

Adirondack schoolhouses survive

By Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, January 30, 2004

You'd never know it from driving by Dave Bushey's house today, but this neat, simple, one-story frame home was once one of Jay hamlet's two 19th century schoolhouses.

Built in the 1840s, the Peck Hill School — also known in the hamlet simply as "the Brown School" — was actually one of the larger schools in the Adirondacks. The front room was a gymnasium; in the rear, classes were held for more than a dozen students.

At least 15 small schools operated at various locations and at various times throughout Jay township in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Each was a local version of the "little red schoolhouse" popularized in the paintings of New York artist Winslow Homer in the 1870s.

Today, just four of those 15 schoolhouses still stand.

Two are year-round homes occupied by scions of old Jay families. Besides the Brown School, there is the North Jay School at the corner of the North Jay and the Hazen and Carey roads, renovated in the 1940s by George Stanley and occupied today by the Marv Stanley family.

The other two of Jay's four surviving schoolhouse buildings, however, are

endangered: the Green Street school, east of Au Sable Forks, and the Hodges School, in the Glen on the way toward Lewis.

Peck Hill School, Jay hamlet

The town of Jay — which includes Upper Jay, the Glen, Jay hamlet (also called Lower Jay or Jay Center), North Jay and most of Au Sable Forks — was first settled around 1795. By 1803, a post office had been established in Jay hamlet.

The Adirondack iron industry fed the town's early rapid growth. In 1822, the town had six school districts with 362 students. Seven years later, 405 students were enrolled in nine school districts.

The earliest mention of any school in Jay hamlet is from 1812, but the location of that school is unknown.

The earliest definite record of a school in Jay hamlet shows that on Sept. 1, 1843, Jesse Tobey gave or sold to the town the land upon which the Peck Hill School was built.

Peck Hill, for which the school was named, was so called for the Peck family, who lived just over the hill on the outskirts of Wilmington township.

"It (the school building) was well-built," said David K. Bushey Sr., who began renovating the building in 1956 for reuse as his family's home.

"It had stone walls underneath for support every 10 feet, each with a big beam on the top," Bushey said. "The floor joists, about 10 inches in diameter, were laid across those beams, all slotted to fit together. Then three layers of floor boarding were laid on top of the joists."

Two entrances led into the Brown School building on either side of a steeped belfry, on the building's east side: one into the front gymnasium, the other into the rear classroom. Both rooms were open to the rafters.

Behind the school was a shed, still standing, where horses were tied up during school.

The Peck Hill School closed in 1936 when the school district built a pair of two-room brick schoolhouses, one in Upper Jay, the other in Jay hamlet.

Dave Bushey acquired the Peck Hill School building in 1956.

"Bill Hathaway had it," Bushey said. "He had been renting it and using it to store antique furniture. Eventually, the school board wanted to get the property off its books, and they put it up for



The Peck Hill School, or "Brown School," now a private home, was Jay hamlet's main schoolhouse for nearly a century. Built in 1843, the building is just above the Village Green in Jay.



A teacher and 22 students pose for a portrait next to the Peck Hill School, in Jay hamlet. No date is given, but clothing styles indicate the picture was taken in the 1890s.



The interior of the Green Street School, abandoned for nearly six decades, east of Au Sable Forks.

auction. I bid against Hathaway, and I got it for \$1,500.”

In the nearly half century since Bushey bought the school building, he has made numerous changes to the structure: First, the interior was partitioned. A front entrance was added, with an enclosed porch. The belfry was torn down — the brass school bell long gone — and another enclosed porch was

added to the side of the building. The ceiling was lowered and a second floor was created.

With vinyl insert windows, new doors, vinyl siding, a new sheet-metal roof, new wiring and modern plumbing, the 16-room duplex standing today on Route 86 bears only slight resemblance to the Brown School building that was so central to Jay hamlet life for nearly a

century — but, like the North Jay School, it has been preserved in some form by the family that has come to live in it.

Green Street School

The Green Street School has not been so lucky. Built in 1900 on the eastern outskirts of Au Sable Forks, today it looks like one more heavy snow might bring its roof down.

For now, the old schoolhouse stands directly across from where the Grove Road “Ts” into Green Street.

The 2.6 acres upon which the 104-year-old school building stands is owned, today as it was a century ago, by the family of Melvin Decker. Today Decker lives in Highland Mills, in suburban Orange County.

“The town asked my great-uncle, Matt Ryan, to loan them the land for a school,” Decker said. “When the school closed during World War II, the title reverted to my family.”

According to Decker, the property descended to him from Ryan through Ryan’s sister, Margaret, who went to live in Lake Placid with her aunt, Decker’s grandmother.

