

# Pigeon Hill School relocated in Oxford, fulfilling a wish by a former student

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The 1867 Pigeon Hill School in Oxford is lowered onto a new foundation Oct. 31 on King Street after being moved from Route 26. Built in 1867, it served generations of students. Starting in the spring, it will be the restored by the Oxford Historical Society as a living history exhibit. *Nicole Carter/Advertiser Democrat*

OXFORD — It began with a last request.

More than five years later, the Oxford Historical Society has fulfilled the wish of Evan Thurlow, the late Oxford resident who attended Pigeon Hill School on Route 26 as a child and owned the property where it stood when he passed away in 2018 at the age of 93.

Thurlow was the third generation of his family to farm the land. He told his children that if and when it was eventually sold, he wanted the schoolhouse donated to the historical society.

Last year, as the property was put under contract to an undisclosed buyer, his daughters, Suzanne Hall and Sandra Roderick, contacted society President Patricia Larrivee about carrying out their late father's request. Fifteen months later, the school has arrived at its new site on King Street.

"Our parents would be so pleased and proud about this," Roderick said. "I wish they could see how it's come together.

"My father went to school there," she said. "He was a town selectmen for 39 years. Both my father and mother drove school buses. Oxford meant a lot to them."

Moving the one-room schoolhouse is just one chapter of the story, however. Restoration will begin next spring, along with a capital campaign to fund it.

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After Larrivee's first conversation with the Thurlow family she immediately started working to preserve the building as a living history exhibit and educational site on the grounds of the society's Kay House Museum headquarters on Pleasant Street in the village.

But seeing such an ambitious project through was not guaranteed, considering the building's dilapidated and delicate condition. Nor was the plan enthusiastically received by the town, which owns the property and held final approval for any construction or other changes.

At the time Larrivee brought the proposal to the Board of Selectmen, there was no plan or money for a move, only the Thurlow family's wishes and Larrivee's vision and a property buyer who was willing to be patient with the process.

Selectmen voted narrowly to allow the society to research the feasibility of moving the schoolhouse to the Kay House Museum. The society quickly collected enough in donations – mostly anonymous – to cover the expense of having Copp & Sons Building Movers of Cumberland transport the building.

Next came determining how to move it. The floor and sills were too rotten for it to withstand being moved in one piece. Dismantling it completely would require extensive labor.

Larrivee talked with several building contractors and engineers, including one who advised scrapping the structure and building a replica. She did not view that as a viable option, especially in light of Maine Preservation listing the schoolhouse on its 2022 list of Most Endangered Historic Places.

The arrival of winter stalled the project.

Last spring, as Larrivee again began consulting with builders about moving the building to Pleasant Street a new possibility arrived.

A 1.65-acre parcel off King Street was donated to the society. The property had been held in trust for decades for the purpose of providing use by local groups and public open space. A Boy Scout troop that held camping excursions had disbanded. Even though a section of the land had been established as a bird sanctuary, few people even know it is accessible.



Oxford Historical Society officers watch Oct. 26 as the 1867 Pigeon Hill School is placed on its new foundation on King Street. From left are lifetime Trustee Elton Record, lifetime Trustee and former Treasurer John Crumpton and Treasurer Donna Tripp. *Submitted photo*

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The owner, Second Estate Corp., was disbanding. Any future use of the land would be restricted to a nonprofit enterprise. The society qualified as its new steward, with the option of using it as the permanent home for the Pigeon Hill School. Trustees began exploring other use options, including partnering with the First Congregational Church on King Street to host Girl Scout activities.

From there, preservation of the building seemed to take on a life of its own. Larrivee found a restoration builder to oversee the project, Arron Sturgis of Preservation Timber Framing.

Copp & Sons would move it in sections, along with its granite foundation, on a low-bed trailer.

The Dirt Store from Mechanic Falls donated gravel for the construction pad. Dancing Willows Trucking of Oxford provided labor for site excavation. Record Building Supply of Oxford and Maschino Lumber in New Gloucester provided materials to build new decking and flooring.

Rob Parsons tended to the site over the summer, mowing grass and preparing it for move-in day.

A group of volunteers, headed by Howard Monday of American Legion Post 112 Oxford, gathered to build the floor and button up the building for the winter.



The 1867 Pigeon Hill School sits on its new foundation Oct. 26 on King Street, boarded up for the winter. The Oxford Historical Society had it moved from Route 26 and plans to begin restoring it as a living history exhibit next spring. *Submitted photo*

Oxford's police, fire and highway department also contributed to moving the schoolhouse.

Jim Bennett and his town public works crew staged the site, setting a gravel entry across a ditch for the truck and trailer to reach the pad and removed it when Copp & Sons finished unloading.

Two police cruisers escorted the schoolhouse on its 3.5 mile journey, and volunteer fire police directed traffic.

“I can’t say thank you enough,” Larrivee told selectmen at their Oct. 19 meeting of the help extended by the town. “The schoolhouse was put back together on its new lot. It’s all in one piece. The town crews were wonderful. The Police Department, Fire Department helped on the road.”

“It’s been very exciting and I can’t thank you enough as a community and helping us with this project,” she said.

Next spring, renovations will start. A new roof and siding are planned with cedar shakes and clapboards. Some of the schoolhouse’s original windows need repair and panes replaced.

Much of the schoolhouse furniture has been part of society’s museum exhibit for years and will be returned. Some pieces, including blackboards and some student desks, were salvaged before its dismantling and will be reinstalled.

Through the winter, the society will focus on further fundraising to pay for the restoration phase. Among the campaign options are people sponsoring memory benches to be placed along the trails winding through the bird sanctuary off Royal Shores Lane, the official address of the schoolhouse.

Larrivee is also applying for historic preservation grants, including one through the 1772 Foundation that could bring as much as \$10,000 and require matching funds by individual benefactors.

She also hopes to partner with groups from neighboring communities to establish a rural tour map of original Maine one-room schoolhouses.

To date, the society has received more than \$34,000 in donations.

“It looks lovely,” Roderick said of the new location. “We can’t wait to see it as a schoolhouse once again. The historical society, and especially Trish Larrivee, worked so hard. She deserves so much credit for making this happen.”

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