

Eight Square, 200 Years of School History

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Photo caption: Participants Excavate the Midden

The 2014 program focused on excavating the midden north of the schoolhouse. From left to right: Crew Chief Hannah Hume, the History Center's Director of Youth Education Carole West, Diana Kelly, and Helen Morse. (Photo by Brant Venables)

“At a Meeting of the Inhabitants of District No. 5 in the Town of Dryden County of Cayuga...in said town on the 22nd day of October 1814...it was resolved that the School House be built on

Henry Snyders Land on the first Knowl north of His house on the west side of the Road – resolved that the body of the School House be built of three inch plank and to be twenty by twenty feet square – resolved that there be sixty dollars Raised by tax for the purpose of building said School House”.

And so we have the very first entry in The Minutes of the District Clerk of School District No. 5 in the Town of Dryden 1814 to 1931.

It is quite astonishing in the 21st century to realize that a one room school house has stood on the same land for 200 years. In this case, first a four sided wooden school, which was then replaced by an eight sided brick school in 1827, the familiar Eightsquare School that we all know and love.

The recent fate of many rural one room schools nationwide has either been demolition, abandonment, or alterations that render a former school house almost unrecognizable. However, as these early harbingers of learning have come into their own as valuable buildings and resources to learn about early rural education in America, many are now being ‘saved’ by being physically moved to more advantageous sites. Those school houses lucky enough to be moved are often found on the grounds of a 20th century school lot, a university setting, or a living history historic site.

Also somewhat unusual is the fact that the four sided wooden school was not replaced by the eight square because of a fire, an all too common occurrence in the 19th century, but it was replaced so the larger and more structurally sound brick school could be built.

Dryden was organized as a town in 1803. In 1804 the first school house was established in the 1797 log cabin that Amos Sweet, who was the town’s first settler, had since abandoned. By 1824 there were 20 school districts in Dryden.

In August of this year The History Center conducted a pilot archaeology program that was open to the public, focused on the fact that 200 years of school history lay buried on the grounds. People came for a week to the Eightsquare grounds, and, under careful supervision, excavated a small piece of the school property in search of traces of the past.

Eightsquare Archaeology

This summer’s public archaeology program focused on an area that had already been surveyed by Ithaca College Professor Michael Rogers using “remote sensing methods.” The remote sensing methods employed by Professor Rogers identify subsurface anomalies that might be archaeological deposits. But it’s still up to archaeologists to go and excavate promising areas

identified by the remote sensing to find out what is actually there. When we excavated one of the areas Professor Rogers' survey had identified as a possible area of interest, we found one of the schoolhouse "middens." Middens are what archaeologists call the garbage pits in which people dumped their trash on their own property before there were garbage collection programs to cart trash to landfills. What made the discovery of this midden surprising was its location – it was near the road and would have been completely visible to any passersby. In 2010, during a previous archeological survey, we had identified a large midden at the back of the schoolhouse, so the midden near the road that ran past the front of the schoolhouse was unexpected. The midden at the back of the schoolhouse included broken 19th century school desk legs, a door to a schoolhouse stove, remains of coal and ash from the stove, some nails, window glass, and other broken material from the building. But the midden near the front of the property was different. It had personal objects thrown out by the children and teachers.

Our dig found some exciting remains from the 19th century. We found several slate pencils that were little more than an inch long, clearly disposed of when they became too small for even the youngest pupil to use. We unearthed half of a student's clay marble. We also found some broken dishes and a metal screw-on bottle cap from the late 19th century, perhaps from a teacher's or student's lunch. For archaeologists, these little mundane artifacts help give us a glimpse into the routine of daily life that never makes it into the documentary record. The midden probably began as an impromptu garbage dump that expanded with continued use – possibly when weather made it too much of a hassle to walk to the back of the schoolhouse and the school's "regular" midden.

These findings give us valuable insights to 19th century life.

Bring a picnic lunch and join us on Saturday, September 20th (rain date Saturday, September 27) on the 8 Square School house grounds for birthday cake, children's activities and a first time look at some of the artifacts that have been unearthed on this 200 year old site.
