the era of the national bicentennial, a wave of community interest in local history led to questions about what remained of public buildings, and a series of schoolhouse preservations became popular. A number of these remain at their original sites, preserved, and even listed on the National Register of Historic Places,² while a similar number were relocated and restored as public history sites, many used for replication of school-day experiences by local school districts.

To gain a greater understanding of the school preservation movement, I visited some thirty-eight school sites and interviewed and otherwise interacted with more than sixty informants whose recorded words produced more than a thousand pages of transcribed notes. Also in that process, I wanted to understand—through my own organization of thoughts, actions, and reflections—what such projects represented to the people who engaged in them. This article synthesizes those thoughts and groups the projects into a typography of sorts. In addition, it explores patterns of presentation of the schools; and represents an ethnography of a group of people with a common idiosyncratic concern—the preservation of country schools.

European Americans in the Finger Lakes Region

The greater Finger Lakes region of New York State was taken by force during the American War of Independence, mostly from one of the five main Native American nations that comprised Iroquoia: the Mohawk, the Oneida, the Onondaga, the Cayuga, and the Seneca. These Native American people had formed a confederacy that had provided for peaceful governance of the region for two centuries prior to the arrival of the Europeans, a confederacy torn asunder during the conflict between European powers (mainly France and England here) for expansion into and colonization of North America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.³

Notorious for its resettlement implications and for the availability for “purchase” of lands subsequent to the treaties involved in the resolution of the Revolutionary War, the Sullivan Campaign, ordered by General George Washington in 1779, exposed soldiers of the Continental Army to the beauty and fertility of the land known as the Finger Lakes. The veterans of the Sullivan campaign and other European Americans from New England and elsewhere resettled the area at the conclusion of the war as a result of the need of the newly formed federal government to compensate veterans with land since there was no other viable means of payment for their service in fighting the British. Large areas of land, “The Military Tract,” were divided into square-mile plots, and towns and counties were formed from these lands. Not long after the cessation of fighting, these rich lands were quickly developed into burgeoning small towns and settlements, and the farms nearby were beginning to feed a growing East Coast population.⁴ Much of land of the Finger Lakes is also known as the burned-over region, so quickly was it developed and so quickly was it thrown into the heat of the religious zealotry of the early nineteenth century’s revivalist movement. It is also home to the Mormon Church in Palmyra, to the Fox sisters’ spiritualism, to the Millerites, and to Jemima Wilkinson’s Quaker communal farm in what would become Penn Yan.⁵ The Oneida Community was one of the longest lasting utopian communal societies in America, home to the “Mansion House” and the free-love experimentation of John Humphrey Noyes. The area is renowned for its involvement in the abolitionist movement, the underground railroad, and the women’s rights movement. It is home to multiple industrial giants such as Kodak, Carrier, Corning and IBM, as well as to numerous colleges and universities, many of which have their origins in the nineteenth-century explosion

of interest in learning represented in part by the establishment of New York's land grant college, Cornell University.⁶

Early Schooling in the Finger Lakes Region

As early as 1782, New York Governor George Clinton warned the state legislature that the Revolutionary War had created a "chasm in education." He called for the encouragement of a system of common schooling at public expense.⁷ In 1784 the Regents of the University of the State of New York was formed, the body with governance responsibility for all educational provisions and professional preparation in the state. This body urged the development of a system of laws and regulations that would be enacted by the legislature and funded by the public in support of the state's common schools. Records from the 1790s show the development of schools in the region. By 1795, a law with a limited five-year lifespan created a common school fund and provided fifty thousand dollars annually to be divided among local communities agreeing to match at least half their allotment with local funds.⁸

By 1798, some 1,352 schools were established in twenty-three counties of the state educating close to sixty thousand students.⁹ Historian Carl Kaestle indicates these data mean that some 75 percent of school-aged children attended a split-funded common school.¹⁰ At the time, common schools were quite common throughout the United States. Kaestle suggests that during the early national period some 95 percent of Americans lived in communities of fewer than 2,500 inhabitants, a figure that changed little in more than forty years.¹¹ Most schoolhouses erected in these communities had only one room and were called informally "country schools."

By 1805 the New York legislature had established a fund for common schools, and in 1812 it enacted the landmark law authorizing the distribution of state funds and the establishment of common-school districts. Town and city officials were directed to lay out districts, voters in which would elect school trustees to oversee the distribution of state funds and the raising of local taxes and/or fees (rate bills) for school purposes. While the 1812 act allowed schools to be formed, an amendment in 1814 *required* that they be.¹² Historian Lawrence Cremin notes that the battle for public funding of common schools was unsettled for much of the early nineteenth century and that the fight for free public education was second only to the abolition of slavery as a subject of political debate during these formative years.¹³ New York and the preserved schoolhouses in the current study were at the heart of these important battles.

By 1825, the Erie Canal was completed, forming a means by which to connect the budding urban centers of New York and Buffalo to points west via the area's waterways. The canal fed the demand for land and the establishment of numerous port towns along its path. The education of children of the pioneers of the region created a loosely linked system of public education through one-room country schools that dotted the landscape at roughly two-square-mile intervals, a distance appropriate for the predominant means of transportation at the time, by foot and by horseback or buggy. These were the archetypal country schools found throughout the Finger Lakes region. In 1830 these small farming communities still represented some 91 percent of the population of New York.¹⁴ Kaestle cites an 1828 *New York Enquirer* article indicating that the education of five-to-fifteen year olds was twice as prevalent in the common schools in the rest of the state as it was in New York City!¹⁵

By the close of the nineteenth century, the demand for free schooling beyond the eighth grade was increasing, and the public high school movement was taking hold strongly in New York. Country schools were increasingly seen as inadequate, and the demand for union free high schools and K-12 central schools grew.¹⁶ Such schools offered the opportunity for secondary level education to the children of rural communities. By the twentieth century the economics and demographics of a new century laid the groundwork for the consolidation of one-room schools into central districts. By 1910 the number of school districts in the state had begun to decrease from a high of 11,372 in 1870 to some 10,565—a pattern that would be exacerbated by the Central Rural Schools Act of 1914 and its post-World War I revision in 1925.¹⁷ A number of the country schools identified in this study are remnants of this consolidation movement. By 1940 there were only 6,400 school districts; and by 1960, only 1,300. Today there are approximately 700 school districts in New York State.¹⁸ Clearly the predominant movement of the twentieth century was school consolidation. In almost all cases, the country school ceased to exist, and with its extermination a concern was raised for the preservation of the buildings and the means of education they represented to small rural communities, which were disappearing at an astonishing rate.

