

BY Mark Dantos

PHOTOS BY Jim Mauchly/mountaingraphics.com

HISTORICAL PHOTOS COURTESY OF NORWICH HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
AND ROOT DISTRICT GAME CLUB, PROVIDED BY Brian Cook

## HISTORY IN THE MAKING



In the 1930s and early '40s, long before the Hanover and Norwich school systems united as the first interstate school district in the country, nearly half of Norwich's students were educated in one-room schoolhouses. The Root District School was among them.

During World War II, about a dozen students learned reading, writing, and arithmetic at the Root School, which was built in 1937, before attendance plummeted as emerging local and national interest in school consolidation took hold. In 1945, Root became the first of the final five one-room schools to close its still-new doors. By 1951, the remaining four had followed suit.

But the building that housed the Root School still stands—about three miles north of Norwich Village in the rural Root District, near the intersection of Union Village and Goodrich Four Corners roads. And today an effort is underway to rehabilitate and reimagine this historic landmark as a vital educational and community space. As Vermont moves to guarantee preschool education, and the local community rallies to preserve a historic landmark, Root School may awaken again to find its story is not complete. >>



# NORWICH'S ONE-ROOM



# ROOT SCHOOLHOUSE

## ONCE A FINE EXAMPLE, A FOUNDATION WEAKENS

In 1937, Vermont's Deputy Commissioner of Education attended dedication exercises for the brand-new Root School. He observed in his public address that the state-of-the-art facility was "a fine example of Vermont school improvement work."

Even after its closure and a period of dormancy, the structure was well used by the community. In 1952, the Norwich school directors, in exchange for five dollars and a commitment that the building be used as a community center, deeded the building to the Root District Game Club, a group of neighborhood hunters who allowed one another to hunt on club members' properties. The schoolhouse was now their clubhouse and the site of regular social events for area families.

Over the next 60 years, the schoolhouse hosted community activities from meetings and potluck suppers to the occasional wedding celebration and birthday party. (Olympic gold medalist Hannah Kearney celebrated her 14th birthday with dozens of friends at a dance party in the building.) It served as a horse-riding club in the 1960s and, since 1974, a general community club. Even as interest ebbed and flowed, nearby families and the next generation always stepped up to commit care and maintenance to the building.

But from the beginning, the greatest challenge facing schoolhouse organizers was not general maintenance for a relatively young building—handy neighborhood volunteers, modest annual membership dues, and the occasional passed hat could manage that. Rather, it was a deteriorating foundation that had plagued the schoolhouse almost since its construction. An urgent effort in 1975 helped reinforce the crumbling basement walls, but drainage issues remained.

In 2002, a building assessment warned, "The walls [of the foundation] if not replaced will eventually fail. The only solution is to either move the building or jack it up and replace the entire foundation." The cost estimate

was in the tens of thousands, and efforts to raise the money locally fell short. In 2011, the foundation problem had worsened, and again the building was closed to public use.

## AWARENESS SPREADS FROM A GRASSROOTS MOVEMENT

A year later, the Root District Game Club once again rose to the occasion, launching a steady campaign to increase awareness about the schoolhouse throughout Norwich and beyond. A Dr. Seuss-themed fundraising event filled Tracy Hall, and a screening of *The Muppets* followed at the Wilder Center. Dan & Whit's and the Norwich Inn hosted wine tastings to support Root and Norwich's other surviving schoolhouse, Beaver Meadow. The campaign made front-page local news, and photos of the two schoolhouses graced the cover of the 2013 Norwich Town Report.

"Getting the larger community to recognize how remarkable this schoolhouse is turns out to have been the easy part," says Brian Cook, president of the Root District Game Club. "Once people are aware of this building, they care."

The truly hard work "has been the steady maintenance and repairs the schoolhouse's neighbors in the Root District have provided this building for more than half a century," Brian continues. "So many families have been involved through the years, and it's gratifying to see that all their work is finally being recognized and rewarded."

Meanwhile, Norwich's Historic Preservation Commission, with the support of the Norwich Historical Society and the two schoolhouse groups, nominated Root and Beaver Meadow schoolhouses to the National Register of Historic Places.

