

In the Spotlight

WEDNESDAY, JULY 27, 2022

LIVING HISTORY



by Gene Pisasale



Photo courtesy Chester County History Center

The Locust Grove School children in the early 1900s.

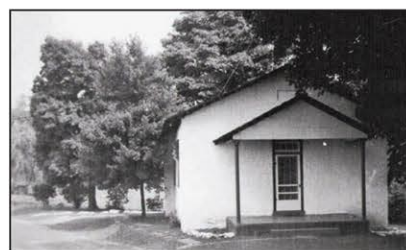


Photo courtesy of Alta Hoffman

The Locust Grove School house circa 1930s when the building was converted into a private residence by Delmont and Alta Baily Bittle.



Pocopson Township Board of Supervisors member Ray McKay speaking at the rededication of the Locust Grove Schoolhouse.

Education from a distant era: The Locust Grove Schoolhouse

By Gene Pisasale
Contributing Writer

A lot of things have changed over the nearly 300 years since schools were opened in America. Since the first buildings were created in the American colonies around the early 1700s, one-room schoolhouses became the learning centers for our nation's youth. Some of them survive today as private residences, while others have fallen by the wayside.

However, one thing is certain: despite their small size and simplicity, the early schools provided a firm foundation for the growth and success of our country.

The Locust Grove Schoolhouse in Pocopson Township was one of them and it has gotten a new life celebrated in a re-dedication ceremony conducted on June 4.

The schoolhouse website mentions that the village of Locust Grove had its beginnings in the early 1800s with local businessman Pennock Marshall, who wanted to establish a settlement resembling William Penn's "greene country towne." He laid out three streets in a stand of locust trees and planned a total of 29 lots.

Marshall was to be disappointed; the village never

had more than two dozen families. By 1847, it had only a blacksmith and wheelwright shop, a shoemaker and a general store.

Education was an important part of Pennsylvania society for decades before the Locust Grove School was constructed. William Penn decreed in 1682 that the Governor and Council "shall erect and order all public schools and encourage and regard the authors of useful sciences and laudable inventions."

The exact year of the school's construction is not known with certainty, but public records give us an inference. An 1816 deed of Indenture indicates that male inhabitants of East Marlborough, West Bradford and Pennsbury Townships created what would become the Locust Grove School. The initial parcel of land was given for the cost of one cent each year for 99 years from William Cloud. This supports the assumption that the original Locust Grove Schoolhouse was built sometime around that year on the recently deeded land.

Attendance books beginning December 1855 confirm the existence of the school as a functioning entity by that time, but held no description of the

schoolhouse or its specific location. An 1873 map of Pocopson Township shows three masonry schoolhouses; of these three, two remain today, one of which is the Locust Grove Schoolhouse. The Pocopson School Board minutes use a variety of descriptions to record the 1870s-era period of rebuilding and renovation.

Early racial integration in the classes of the Locust Grove School was decades ahead of its time, long before it occurred on a national scale in the United States. Census records from 1860 indicate 112 households and 601 people lived in Pocopson Township. In January of that year, Locust Grove School had 36 students enrolled. The average attendance during the month was 26 students. There were eight white female students, six African-American male students and 22 white male students.

The Pocopson Township School Board managed three one-room schoolhouses from the time of the Township formation in 1850 up until 1923, when the schools were closed and residents transferred to the newly established Unionville Vocational Joint Consolidated School. After 1923, the school was converted into a private residence.

A man who would later become known as the "village historian of Chadds Ford" taught at the Locust Grove School. In the early 1900s, the schoolteacher was Christian Sanderson, the leader of the folk band, the Pocopson Valley Boys. He was a well-known and a colorful member of the community. The West Chester *Daily Local* dated December 28, 1906 states:

"Christian Sanderson, teacher at Locust Grove School, gave an excellent entertainment on Wednesday



Photo courtesy Christian Sanderson Museum

A photograph of Locust Grove School children taken when Christian Sanderson was the teacher in 1908.

evening, December 23rd consisting of music, recitations, and gymnastic drills. The music and drills were especially well rendered and both teacher and pupils deserve a great deal of credit for the manner in which the entertainment was conducted."

Preservation of historic structures has waxed and waned over the decades since Locust Grove Schoolhouse was in operation. In recent years, citizens in Pocopson Township determined that the schoolhouse was an important part of local heritage and should be preserved, refurbished and maintained as a "living" museum for all to see.

Since 2004, volunteers have been involved in refurbishing and maintaining the structure. During the course of its renovation, it was discovered that local residents Barnard Baily and Mary Beth Drobish owned portions of the original chalkboard that was used in the school. They donated the chalkboard and it was re-installed on the wall, along with a wood-burning stove of the period owned by Baily which is now in the school.

The ceremony on June 4 showcased the hundreds of



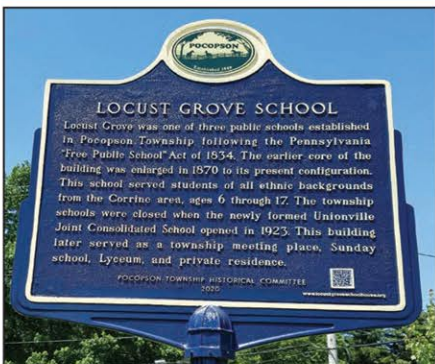
The Interior of the renovated Locust Grove Schoolhouse

hours of work these people have done to restore a part of local history. Just as it happened 150 years ago to call students to class, the school bell was rung several times during the opening ceremony. The school room is completely finished and hosted dozens of guests for the re-opening event. Further planned work includes refurbishment of the basement and installation of restrooms.

The Locust Grove Schoolhouse is a wonderful example of how citizen volunteers can have a substantial, and quite positive, impact on maintaining local heritage, bringing historic structures to the attention of an appreciative public. The

schoolhouse at 525 Locust Grove Road in West Chester will be open for tours in the coming year. For more information, visit their website at www.locustgroveschoolhouse.org.

Gene Pisasale is an historian, author and lecturer based in Kennett Square. His ten books focus on the history of the Chester County/mid-Atlantic region. His latest work is *Forgotten Founding Fathers: Pennsylvania and Delaware in the American Revolution*. His books are available on his website at www.GenePisasale.com and on www.Amazon.com. Gene can be reached via e-mail at Gene@GenePisasale.com.



The Locust Grove School historical marker.