Models of Local Schoolhouse Restoration

I became aware of and enamored by the story of local country schools by chance. As a young superintendent in the 1990s, I came across my first restored one-room schoolhouse at half-time of a high school football game in Dundee, Yates County. I noticed a yellow clapboard building called Barrington #4 that was restored and relocated on the Dundee Central School grounds.¹⁹ I became obsessed with learning the school's story. That obsession grew into two restoration/relocation projects during two subsequent superintendencies, and into a study of the people who involve themselves in this sort of historic preservation. The research results grew out of some twenty years of personal involvement in country school preservation.



Figure 1: Barrington #4 Schoolhouse, relocated to the campus of Dundee Central School. Photographs in this article courtesy of the author.

In order to learn more about the Barrington No. 4 schoolhouse, I contacted the superintendent of the district, Nancy Zimar. Nancy introduced me to her retired superintendent of buildings and grounds, Clarence Sebring. After Clarence and I met, the study of similar projects involving the use of snowball sampling began in earnest.²⁰ Over the next several years, I would arm myself with camera and voice recorder and interview everyone I could find who had been involved in the preservation and/or relocation of a country school. During that same time, I would come to urge local community leaders in the small town of Romulus to organize themselves in an effort to replicate what Clarence had accomplished almost singlehandedly in Dundee. The organizational effort in Romulus led to the relocation and restoration of the MacDougall

Schoolhouse on RCSD property, and that resulted in a similar effort in the next school district for which I was to serve as superintendent, Wheatland-Chili, and the relocation and preservation of the Wheatland No. 4 District in Scottsville in 2004. During this time, I was a student under John Briggs, an education historian at Syracuse University, and Bob Bogdan, a sociologist and qualitative researcher. Both men served on my dissertation committee, guiding me in an effort to research one-room schoolhouse preservation projects and the people who involve themselves in such efforts.

Clarence Sebring, seventy-eight years old when I interviewed him, and his Barrington No. 4 project are perhaps the epitome of the efforts I studied.²¹ His work is certainly representative of the efforts of others who have adopted such projects, if not entirely a model after which all others could pattern their endeavors. Clarence had attended a one-room school in what became the DCSD, though not the Barrington #4 that he helped restore. As a septuagenarian in the community where he was raised, and as a person in a position of relative power and expertise, Clarence took it upon himself to do what he could to preserve a generation of schooling experience that had disappeared. Every day on his way to work at the central school from which he had graduated, he passed along the highway one of the last and best standing one-room school buildings that had been consolidated to form DCSD, and every day he saw that old wood frame building fall into greater and greater disrepair. The building dates from 1824 and was used as a school until the Dundee centralization in 1938.²²

Discouraged by what he saw as the natural but sad decline in the condition of the building, but willing to get involved to make something small but good happen, he approached his boss. He proposed that he relocate the former one-room schoolhouse from its location on a hill about two miles from the village to the central school grounds where he and some of his friends would be willing to refurbish it. His boss thought it was a great idea, and so Clarence used his connections to the school district and to the State Education Department as a school superintendent of buildings and grounds to further his project. Clarence purchased axles and beams used to move pontoons by the Army Corps of Engineers and orchestrated the move of the building in 1984, even driving the large tractor rig himself. A grand celebration was held when the building was moved to the school grounds, and the Dundee Historical Society subsequently assisted in furnishing the interior.²³ The involvement of the current central school district that

replaced the country school as the site of its relocation, the participation of the school as a host site in and on a public space, and the collaboration of the local historical society make the Barrington #4 restoration a model of school and community partnership among the sites and people I visited, and it remains for me a model of what a great country school preservation project can and perhaps should entail.

A decade or so after Clarence finished the Barrington Project, I was in the midst of writing a paper about the history of the RCSD for a class on the history of education, and the school district where I was employed was in the midst of an existential crisis. The Seneca Army Depot, home to a munitions mission dating back to the Second World War, had been placed on President Clinton's Base Realignment and Closure list.²⁴ The future of the school district, which had been created by centralization in 1938, was in doubt. Without the federal "Impact Aid" paid by the federal government on the twenty-five square miles of land exempted from the local tax base, the school faced uncertain economic times.²⁵ With the threat of closure on the minds of many in the school community, the district chose to embark on an endeavor to celebrate its past. In so doing, we looked to replicate Clarence Sebring's work in our community across the lake from Dundee. James "Jimmy" Hicks, a retired union carpenter and a prolific local history buff, showed me around the community and took me to the site of each one-room schoolhouse that had closed when RCS was formed in 1938.²⁶ Some sites were little more than rubble and overgrown thickets of saplings. Some foundations were all that remained where volunteer fire departments had destroyed dilapidated buildings to enhance public safety. Other buildings had been converted to homes. The last former one-room schoolhouse on MacDougall Road remained in good shape and was used for farm storage by Ralph and Carol Sorensen, a childless couple about to retire from farming. We had found our building!