“I was up there a few times with my mother to see the place (the schoolhouse), but it’s been a while,” Decker admitted.



The Green Street School, a pine tree fallen on its roof, an add-on porch fallen in.

An enclosed porch added to the south side of the small building, bringing the total floor space up to 792 square feet, has completely collapsed. A pine tree has fallen on the roof of the original structure, though the roof remains intact for now.

Inside, all that is left from the building's school days are a pre-WW2 kerosene heater, the three blackboards running the length of an entire wall, the built-in school-supply cabinets, and the cloakrooms at either end of the building.

Written on one of the blackboards in a neat, cursive hand is an anonymous plea: "Please keep all doors closed. The mice will come in."

Hodges School

Like the Green Street School, the future of the Hodges School is in question — not because of the building's condition, but because the owner of the property upon which it stands wants it removed.

The family of owner Tony Sinopoli has summered on the property since he was a child. Today Sinopoli, like Decker, lives in suburban Orange County.

Though Sinopoli offered a couple of years ago to give the building to the town of Jay as a historical artifact, Sinopoli told town officials then that they would have to move the Hodges School building somewhere else if they wanted it.

"I love that property more than any

other piece of land in the world," Sinopoli explained. "I want to keep it as a quiet retreat, and we wouldn't have that if we had visitors traipsing up there all the time to look at the schoolhouse."

The property upon which the one-room school stands was dedicated to the town for use as a school site by the Hodges family as early as 1851, though Sinopoli is not sure whether any school was actually built there as early as that. The Hodges farmed the acreage below the school site, where their former house still stands on the corner of Styles Brook and Luke Glen roads.

The current school building was erected in the very early years of the 20th century. Celia Bola Hickey, one of the first teachers at the Hodges School — if not the very first one — started her teaching career there in the early 1900s, descendant Beverly Wallace Hickey wrote in her 1999 history of Jay township.

"The local residents held a 'box social' to raise money for the blackboards," Hickey wrote. "Each woman made a lunch and put it in a decorated box. The box was then auctioned off to the highest bidder, who got to eat supper with the preparer. Of course you were not supposed to know whose box it was, so it would be a surprise, but that was not always the case."

According to Sinopoli, the blackboards bought a century ago with the money raised from schoolmarm Celia Bola's "box social" are still there, along with the original flooring and window shutters, though the building's siding was replaced in the 1920s.

Records showing when the Hodges School was closed are currently unavailable, but classes would almost certainly not have continued after the new two-room brick schoolhouse was opened in nearby Upper Jay in 1936.

Sinopoli says that the Glen community found other uses for the Hodges School house, however, after the last school bell had sounded. In the 1950s and 1960s, Sinopoli says, square dances were held in the building.

Now, a couple of years after Sinopoli's initial offer, the town of Jay is facing a deadline: The town must find a new site for the Hodges School building before the summer starts — and the

funds to pay for moving the building — or Sinopoli will remove the structure himself.

At the most recent meeting of the Jay Town Board, officials discussed the possibility of moving a storage shed away from a public area just below the Jay rapids. Councilors Archie Depo and Amy Shalton, who have taken measurements, say that the shed site's dimensions would accommodate the Hodges School building.

Officials emphasized, however, that no decision has yet been made on what to do — if anything — with the Hodges School.

THE FATE of the old, one-room schoolhouses that served the growing communities of the Adirondacks in the 19th and early 20th centuries has aroused much interest throughout the region.

In Wilmington township, adjacent to Jay, three of the eight schoolhouses documented in 1850 still stand.

One of them, the *Kilborn School*, is a private residence. Located just off the Springfield Road on the Hardy-Kilborn Road, it looks every bit like the little red one-room schoolhouse it once was, original belfry and all. The woodshed out back is original, too, though the front porch is not, according to current resident Jennifer Owens.

According to Bob Peters, the Kilborn School building was first refur-



The Hodges School, ca. 1900, The Glen



The Kilborn School, Wilmington



Hardy School, Wilmington

bished as a residence in 1977. Peters completed additional renovations a few years ago, selling it to the Kenneth Owens family just last year.

Another one of Wilmington's surviving schoolhouses stands just 2.45 miles north on the Hardy Road from the Kilborn School. The owners of the *Hardy School* building, which is now used as a seasonal camp, have maintained its architectural integrity. An out-house still stands shyly in the shaded woods behind the schoolhouse. Only an enclosed entry porch has been added to the front of the structure.

Records currently available do not show when either the Kilborn or Hardy schools were first built, nor when their school bells last rang to dismiss class.

