

Former school placed on National Register

01:00 AM EST on Wednesday, February 21, 2007

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BURRILLVILLE — Recently listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the 110-year-old Bridgeton School has come full circle as an educational institution.

Built in 1897, the 1 1/2-story, wood-frame structure at the intersection of Laurel Hill Avenue, Church Street and Wallum Lake Road in the Bridgeton neighborhood of Burrillville was used as a grammar school for more than 90 years.

Used today as a local history museum and headquarters for the Burrillville Historical & Preservation Society, the structure now teaches visitors about the town's contribution to architecture and education.

“Today, Bridgeton School has lessons to teach about historic preservation and the work of volunteer stewards of this local landmark,” said Edward F. Sanderson, executive director of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission.

The National Register is the federal government's list of properties throughout the country whose historical and architectural significance makes them worthy of preservation. In addition to honoring a property's contribution to history, being listed on the National Register makes the property's owner eligible to receive state and federal tax credits for historic restorations.

“It's a symbol of preservation for the town,” said Betty Mencucci, president of the Burrillville Historical & Preservation Society, which nominated the school for the National Register.

Mencucci said she and other society members had been researching the building to prepare the lengthy nomination form for several years. Most places pay professionals to do that work, but the Burrillville society did it on their own, she said.

“To me that was a big accomplishment,” Mencucci said.

The school was built in 1897 after the Burrillville School Committee purchased land in Bridgeton from Nehemiah Kimball and hired him as a contractor and builder for a new school. Woonsocket architect George W. Spaulding drew up plans for the two-room, late Victorian-style building that served elementary students from Bridgeton and nearby Pascoag, according to the application.

The school opened that same year and taught 76 students in grades one through four. By 1935, 101 students attended the Bridgeton School.

Closed by the town in 1966, the school reopened as a neighborhood kindergarten and was renamed the Joseph Sweeney School in 1970. When the town built the Steere Farm Elementary School in 1995, the Bridgeton School was closed again and transferred to the Burrillville Preservation & Historical Society.

The society completed a \$34,000-restoration of the school's bell tower in 2004, and hired Wakefield-based Historic Restoration to restore the building's exterior the following year, using \$104,000 in state preservation grants and funds from the Champlin Foundations and the June Rockwell Levy Foundation. A video documentary of the bell tower restoration, shot by Mencucci and her husband Carlo, will air on Cox Cable this Sunday and next Sunday at 3 p.m.

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