To Jimmy Hick's surprise, Ralph and Carol were willing to donate the building and a small amount of cash to help pay its removal costs if we could find a home for it. They were concerned about what to do with it and were interested in its history, but did not know how to go about preserving it. The schoolhouse was believed to date to 1836, which was the first time a map of the Town of Fayette, including the hamlet of MacDougall, indicated a schoolhouse. The building had been used as a school until 1948, ten years after the Romulus centralization, and Ralph had attended it as well as the new high school in the Romulus village, where he played eight-man

football. Ralph's father purchased the old building for twenty-five dollars in 1948 and used it to store grain and farm equipment.²⁷

A 501(c)3 group called Friends of the MacDougall Schoolhouse was formed to receive donations toward relocation and restoration costs, and longtime local State Senator Michael Nozolio provided a ten-thousand-dollar allocation of "bullet aid," a special legislative allotment awarded by locally elected Assemblymen and State Senators, to help support the effort.²⁸ A building mover, Bernie Klug, was hired at a cost of twelve thousand dollars to relocate the structure. Terry Mays, then supervisor of buildings and grounds at RCSD, and Jimmy Hicks shared general contractor duties for the relocation and restoration, almost all of which was conducted by volunteers. Because of the height of the building and that of powerlines along the seven-mile shortest relocation route, the roof of the building was removed during the relocation. In order to reduce the incidence of wire-related underpassing, an arrangement was made with the commander at the Seneca Army Depot to allow the building to pass through the military base, with the fence surrounding the installation being lowered temporarily at a convenient entry-and-exit point to allow the building to use roadways within the depot proper that had far fewer power lines.²⁹

The relocation and restoration of MacDougall Schoolhouse were timed to coincide with a celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of the school consolidation that marked the end of the MacDougall School as an independent country school, with the entire K-12 school population of some 650 students coming out to the lawn on a glorious October afternoon to watch the building arrive. The local daily paper, the *Finger Lakes Times*, showed a front-page picture of the old school passing a two-room Mennonite school along the road, children in overalls and gingham dresses watching in awe as the building moved slowly down the road.³⁰

The community now had a group of organized volunteers newly formed as "friends" for tax purposes (in part because they had no historical society), and they planned to continue using the school building as a reenactment site. In order to accept the building as a gift, the school district applied to the State Education Department for a permit, and one was finally issued *after* the relocation. The permit listed the structure as a "found building," a term of art used by the State Education Department for an unauthorized structure such as a press box or storage shed on school grounds, and thereby exempting the structure from several regulations.³¹ The MacDougall

Project involved the current local school district as a new permanent public location, a group of organized local volunteers newly formed as a “friends” group for tax purposes, and the continued use of the school building as a reenactment site. Because of these factors, the MacDougall Project is considered another model for country school preservation.



Figure 2: MacDougall Schoolhouse relocated to the grounds of Romulus Central School.

Concurrent with my involvement with the MacDougall Project, I continued to investigate other Finger Lakes country school preservation projects. These “modern” monuments to a time gone by are reflective of a communal past for those involved in the effort. For a complete list of preservation projects and the location of each restored schoolhouse, see Appendix A.

Categories of Connection

I found through my interviews that people’s relationships to schoolhouse restoration fell into one, sometimes more than one, of three main patterns of connection: personal (including family), professional, and place-based.

Patterns of Personal (including Family) Connection. Interviews with volunteers revealed that many had attended one-room schools or had family members who attended or taught in the buildings they were preserving. These I categorized as patterns of personal connection. A few examples include Clarence Sebring, who restored Barrington School No. 4; Sandy Ansley, whose family farm included a schoolhouse that she helped to restore; and Glenn Young, who

helped restore the East Palmyra School.³² Personal connections run deep, but they are likely to expire when the people most intimately involved in them pass away. Cliff Chapman used his experience as a foreman on the Wheatland No. 4 Project in Scottsville as a means of therapy during his recovery from cancer, a revelation made by his wife, Barbara, only after the project was complete. He threw himself into what he made meaningful work and measured the quality of his days by the achievements made on the schoolhouse project.³³



Figure 3: Wheatland #4 School relocated to the grounds of Wheatland-Chili Central School.

Patterns of Professional Connection. Some volunteers, like myself, had professional connections to the buildings. One member of the Romulus Friends group was the superintendent of a nearby state park who had a degree in archeology and historic preservation.³⁴ Others involved were connected professionally by their roles in the schools where they worked, schools that were sometimes the receiving site for a relocation. Terry Mays, for example, at Romulus, was involved almost by default in his role as supervisor of buildings and grounds for the MacDougall Project. He went on to become intimately involved in the relocation of the Midlakes One-Room Schoolhouse in the Midlakes School District in which he has resided since his retirement from Romulus.³⁵

Barbara Chapman was the Chili town historian; C. W. Lattin was the Gaines town historian; and Gordon Cummings, the King Ferry historian.³⁶ The schoolhouses personified their work and allowed them office storage space as well. Cummings claims his wife had given the Cornell emeritus an ultimatum: give up the historian's position or find some other place for "his" junk.

The schoolhouse was the perfect place for storage, so he moved the building in the middle of the night using rolling logs and the largest tractor he or his friends could find.³⁷

The Genesee Country Museum is the brainchild of Stuart Bolger,³⁸ whom I interviewed, and who was responsible for engineering the relocation of dozens of examples of nineteenth-century architecture to a Deerfield or Sturbridge-like setting in Mumford, New York, neighboring Scottsville and Chili, just southwest of Rochester in what is known popularly as the Genesee Country Village. While Bolger's passion for local history was deeply personal, it was also clearly his chief means of earning a living. Here was a "professional" connection if ever there was one.