Lyssa Papazian, the historic preservation consultant who helped prepare the nomination, recognized that these two buildings were special. "The Root District School is a wonderfully well-preserved example of a 20th century 'superior' grade one-room rural schoolhouse," Lyssa wrote in her nomination. "Its interior and exterior integrity and





The building features classic schoolhouse windows. The large classroom space with a stage on one side still contains a piano and a desk or two.



  
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Dr. Schell and Dr. Noble are pleased to announce the addition of Dr. Kathleen Rowley to their team in January 2015.

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Right: Helen Smith, shown in a recent photo wearing red, below, is the girl in glasses in the front row of the top picture and is the last girl on the right in the photo below. Dan Smith is the smallest boy in the bottom photo. Helen and Dan are also in the photo on page 62. She's the first girl on the left; he's the boy front and center. Opposite: Do you recognize the girl in the red top? That's future Olympic champ Hannah Kearney, who celebrated her 14th birthday at the schoolhouse. In 2012, Hannah read *One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish* at a Dr. Seuss-themed fundraiser in support of Norwich's schoolhouses.



A broadcast by Boston-based Historic New England and CATV, expected to premiere this winter, will feature interviews with 10 former one-room schoolhouse students of the 1930s and '40s era, intertwined with dozens of historic photos and narrative.

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Four Root students who were interviewed for the documentary are (top) Helen Smith and Rockcey Ruby, and brothers Dan (left) and Fred Smith, no relation to Helen.



its pristine rural setting are rare and significant in Vermont.” In the summer of 2013, both schoolhouses were added to the Register.

The schoolhouses also caught the eye of Boston-based Historic New England, the nation’s oldest, largest, and most comprehensive regional heritage organization.

Following the success of a jointly produced documentary by Historic New England and CATV about AVA Gallery’s origins as the H.W. Carter and Sons Factory, the two entities considered their next venture. Bob Franzoni, CATV director, proposed exploring the storied histories of the two schoolhouses in his hometown, and a second collaborative effort was born. Expected to premiere this winter, the broadcast will feature interviews with 10 former one-room schoolhouse students of the 1930s and ’40s era, intertwined with dozens of historic photos and narrative.

### THE FUTURE OF ROOT SCHOOLHOUSE

Root organizers are frequently asked how the building will be used once it is saved and how it will benefit the community. One option the Game Club has explored since 2012 is returning the Root School it to its original

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purpose: the education of Norwich's children. Thanks to grants from the Norwich Women's Club and Preservation Trust of Vermont, Norwich architecture firm Smith & Vansant (which donated several hours of its services) examined the schoolhouse and developed plans for its future use as a nursery school in its idyllic rural setting opposite Hogwash Farm.

"Root Schoolhouse was built with children in mind, and many people who care about this building get excited by the idea of bringing the kids back," Brian notes. But the immediate concern is rebuilding the foundation and simply saving the schoolhouse, he stresses. Once that's accomplished, "then we can get serious about pursuing the nursery school idea, which is a long-range vision our community seems to be uniting behind."

Coincidentally, this year Governor Peter Shumlin signed a bill into law requiring communities to offer at least 10 hours per week of high-quality education to Vermont's three- to five-year-olds. The Game Club, now a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, believes nothing could be more appropriate for the schoolhouse than to meet an expected demand for more preschool space. And offering locals a gathering place in the summer months would round out its utility.

But whether the Root Schoolhouse prevails depends on raising funds both to repair the foundation and to make upgrades required to provide a safe preschool environment without compromising the schoolhouse's historic integrity.

Thus far, the Jack and Dorothy Byrne Foundation has offered to match \$40,000 in contributions from other sources, including individual donors. With further community support, the schoolhouse may once again serve as a "fine example" of Vermont school improvement work and continue to serve as a valuable historic resource for generations to come. ←

To learn more about the Root Schoolhouse, visit [www.rootschoolhouse.org](http://www.rootschoolhouse.org).



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Greek, Attic, black-figure lekythos: octopus and three dolphins, flanked by kneeling man and youth (hunters?); about 540–530 BCE, ceramic. Tampa Museum of Art: Joseph Veach Noble Collection; 1986.043.

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