



Milestones

THE HARRISON TOWNSHIP HISTORICAL SOCIETY

HTHS ACQUIRES RICHWOOD ACADEMY

On Monday, October 7, 2019, the Society officially accepted ownership of Richwood Academy from the Richwood Academy Association culminating over a year of discussion and careful deliberation. The Academy, of course, is a prominent and beloved local landmark and the best surviving example of the township's village schools.

Last year, the Association advised the Society of its interest in transferring ownership of the property to HTHS. The Association was formed in 1951 in order to preserve the schoolhouse after the new consolidated elementary school in Mullica Hill made it obsolete. For decades it served as a center for community activities, bridal parties, anniversaries, and baby showers. More recently, however, more such venues have become available and the demand and income from rentals declined and rent from long-term tenants, French Lodge #89, I.O.O.F., was inadequate to cover expenses. The Directors, therefore, felt that the time had come to look for new stewards who could develop new directions for the property and who shared their commitment to the building's preservation as a historic site. With that in mind, the Association decided that the Society would be the most appropriate successor.

Coincidentally, the Society's Board had been discussing ways to expand its facilities, including the option of building an addition onto Old Town Hall. The 2017 archaeological work at that site was undertaken as part of the requirements for an application to the NJ State Historic Preservation Office for a permit to build. At issue is the fact that our collections include important agricultural artifacts that are too large to fit in the current facility. The Board recognized that while the Academy building itself did not address that issue, the site was larger than the Old Town Hall property and offered the opportunity to build a facility that could meet our needs and expand our services to the public. Furthermore, there is ramped access to the first floor classroom, providing an accessible programming space which we now lack.

After considerable deliberation, the Board voted to acquire the building at its June meeting. We officially purchased the property this month for \$100 plus all closing costs.

This is an historic moment for the Society and a major new undertaking. While the building and grounds promise great opportunities, those opportunities come with increased annual expenses. We feel confident, however, that with the support of our members and friends we will be able to bring those new opportunities to fruition.

We are honored that the Richwood Academy Association has entrusted us as the next stewards of the Academy. It should be noted that the Association is not disbanding and has pledged to partner with us in getting the Academy listed on the New Jersey State and National Registers of Historic Places. This summer the Society completed the first step in this process and a Certificate of Eligibility was granted, citing the Academy as "a rare surviving example of a vernacular two-story schoolhouse." This certification allows us to submit a full application for which we are seeking the services of historic preservation consultants to prepare and present the application. The Association has pledged to help fund the process.

We would be greatly remiss if we did not acknowledge the on-going legal services of Brian Duffield, Esq., of Mullica Hill. Brian has guided the Building and Expansion Committee (Bob Schumann, Suzanne Grasso, Karen Heritage, Chris Knisely, Richard Ridgway, Jim Turk, Marion White) through this process and we are very grateful for his wise counsel. Likewise, we thank the Academy Directors, especially Eleanor Madara and Maier Hitchner, who have been so very helpful in providing information and assistance.

Over the next year - coincidentally the Academy's 150th anniversary - we will be developing plans to make the best short and long term use of this historic site. French Lodge, #89, I.O.O.F., Harrison Township's oldest civic organization, will continue as tenants.

We are excited to have a presence in Richwood and to be able to preserve a village landmark in the midst of so much change.

In the meantime we invite you to share your suggestions and your time as we enter this exciting new chapter of our own history. Let us hear from you.

RICHWOOD ACADEMY—A BRIEF HISTORY

Richwood Academy was built in 1870 in what was then the village of Five Points. It replaced the one-room Mount Pleasant School which was built at the same location in 1855 when the Mount Pleasant School District was incorporated. The new school was briefly called Mount Pleasant School before being renamed Five Points School and then Richwood School when the village became Richwood in 1888. By the 1890s Harrison Township had consolidated all of its village schools into one district and numbered them; Richwood was number 7. Richwood Academy came into common use in the 1940s.

William E. Heritage, a member of the building committee, kept an account book documenting the expenses incurred building the new school. This book identifies the builders as James Fletcher and Thomas Sharp; in 1871, Sharp constructed Mullica Hill's Old Town Hall.

The schoolhouse consisted of two rooms, one room in each story, and was initially attended by village children from first through eighth grades. Children in nearby Pitman also attended the Academy until that town built its own school in 1884. During the 1920s the Township began sending children to different village schools for specific grades, although which grades attended which schools varied over the years. The last grades to attend Richwood Academy were kindergarten through second, and students still used the outhouses and pumped water from the outdoor well.

By the 1940s the Board of Education believed that a consolidated elementary school would better serve the township's students, and in 1950 the Harrison Township School opened in Mullica Hill. The remaining village schools closed and plans were made to dispose of them. A group of Richwood residents, composed of Academy alumni, expressed the desire to preserve their school for use as a community center, and through a representative purchased the building at auction in 1951. The Richwood Academy Association was formed and incorporated that same year and exists to this day. In 1953 the Association held its first "Old Home Day" baked ham supper, a fundraising event held outdoors on the grounds that included displays of historical photos and artifacts and craft and food sales. Old Home Day continued as a popular June event into the 1990s. Around the same time French Lodge #89, I.O.O.F., began meeting at the Academy and continues to do so today.

In the 1960s Gloucester County recognized the school's significance with a county historic site marker. Today the Academy and Richwood Methodist Church and Cemetery survive as prominent local landmarks amidst increasing development and change.



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Old Town Hall Museum