Patterns of Place-based Connection. The connection many volunteers feel to a schoolhouse preservation effort is a tie to the unique qualities of a particular town, hamlet, or crossroads. The connections are found most prominently in restorations that do not involve relocations. When Gene Miller, for example, bought property overlooking Conesus Lake in Livingston County, he learned that his carpenter's wife had attended the school there and that the schoolhouse had been converted into a residence. Because of that personal connection, he allowed the carpenter free reign in the schoolhouse restoration, even constructing a new building adjacent to the schoolhouse to act as a local history museum for the community.³⁹ Similarly, the Overackers Corners Schoolhouse is leased from the long-time owner of the property by the Middlesex Heritage Group for use as a schoolhouse museum and activity center for that group.⁴⁰ The Red Schoolhouse on the grounds of the Watson Homestead in East Campbell preserves the one-room schoolhouse in which Tom Watson, founder of IBM, received his elementary education.⁴¹

Dayton's Corners, Glen Haven, Marbletown, Shacksboro, and Wallington are unique places whose names are all but forgotten. Swallowed up by surrounding towns and central schools, these are places whose names are special to their inhabitants, but not necessarily to anyone else. They are the small communities that sometimes no longer show up on paper maps, that are visited by few, whose monikers once denoted a certain place where certain transactions occurred but where today little does. They don't have zip codes. They don't have other public structures; they hardly still have a name. In preserving their school buildings, sometimes the only public building associated with that place, those involved are often preserving that specific community,

the special sense of that space, that place, and that location in the hearts and minds of people once familiar with it. In the sense that school provides a common experience for those of us of a certain generation, those of us familiar with a particular location in time and space, those of us in association with particular people, in that sense preservation of these structures, these edifices, is a preservation of memory. For some involved in the school preservation initiative, the place rather than the people or the profession provides that critical link to a set of others that makes the work worth doing.

Patterns of Presentation

In visiting thirty-eight country school preservation sites in recent years and in contemplating what patterns may exist in their presentation to the public, I found three main archetypes: schoolhouses viewed as artifacts, as local history museums, or as reenactment or “living history” sites. I have categorized these because the presentation as an artifact is far more static than is the presentation of a reenactment or “living history” site.⁴²

Schoolhouses Viewed as Artifacts. Twelve of thirty-eight schoolhouses are viewed as artifacts. The primary purpose of the school’s preservation is its conservation and demonstrable representation of its past educational purpose. The groups responsible for the buildings do not sponsor frequent or regular visitations by school groups or others. See Appendix B for a list of schools used as artifacts and whether they are left in place or relocated.

Schoolhouses Viewed as Local History Museums. Examples of buildings preserved for use as local history museums are most obvious in fifteen of thirty-eight projects. Seven of these buildings are standing alone. Five are part of a local history museum, and three are viewed as local history in a schoolhouse setting. See Appendix C for the entire list.

Schoolhouses Viewed as Reenactment Sites. Buildings preserved as reenactment sites usually interpret schoolhouses as representing life and schooling in the nineteenth century. Their purposes are most prevalent in eleven of thirty-eight projects. It is important to note, however, that this category has a very wide range of use based on regularity and formality of visits. For

example, Jane Edwards at the Eight Square School in Ithaca, Carrie Fellows and Myron Johnson at the Browntown School in Corning, and Mary Stultz at the Avon District No.11 School House at the Genesee Country Museum, are reenactors by trade and their schoolhouses are their stage.⁴³ Schoolhouses that are part of larger historic village reenactment sites, such as the Avon No. 11 School House in the Genesee Country Museum, are likely to offer a more professional and regular country school reenactment experience than some others that tend to limit themselves to visits from particular schools.⁴⁴ For example, Heritage Square lacks the many architectural offerings of Genesee Country Village, but it does have multiple historical buildings associated with it, as does the Gaines No. 5 School which is part of a larger Cobblestone Society Museum. The Eight Square School is the only building actually owned by the active DeWitt Historical Society in Ithaca, but it has a very busy school-visitation schedule and is an archeological site for college classes. Similarly, the Browntown Schoolhouse, which is part of the Benjamin Patterson Inn in Corning, is an example of a multi-building reenactment site. The Mendon No. 15 Schoolhouse at Honeoye Falls has developed an elaborate summer camp experience for local fourth-grade students involving reenactment scenarios based on rubbings of local gravestones. Its schoolmarm, Marilyn Lesczynski, a teacher in local schools during the school year, has attended regional workshops on country schools.⁴⁵

So, while particular schoolhouses may serve a smaller number of reenactment visitors than others in a less formal manner, they do so intentionally and many try to preserve the specific local nature of the schooling experience as endemic to that particular community. As part of their local curriculum, for example, students in the MacDougall Schoolhouse locate which of the country schools in their neighborhood they would likely have attended a hundred and fifty years ago using an 1874 atlas.⁴⁶

Patterns of Motivation

The third area of interpretation of the data collected deals with the motivation for involvement in the activities associated with these projects. Here I found four patterns: personal and idiosyncratic motivations, communal and intentional rewards, the promotion of community, and resistance to the dominant culture.

Personal and Idiosyncratic Motivations. A significant number of respondents to interviews indicated that they found pleasure in the involvement with others in a group effort to preserve something that represented their values. Many had attended one or more of the one-room schools in question, or they had a parent or other family member who had been a teacher or trustee or who had in some way been involved with the country schools in the area. Others reported a love of learning about their communities. At one site, Midlakes, engraved bricks are available for purchase, which are subsequently placed into a walkway leading to the schoolhouse. Many of these bricks are placed there in memory of loved ones who were teachers in area schools or in memory of teachers in area schools who became beloved for their work.⁴⁷

People reported an affinity for things of a historical nature. They said it was important to preserve things from the past as representing a time and place worthy of preservation, a time to be valued. This intentionality in maintaining the buildings as physical reminders, touchstones per se of a time now past, is a palpable and powerful motivating factor for many involved in the work. With relatively rare exceptions, these volunteer preservationists were of a generation that had some personal connection to these disappearing buildings. Whether they were involved in preserving lighthouses, outhouses, or schoolhouses, they participated in preservation because the past was important to them, and the future was creeping up on them at far too rapid a pace for their liking. The most basic level of motivation and reward expressed was personal fulfillment. Many claimed to be “history buffs.” Several were historians or members of the historical society for the town or county in which they resided and had come to the work of preserving schools through that connection. Fully a quarter of the interviewees were officially or had been historians for a local governmental entity. For those in the sample, a schoolhouse project was often only one or the latest of many projects related to local history. Two respondents are architects or architectural historians by training, a third is an archeologist by training, and a fourth a rural sociologist of academic standing. For these people, the fact that they were preserving a schoolhouse per se had only minimal implications for their involvement in a preservation project.