Such is not the case with the *Haselton School*. A brass plaque proudly affixed above the front porch of the recently restored schoolhouse tells

passersby that classes were held there, on the banks of the Au Sable River in a remote stretch of northern Wilmington township, between 1836 and 1943.

Halsey Haselton, who owns the building, replaced its roof in the late 1990s, according to cousin Dan Gould. It was left to Gould, however, to repaint the school's exterior siding and replace the rotten boards on the front porch.

"My daughter Aimee and I slapped two coats of oil-based primer onto those old boards a couple of summers ago before applying the paint," Gould said. "They just drank it up. But once we got that done, the boards kind of straightened themselves out, and we could pound the nails back in to secure them. Structurally, it's in really good shape."

A patch of trimming inside the schoolhouse, with wainscoting of different sizes on either side, shows where the building was extended a couple of yards back toward the river at one point in time. A stone foundation holds the older portion of the schoolhouse, while a poured concrete foundation supports the rear.

Inside the Haselton School building, nothing has been touched for years. The blackboard is gone but the old stove is still there, surrounded by a filigreed iron shield that kept the schoolchildren from burning themselves. Rolled up and tucked away in the vestibule are the ancient maps that once hung from the

walls, along with a flip chart displaying history questions from 1905.

ELSEWHERE in Essex County, historians have done much to document the schoolhouses that once fostered the region's growth.

In 1988 Marilyn Cross published a 38-page book describing the history and fate of Lewis township's 21 schoolhouses, the first seven of which were opened in 1814. Today, eight of those 21 schoolhouses are still standing, in one form or another — most as private residences, a few as ruins, one as a chicken house.

Adirondack Architectural Heritage recently started leading tours of architecturally significant schoolhouses still standing in Essex township. Last year's tour covered eight schools, including the beautiful Bouquet Octagonal School, built of stone in 1826. Currently owned by the town of Essex, it was restored in 1972 by the Essex Community Heritage Organization.

Other old schoolhouses in the area now refurbished as private residences include structures in Onchiota, Chateaugay, Keene, Ray Brook and the little hamlet of Sodom, Johnsbury township, Warren County.

At least six Adirondack schoolhouses have been restored for museums. The best-known of these is the *Rising Schoolhouse*, built in Ohio, N.Y., in



Left: The Haselton School, open from 1836 to 1943, was recently restored by Haselton descendants Halsey Haselton and Dan Gould. *Right:* A 1916 photograph of the Haselton School students. To the left of the post, Leo Crowley and Hazel Thew stand behind Paul Haselton. To the right of the post, standing on porch, left to right: Elenor Crowley, Helen Haselton (Dan Gould's mother), Martha Thew, Dorothy Thew, Grazia Haselton, Vere Hardy and Francis Crowley. Standing on steps: Isabel Shumway, John Warren, Hazel Preston, Martha Haselton and Lee Thew.

1907, closed in 1945, and moved on sleds in the winter of 1988 to the Adirondack Museum in Blue Mountain Lake.

Other Adirondack schoolhouses restored for — or *as* — museums include:

The Burt School, originally constructed in 1826 on the Middle Road in Essex. The school was closed in 1945. It was moved in the early 1970s to the 1812 Homestead Farm and Museum, in Willsboro.

The two-story 1867 *Union School*, a block off the lake on Route 22 in Essex, was closed in 1908. It was restored in the 1970s as an art gallery for the Adirondack Art Association.

The Giffords Valley School is currently home to the Northville/Northampton Historical Society

Museum. The school was built before 1856, possibly as early as 1813. It was partially dismantled for moving to its present site in 1990.

The Riverside Schoolhouse is now part of the Old Fort House Museum, in Fort Edward. The school, built around 1900, was originally located on West River Road, Northumberland township, Saratoga County. It closed in the mid-1950s.

In Fonda, on the southern outskirts of the Adirondacks, the local school district has restored its very own “Little Red Schoolhouse,” the *Plank Road School*, for use as an instructional device. The schoolhouse was moved in June 1973 from its original site on the southwest corner of Route 30A and Old Trail Road in Montgomery County.

REGIONAL interest in old schoolhouses is intense, to say the least. To prove it, here are a couple more examples to wrap up our story.

Some schoolhouse enthusiasts seemingly can't live without having one of their very own. Stephen and Beverly Zingerline, of Rome, were two such enthusiasts. In 1986 they looked and looked for an old schoolhouse to purchase and renovate, but to no avail. Their solution? Stephen built Beverly an authentic reproduction in their backyard.

Adirondack schoolhouse fans who don't want to go quite as far as the Zingerlines can rent one for just the weekend. A remodeled schoolhouse is part of the Lake Champlain Inn B&B, 428 County Route 3, in Putnam Station, northern Washington County.