

A New Course for a One Room School

Resident volunteers of Boutwells Landing, in Oak Park Heights, give new life to the old McKean Schoolhouse.

The first bell rang and the Pledge of Allegiance was recited by all in attendance on July 11, 2009, as Boutwells Landing dedicated and opened the one-room McKean School to the public.

It was just as it had been every day in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when the schoolhouse was a vibrant center of the community, educating children, hosting community events, and serving as the local gathering place. Now, 145 years since it was first opened, the little schoolhouse is prepared to resume its role as a neighborhood hub, thanks to the efforts of a tenacious group of volunteers who appreciate its history and recognize its potential.



◀ The restored McKean Schoolhouse

In 1864, Elias McKean, a founder of Stillwater, Minnesota and member of its first school board, built the 30 by 22 foot clapboard schoolhouse on his farm, at a cost of \$300. When the last class graduated in 1940, the McKean School doors were closed.

The years that followed were tough. The little schoolhouse was sold and moved to the Koller family farm in Baytown, Minnesota where it was used as a storage building. The building slowly fell into disrepair. The Koller farm was purchased by the family of Pete Miller, who moved the schoolhouse to its business property. Recognizing its historical significance, the owners offered the schoolhouse to the Stillwater School District, which declined due to the expense of relocation. Several Stillwater area restoration groups investigated using the schoolhouse, but again, funding and other issues were impediments.

The schoolhouse found the first of its many present-day heroes in Bob Hagstrom, retired builder and board member of the Valley Senior Services Alliance (VSSA), the parent organization of Boutwells Landing. Bob, who has experience with historic restoration, brought the schoolhouse to the attention of the VSSA board and Presbyterian Homes & Services (PHS). As the Boutwells Landing site plan developed, the Historic Village Green was designed to include the old schoolhouse, a replica of the First Presbyterian Church in Stillwater (established by William T. Boutwell in 1849) and a bandshell for community concerts.

After many idle years, the schoolhouse was moved to the Village Green in April, 2006. There it sat, until over a year later, when Boutwells residents Ray Hunder and Les Heggernes saw potential in the eyesore resting in the middle of the community. Windows were broken, the stovepipe suffered a hole in its side and the roof leaked. Les and Ray proposed its restoration to Boutwells management,

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Boutwells Landing residents Joe Carufel and Norm DuFresne repair the schoolhouse window frame.



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LuJean Swanlund, Boutwells Landing resident and volunteer, restores an old school desk.

which turned to Presbyterian Homes Foundation for support. Steve Preus, Executive Director of Presbyterian Homes Foundation, brought the idea to Ken Hooze of Senior Housing Partners, (the development arm of PHS), to work out a restoration project plan with low-injury risk possibilities for volunteer involvement.

Ray approached the independent living residents of Boutwells Landing to volunteer. The company of heroes swelled as the first 50 people offered to help in various ways, from building and restoration, to locating artifacts, historical research, and fundraising.

The project took off as the volunteers swung into action. A workshop was equipped through generous donations by residents and Adolfson-Peterson Construction (general contractors for

the Boutwells Landing care center), and became one of the busiest places on campus. Volunteers rebuilt windows, refinished old floorboards and restored donated wooden desks. Joe Carufel rebuilt windows with the same type of glass used at the turn of the 20th century.

Retired antique dealers Jane Lee and Jeanne Mullen spearheaded the quest for artifacts, collecting among other things, desks, books, maps, bookcases, pictures, a school marm's chair, and a school bell. David Spencer, former college professor, researched the history of the McKean School, while his wife, Mary, restored donated furniture and photographed the volunteers' progress.

Marian Carlson, whose mother taught at the McKean School, spent a day in the schoolhouse telling area children about a pupil's typical day in a one-room school. According to their teachers, few moments had mesmerized the children as much as their time with Marian.

Lyman Geary, former Stillwater School Board member, went to work on fundraising. Artists Wayne Leisman and Elisabeth Ljungkull created images of the building to be used in publicity and displays. Rosie Carufel and Helen Clark documented the restoration story with a scrapbook, while Les Heggernes, along with his workshop duties, kept the Boutwells Landing community informed through monthly newsletter updates.

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The volunteers were joined by McKean School alumni and McKean family descendants on July 11, at the grand opening, to reintroduce their gleaming little schoolhouse to the community. But the work is not done, as the challenge remains to provide for the use of the schoolhouse. Once again, volunteers are stepping up to chart a course for the school.

A committee is working with Boutwells Landing's management and Stillwater Public Schools to develop programs, staffed by volunteers, to offer in the schoolhouse. “After all, the intent,” said Bob Hagstrom “always was to offer the opportunity for children to connect with older adults in a relationship of learning and adventure.”

The McKean School is ready again to be a hub of the neighborhood, poised to educate children and welcome the greater public. Once in shambles, the schoolhouse stands proudly now as a monument to the dedication and determination of volunteers. As Ray Hunder points out, “the more you can use your gifts, the more fulfilled and the more joy you feel.”



◀ Ray Hunder, Boutwells Landing resident and McKean School volunteer organizer, welcomes descendants of Elias McKean to the grand opening of the schoolhouse.



~DEBRA CAMPBELL