Another subset of informants found their passion ignited specifically because it *was* a schoolhouse project with which they were involved. For them, the nature of a schoolhouse in and of itself was something special, something that connoted a particular nostalgia for a sort of schooling and school relationships not readily found today. These informants were the brick-

name-carving type, whose personal relationship to the ideal of the country school and its aura of community and neighborliness made the preservation of a school something special, beyond the purpose of preserving any other sort of public building, if one were available.

The happy marriage of opportunity with interest, along with a paucity of other public buildings and a surplus of old schoolhouses, may have made for pleasing interactions for any number of other informants. They were happy to be involved in preservation. The ready availability and relatively low expense of working with schools where their reuse had not been a public concern made these buildings low-hanging fruit for a communal effort. While clearly a restoration of the Guggenheim or a religious masterpiece was beyond the ken of the average person, just as anyone could have attended one of these relatively ubiquitous school buildings, almost anyone could be justifiably involved in their preservation. In this sense, the movement to restore and preserve country schools is as democratic as was attendance of these institutions in their heyday.

Gordon Cummings, retired emeritus professor of rural sociology at Cornell and the historian of the Town of Genoa, discussed the semantics of the schoolhouse in particular. “It’s always interesting to me that they were called houses, not school buildings, but houses,” Cummings said. “We come from a house and we’re going to another house. It was a school-house.... probably churches would be better off if they’d called their buildings church-houses.” Part of what Cummings was claiming was the personal connection individuals who experienced schooling in these local “houses” in hamlets and villages spread across the countryside felt—connections to one another as students, connections to the community of adults who provided for the education of their and their neighbors’ children in these isolated places, and connections to the place itself, a place that may no longer exist except as a crossroad or byway.⁴⁸

In several of the sites visited, particularly those with schools as artifacts on existing sites, the preservation effort was as much about the place as about the school building in question. Oran is a prime example. Situated outside of what has become a major Syracuse area suburb, Manlius, the Oran Schoolhouse on Route 92 is listed on the National Register of Historic Places,⁴⁹ but is among a mere handful of buildings other than sporadic residences in what was once a thriving little community. Cummings’ relocated

schoolhouse at the Country Life Museum in King Ferry sits at the crossroads of two little-used state highways in the hills between Cayuga and Skaneateles Lakes. Cummings noted that these schools were a unifying force in the communities in which they were located and that more than the buildings were lost in the consolidation process that resulted in their closing.⁵⁰

Ray Todd was quick to talk about the brisk iron ore business that was the backbone of Ontario as a community, a business now long gone, along with much of the community it represented.⁵¹ Ontario is now primarily a bedroom community to the eastern portions of Rochester and Monroe County. Heritage Square now represents the faded glory of what had been a thriving little community.

Similarly, the Cobblestone Society in the Town of Gaines is at a crossroads known as Childs, a stagecoach stop on the Ridge Road along State Route 104 from the time when the nearby land was first settled in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The Cobblestone Society works to preserve a sense of community where there is little of one left, particularly among a generation of individuals who can remember a more vibrant place than what exists there today. A gas station-convenience store, a restaurant that was once a stagecoach inn dating from 1824, and a handful of cobblestone and brick buildings are all that remain of a community that was once an agricultural hub. A small vinyl sign hung between two posts along Route 98 that heads south to Albion from Carlton Station (where the trains used to stop), only somewhat ironically proclaims today, “This Place Matters.”

Communal Rewards

In places like Heritage Square, Childs, and even the commercial Living History Site of the Genesee Country Museum, people involved in schoolhouse preservation seek to promote the communities represented by these relics of a time gone by, and in so doing they plan for there to be a reward for the communities in which the projects are located. For some there is a small tourist draw, and for others merely a sense of pride of place. For still others, located in current central school districts like Dundee, Romulus, Scottsville, Midlakes, and Newfield, the central school has absorbed the responsibility for housing the relocated remnants of what was once one

of its component country school sites. In these cases in particular, the intent of the restoration project was often in part to celebrate the history of the school district and in order to promote the current best interests of the central school that replaced the country district. In Romulus, for example, the restoration and relocation of the MacDougall Schoolhouse was intentionally a major part of the celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of the centralization of the Romulus district. RCS@60 was designed to capture support for the continuation of the central school despite the loss of a major employer in the area, the Seneca Army Depot, and the widespread concern that the school community might be in danger of further consolidation. That project was conducted in 1997, and just within the last few years (2013) voters in the Romulus Central School District rejected a proposed school merger with neighbor South Seneca, the third time such a proposal has been offered to voters since 1968.⁵²

Community Promotion

For a number of the schoolhouse preservation projects in the current study, the promotion of the concept of community, regardless of the *actual* community in which the schoolhouse project is located, was a primary motivation for the individuals involved. In these cases, preservationists were actively involved in constructing a sense of community among their fellow participants in the project. Informant John Spellman, Town of Savannah historian for more than twenty years, is an example of the community-building aspect of involvement in these projects. He and his wife used their membership in the Savannah Community Club, a lively group that draws some seventy-five or more locals to its monthly meetings, to support the restoration of the Wiley Schoolhouse as one of its pet projects. When that group took on the schoolhouse project in the late 1980s, the school had sat untouched since its closure in 1949. John commented, “Volunteer labor and people in the community just rose up to the occasion,” attributing the success of the project to a sense of stewardship for community resources. He stated further, “my thought is that we are stewards – that is all. We’re going to be moving on. Some sort of ownership—we don’t own anything—money or otherwise. . . . It’s that moment of passing through. We want to keep as best we can the things of the past for the future.”⁵³

Mike Karlsen, former president of the RCS Board of Education, described the keen sense of community building that characterized the MacDougall Project when he talked about his ten-year-old daughter Jessica painting the schoolhouse bell tower alongside septuagenarian Jimmy

Hicks. Each was appreciative of the other's involvement in a project that brought community members together for a common cause—schooling in the greater community over the decades. “To see Jimmy Hicks painting that building with my daughter—there is sixty years between the two probably, or more. But they were both doing the same thing, for the same purpose, the same goal, coming at it with totally different viewpoints.” Mike had the vision to allow the school to become involved in catering to its senior citizens and its current students simultaneously in co-chairing the RCS@60 celebration which featured the relocation and restoration of the MacDougall Schoolhouse as a symbol of the pride the community maintained in its provision of public education across generations.⁵⁴

Barbara Chapman, former teacher, charter member of the Quaker Schoolhouse Committee, and schoolmarm for the Chili Cobblestone School, described the sense of community generated by like-minded individuals caught up in schoolhouse preservation projects. She said that the projects are “[c]ontagious . . . when you start meeting these people and hearing their excitement, it just spills right over.”⁵⁵

Mary Smith, Hamlin Town Historian, and mistress of the North Star School, described the changes she had seen in her rural corner of the countryside.

It's still a friendly town. However, our population used to be third, fourth, fifth, sixth generation descendent[s] of early settlers, whereas now we have people who might have been here six weeks. They're not as inclined to the feel of community, to appreciate the feeling of family that goes with residency in a small town. I don't know how else you can . . . for some of them you'll never impart that feeling and they don't care and that's okay, that's their choice. But for those who want to become involved, I don't know any better way of doing it than to appreciate its history.⁵⁶

Gene Miller, new owner of the property on which the Punky Hollow School sits, described his sense of community building through the restoration of the schoolhouse with these words: “I'm not interested in anything else but building bridges in communities, building bridges between people, seeing people come together and have a little sniff of what I've been able to have.” What Gene has been able to have is a sense of community too seldom found in a fast-paced modern world of consumptive wealth and accumulation of goods. For him, Punky Hollow is a respite, a place where history and community combine to create a new whole that is somehow special.⁵⁷

For the community builders, the project might have been anything that allowed people of various backgrounds, ages, education, and temperaments to come together for the common good, to create something that wasn't, to reenergize a passion in a place that may have been all but forgotten. Many of these volunteers will likely move on to commit their energies to other projects; schoolhouse preservation is one way of fulfilling a basic human need for connectedness to something larger than themselves.

Resistance to the Dominant Culture

The final motivation uncovered in the practices of individuals involved in the schoolhouse preservation projects was one of resistance to the dominance of twentieth-century, and now increasingly, twenty-first century homogenization. Paul Theobald is perhaps one of the sagest interpreters of America's rural legacy. In his *Teaching the Commons: Place, Pride and the Renewal of Community*, he reminds us,

The celebration of urban industrial progress in the pages of our history books contributes indirectly to the stereotype of rural places, and therefore rural people, as unimportant. Indeed, rural dwellers have been told time and time again that the disintegration of their communities, the boarded-up main-street businesses, the closed schools, and the growing sense of isolation are all part of the price of progress. They are all somehow unavoidable or natural, and therefore those who make the decisions (and profit from them) that create these circumstances are blameless.⁵⁸

Participants in preservation efforts are in some cases radical in their approach, defying the trend toward what Michael Wallace calls "Mickey Mouse history"⁵⁹ and toward one-giant-size fits all philosophies of contemporary living. They espouse a different tack. They choose to defy the juggernaut of "progress," and instead celebrate and actively preserve a past that is slower, smaller, and more intimately connected to place than what the modern American would stereotypically embrace. Theobald traces the conflict of culture between urban commercial interests and rural agrarian interests to the English Civil War, and follows the agrarian revolt against commercial interests across the Atlantic a century later with Shay's Rebellion in western Massachusetts in the 1780s. He contends that a communal interest in rural America threads through the thought of Jefferson, Emerson and Thoreau, and emerges again in the late nineteenth

century and early twentieth century with the rise of the populist People's Party and the Country Life Movement.⁶⁰ Similarly, Robert Archibald notes about projects like these:

What they represent is not history in the conventional academic sense; rather they are some of the building blocks of community. What they offer is a sense of identity, an affirmation of individuality, and evidence of continuity. These places are memory markers for the community, and little context is needed. People walk in with their own memories and artifacts, and in the museum's objects and in the conversations that happen there, remembrance is tangibly confirmed. The numeric explosion of these places is not evidence of a revived interest in old-fashioned history, but is instead evidence of community resistance to homogenizing forces.⁶¹

I found through this study that the substantive issues people involved in these projects are addressing are issues of values, significance, and importance. Through their involvement in the preservation of a one-room schoolhouse, these people are expressing themselves, their identity as rural Americans, and their love of and concern for the preservation of a way of life tied to the landscape, the locality, and to one another through time. Theirs is a quiet rebellion against the homogenizing influence of large-scale international corporate consumerism. These folks lament the loss of the mom-and-pop grocery, the local farm store, the general practitioner, and the community school. Their efforts help promote recognition of the importance of the local, the small scale, the rural, and the real in the face of a loss of community identity, large-scale manufacturing, agribusiness conglomerates, and superficial living.

Theobald tells of the rise of independence as opposed to interdependence, along with other manifestations of a mechanistic society as opposed to an organic one, that he claims has corrupted the very structure of the modern school, bringing the industrial model of graded classrooms and learning factories into a rural setting for which such institutions are not only poorly adapted but actively counterproductive to the replication of traditional community values.⁶² When one listens closely to the informants of this study, when one reads the transcripts of their interviews, one finds an appreciation for the small-scale, intergenerational-family atmosphere found in the one-room schoolhouse experience that is too seldom replicated in a modern schoolroom. Informants speak longingly of the positive influences of attending school with siblings, about the powerful influence of a multigrade classroom and about "looping" (having the same teacher for multiple years). All of these accommodations some progressive

schools seek to emulate even today. For many of the informants of this study, however, these practices should be as they once were—the norm, rather than the exception.

The Finger Lakes region of New York State remains predominantly rural, and has in recent years become home to many Amish and Mennonite communities whose appreciation for communal and interdependent living is significant and certainly reminiscent of what was common in the communities that still dot the landscape between the lakes. There is also a pronounced appreciation among many of the inhabitants of the region for the benefits of small-town life. They believe portions of the American landscape might still thrive, despite the intrusion of McDonalds and Walmart and other corporate entities that challenge the cultural identity of individual communities. Their hope is a testament to a certain type of American citizen who recognizes the value of independent identity and the importance of local autonomy. To a great extent the motivation of a number of individuals interviewed for this study expressed just such an appreciation.

Conclusion

This qualitative study involved visiting thirty-eight country school preservation sites in the greater Finger Lakes region of New York State, photographing the schools, and interviewing sixty informants involved in these preservation efforts. The results offer a narrated pictorial record of schoolhouse preservation projects in fourteen counties. Included also is a narration of the relocation and restoration of two model schoolhouses. The snowball methodology was used to locate volunteers connected to each preservation project. Interviews were conducted on the schoolhouse sites, recorded and transcribed, then analyzed for common content and emergent themes. The study also answers questions about the volunteers involved in these preservation efforts such as who they are, what they perceive themselves to be doing, and what their motivations are for being involved in so idiosyncratic an activity. Modern monuments to a former era, these preservation sites reflect a communal past for those in the effort. The volunteers view themselves as doing work that falls into one or more than one of three categories of connection (personal, professional, and place-based) and they have chosen to be involved in the volunteer work either for personal and idiosyncratic reasons, in order to preserve specific communities where the schools were located, or to build a community for themselves, in some cases in a fight against community dissolution or the subsumation of the local community by a

greater, more homogenized, commercialized, and standardized norm. The findings also involve a taxonomy of presentation: the schoolhouse as an artifact, as a local history museum, and as a reenactment or living history site. In all cases, these sixty individuals have found meaning in their individual and communal effort to preserve the local history and sense of place that the schoolhouse represented for them and for their community. To quote a vinyl banner posted on a local highway, the participants collectively proclaim through their work, “This Place Matters.”

Appendix A

Schoolhouse Projects and Their Locations

Abby Road Schoolhouse, Honeoye, Ontario County
Avon District #11, Genesee Country Museum, Mumford, Monroe County
Ansley Schoolhouse, Geneva, Ontario County
Babcock Hollow, Bath, Steuben County
Barrington #4, Dundee, Yates County
Town of Benton #6, Benton Corners, Yates County
Brick Church School Heritage Square, Ontario, Wayne County
Browntown Schoolhouse, Corning, Steuben County
Chili Cobblestone School, Scottsville, Monroe County
Dayton's Corners Schoolhouse, Penfield, Monroe County
East Palmyra Schoolhouse, Hydesville, Wayne County
Eight Square School, Dryden, Tompkins County
Field School Lansing, Tompkins County
Franklin Schoolhouse, King Ferry, Cayuga County
Gaines #5, Cobblestone Society Museum, Childs, Orleans County
Glen Haven Schoolhouse, Scott, Cortland County
Gulf School, Marathon, Cortland County
Kellogg's Corners School, Newfield, Tompkins County
Lee School, Montour Falls, Schuyler County
MacDougall Schoolhouse, Romulus, Seneca County
Marbletown Centennial, Marbletown, Wayne County
Mendon #15, Honeoye Falls, Monroe County
Midlakes one Room Schoolhouse, Phelps, Ontario County
North Star School, Hamlin, Monroe County
Oran Schoolhouse, Oran, Onondaga County
Overacker's Corners, Middlesex, Yates County
Punky Hollow School, Springwiler, Livingston County
Pompey Schoolhouse, Pompey, Onondaga County
Red Brick School, Cato, Cayuga County
Red Schoolhouse, East Campbell, Steuben County

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Rippleton Schoolhouse, Cazenovia, Madison County
Shacksboro Schoolhouse, Baldwinsville, Onondaga County
Side Hill School, Spafford, Onondaga County
Six Nations School, Tyrone, Schuyler County
Stone Arabia, Cicero, Onondaga County
Wallington Cobblestone, Wallington, Wayne County
Wiley Schoolhouse, Savannah, Wayne County
Wheatland #4, Scottsville, Monroe County

Appendix B

Schoolhouses Viewed as Artifacts

Examples of schoolhouses viewed as artifacts in place or relocated are found in the following greater Finger Lakes sites. The twelve buildings are listed without concern for variations in size or other characteristics.

<i>Artifact in Place</i>	<i>Relocated Artifact</i>
Six Nations	MacDougall
East Palmyra	Kellogg's Corners
Marbletown Centennial	Babcock Hollow
Oran	Barrington
Wiley	Benton
Red Schoolhouse	Rippleton

Appendix C

Schoolhouse Used as Part or All of a Local History Museum

The schoolhouse preserved for use as a local history museum is most obvious in fifteen projects. Seven of these are buildings standing alone. Five are part of a local history museum, and three are viewed as local history in a schoolhouse setting.

<i>Schoolhouse only</i>	<i>Schoolhouse used as part of local history in a museum</i>	<i>Local history in a Schoolhouse setting</i>
Field School	Brick Church	North Star
Glen Haven	Gaines Cobblestone	Pompey
Lee School	Franklin	Shacksboro
Midlakes	Overacker's Corners	
Marathon Gulf School	Punky Hollow Stone Arabia	
Wheatland No. 4		



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The research included in this article was originally conducted in completion of a dissertation at Syracuse University in Cultural Foundations of Education, and was presented at the Country School Association of America's annual conference at Colby-Sawyer College in New Hampshire in June 2017. A copy of the complete dissertation on which this article is based is available at the Syracuse University Library and by request at UMI ProQuest Dissertation Services.

Notes

¹ "Researching the History of Your School: Suggestions for Students and Teachers," *New York State Education Department*, last modified 1985, http://www.archives.nysed.gov/common/archives/files/ed_researching_school.pdf

² "National Register of Historic Places," *National Park Service*, accessed 14 July 2017, www.nationalregisterofhistoricplaces.com

³ Stuart Bolger, *Genesee Country Village: Scenes of Town and Country in the Nineteenth Century* (Mumford: Genesee Country Museum, 1993).

⁴ "RootsWeb," *Ancestry.com*, accessed 14 July 2017, <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nycayuga/land/mtracths.html>

⁵ Emerson Klees, *The Crucible of Formant* (Rochester, New York: Cameo Press, 2001).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and the American Society 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 8.

⁸ Common schools were local districts established by law in 1812 for public education purposes in New York State. "History of NYSED," *New York State Education Department*, accessed 14 July 2017, www.nysl.nysed.gov/edocs/education/sedhist.htm

⁹ Betty Auten, "Seneca Highlights," *Access Genealogy: Seneca County New York Genealogy*, Seneca County Historian's Office, 1980, accessed 14 July 2017, <https://www.accessgenealogy.com/new-york/seneca-county-new-york-genealogy.htm>

¹⁰ Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic*, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹² "History of NYSED," *New York State Education Department*, accessed 14 July 2017, www.nysl.nysed.gov/edocs/education/sedhist.htm

¹³ Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic*, 11.

¹⁴ "History of NYSED."

¹⁵ Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The National Experience, 1783-1876* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1980), 20.

¹⁶ Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic*, 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁸ "History of NYSED."

¹⁹ Both Dundee Central School (hereafter DSD) and Dundee Central School District (hereafter DCSD) refer to the same central school district in Yates County.

²⁰ Snowball sampling is a source identification method used in qualitative research whereby one source helps to identify other potential sources of data. See Robert Bogdan and Sari Biklin, *Qualitative Research for Education* (London: Pearson, 2003), 64.

²¹ Clarence Sebring, numerous conversations, 2002. Nancy Zimar, interview with the author, 2002.

²² Plaque in Barrington No. 4 Schoolhouse, Dundee, New York.

²³ Display of photographs of school relocation in Barrington No. 4 schoolhouse entryway.

²⁴ "Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC)," *Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics*, assessed 17 July 2017, <https://www.bing.com/>

²⁵ The federal government compensates local school districts for the land federal installation occupied within their boundaries routinely through "Impact Aid" because the land essentially becomes locally tax-exempt. "About Impact Aid," *Department of Education*, accessed 14 July 2017, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oese/impactaid/whatisia.html>

²⁶ James "Jimmy" Hicks, conversations with author, 1996.

²⁷ Ralph and Carol Sorensen, interviews with author, 1996.

²⁸ Terry Mays, interview with author, 1996.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Micheala Bancarro's photograph, *Finger Lakes Times* (Geneva, NY), Oct. 7, 1997, 1.

³¹ "Found Building," *New York State Education Department*, accessed 14 July 2017, http://www.p12.nysed.gov/facplan/Newsletter/Newsletter_108.htm

³² Sandy Ansley, interview with author, 2002; Glenn Young, interview with author, 2002.

³³ Cliff Chapman, interview with the author, 2005.

³⁴ Bruce Fullem, interview with the author, 2003.

³⁵ Terry Mays, interview with the author, 2006. This schoolhouse relocation occurred after the publication of my dissertation.

³⁶ Barbara Chapman, interview with author, 2003; C. W. Lattin, interview with author, 2003; and Gordon Cummings, interview with author, 2003.

³⁷ Cummings, interview, 2003.

³⁸ Stuart Bolger, interview with the author, 2002.

³⁹ Gene Miller, interview with the author, 2003.

⁴⁰ Ruth Clark interview with the author, 2002.

⁴¹ Mary Kosty, interview with the author, 2003.

⁴² The number of schoolhouse visits completed for the research associated with my dissertation was 37. Since the completion of my dissertation, I have visited a number of additional schoolhouse preservation projects. I include in this article references to two of those specifically: the Midlakes One-Room Schoolhouse in Phelps, and the Wheatland No. 4 Schoolhouse in Scottsville. One of the originally visited sites, included in the dissertation material, the Jones School in Groton, continues to sit idle and has not been restored as planned. I exclude any mention of the Jones School in this article, leaving the correct total of schoolhouse restoration projects visited at 38.

⁴³ Jane Edwards, interview with the author, 2003; Carrie Fellows, interview with the author, 2003; Myron Johnson, interview with the author, 2003; Mary Stultz, interview with the author, 2002.

⁴⁴ Mary Stultz, interview with the author, 2002; Ray Todd, interview with the author, 2003; C.W. Lattin, Gaines No. 5 School, interview with author, 2003; Carol West, Eight Square School, interview with the author, 2002; Browntown Schoolhouse, interview with the author, 2003.

⁴⁵ Marilyn Lesczynski, interview with the author, 2002.

⁴⁶ James Hicks, interview with the author, 1997.

- ⁴⁷ Engraved bricks are found at Midlakes One-Room Schoolhouse in Phelps.
- ⁴⁸ Gordon Cummings, interview with the author, 2002.
- ⁴⁹ “National Register of Historic Places.”
- ⁵⁰ Cummings, interview, 2002.
- ⁵¹ Ray Todd, interview with the author, 2003.
- ⁵² *Seneca Daily News*, 30 Oct. 2013, <http://senecadaily.com>, accessed 14 July 2017.
- ⁵³ John Spellman, interview with the author, 2003.
- ⁵⁴ Mike Karlsen, interview with the author, 1998.
- ⁵⁵ Barbara Chapman, interview with the author, 2005.
- ⁵⁶ Mary Smith, interview with the author, 2003.
- ⁵⁷ Gene Miller, interview with the author, 2003.
- ⁵⁸ Paul Theobald, *Teaching the Commons: Place, Pride, and the Renewal of Community* (Bolder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), 62.
- ⁵⁹ Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1996).
- ⁶⁰ Theobald, *Teaching the Commons*.
- ⁶¹ Robert Archibald, *A Place to Remember: Using History to Build Community* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1999), 177; quotation in Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History*.
- ⁶² Theobald, *Teaching the Commons*.