

# Saving the Old Wallville School

*Joe Flanagan*

FOR STUDENTS IN CALVERT COUNTY, MARYLAND, a tiny structure that is nearly a century-and-a-half old affords a unique opportunity to understand the African American experience. The Old Wallville School, an 18x18-foot wood frame building, is the oldest known surviving one-room school in Calvert County. It is believed to have been built some time in the early 1880s and functioned until 1934, witness to a segregated nation and the plight of African Americans in their pursuit of education.

The one-room school is currently located near the Calvert Elementary School. But for 60 years it sat in a private yard where, until 1994, it sat forgotten and decaying. The fact that it has been restored and integrated into the local school curriculum as a learning platform for African American culture and history is testament to people taking possession of their history and using it to make a better future.

In late-19th-century Maryland—as in much of the rest of the country—African Americans had to struggle to get an education. They improvised, made do with what was available, used castoff supplies from white schools. The Old Wallville School was illustrative of the experience. It could accommodate 35 students, grades one through seven. Twelve double desks were fitted into the building with little room to spare. Smaller children sat three to a desk. If there were more students, the overflow sat on the floor and used flat-topped logs for a writing surface. Supplies were scarce. Textbooks were used, not new, and were often missing pages. The bathroom was an outhouse and the school's only source of heat was a wood stove that had to be lit well ahead of the start of the day. The teacher—who also served as principal, secretary, and custodian—started the school year with a roll book, a water bucket and dipper, a dustpan and broom, a box of chalk, hand-held chalkboards, and not much else.

In a 2005 paper, Kirsti Uunila, a historic preservation planner in Calvert County who was very much involved in the rehabilitation of the building, explained its origins and use: “The Old Wallville School . . . represents an early public school, a successor to the community-built and supported schools that appeared throughout the south after the Civil War, often constructed with the assistance of the Freedmen’s Bureau and regional and community part-

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ners—in Calvert the partners were almost always churches. African American education was not supported by Calvert County until near the end of the 19th century, and then not much. The Old Wallville School served African American children for miles around for at least 40 years. It was replaced by a newer, slightly larger one-room building in 1934.”

The building began the transformation to its current use in 1994, when a collaborative effort was underway to develop a traveling display on the history of African American education in Calvert County. A retired teacher who had taught in the county’s one-room schools led Uunila to the Old Wallville School, which had been moved from its original location and was then sitting in a private yard and being used for storage. Its future was uncertain because a new house was going to be built in close proximity and the construction permit called for the schoolhouse to be removed.

The property owner and the builder were local African Americans who knew both what the building was and what it represented. It was arranged with Calvert County permit reviewers to let the schoolhouse stand when the new house was built. But the arrangement was temporary. Zoning and other issues related to its location meant that it would eventually have to be moved.

At that point, an effort was made to reach out to community activists and encourage them to take on the school’s restoration as an important part of African American heritage. Local media reported on the Old Wallville School and the attempt to save it—not just as an historic structure but as a powerful source of education and African American identity.

The informal group that had been advocating for the building formed Friends of the Old Wallville School, with a local attorney donating his time to compose its articles of incorporation. State Senator Roy Dyson submitted a \$30,000 bond bill to the Maryland General Assembly, which was awarded. The bill required the friends group to match those funds. The plan was to move the building to the site of a church-affiliated youth center, where it would become part of the educational programming for the young people there.

But at that point, in the late 1990s, the people who were actively involved in the effort were relatively few and there were other demands on their time. And there were other obstacles. Writes Uunila, “With the long history of African American presence in Calvert, there is a lot of diversity among the geographically separated communities. And there are affiliations and enmities that affect the way they work together.” The plan to relocate the school would move it out of the Wallville community and to another African American community whose residents did not go to the same churches or frequent the same social circles.

And there was the racialization of space. “There was resistance,” Uunila writes, “to public support of a heritage resource in a black space, which the youth center property is. . . . The potential partners who resisted the first attempt to save the school included the county historical society, the Heritage Committee (which is appointed by the County Commissioners), tourism marketers, and finally, a statewide preservation organization, which cried poverty and turned down a request for a few thousand dollars to assist with stabilization and planning the move.”

While the effort to rehabilitate the Old Wallville School flagged, the traveling display on African American education in Calvert County was completed. This led to a more ambitious

project—a regional exhibit created by the state-run Jefferson Patterson Park. “Strive Not to Equal, but to Excel: African American Schools during a Century of Segregation” was funded by a \$174,000 grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Its creators gathered a large quantity of oral histories, documents, and artifacts to tell the story of this particular aspect of African American history. The material helped form teacher guides and materials that are used today.

The bond intended to fund the rehabilitation of the Old Wallville School expired for lack of matching funds, and the friends group disbanded. Once again, the building’s future looked uncertain. But the story of the African American struggle for education in segregated southern Maryland was getting more exposure. For Calvert County’s 350th anniversary, the tourism office published a brochure that mentioned education as a critical touchstone of the African American experience. Also, a public archeology project revealed details about the lives of a local African American family of the late 19th century, including their effort to educate themselves and a connection to the Old Wallville School. So, while the drive to rehabilitate the school had all but stalled, the historic context that gave it importance was very much in the public consciousness.

As part of its effort to incorporate historic sites into the school curriculum, the Calvert County Historic Preservation Office presents summer in-service training for teachers. In 2004, as part of a course on the African American experience after the Civil War, teachers were offered a tour called “Landscape of Segregation.” The Old Wallville School was part of the tour. The size of the building and the idea that as many as 35 children would have crammed inside it as the only option available had an effect on the visiting teachers.

They approached the Calvert County Heritage Committee with a request to save the building, which was met with approval. The committee formed a group, appropriating the name Friends of the Old Wallville School, re-established its articles of incorporation, and began raising funds. Now, Calvert County Public Schools were a partner in the effort. In 2006, workers and volunteers began disassembling the schoolhouse, taking salvageable pieces of it to the Calvert Elementary School, where it would be reconstructed.

Preservation Maryland gave \$5,000 to the project. The Calvert County Heritage Committee and the recently certified Southern Maryland Heritage Area each donated \$1,000. The aim was to restore the building as faithfully as possible to how it was when it was a functioning schoolhouse. To ensure authenticity, oral histories from former students and teachers were consulted. The project conformed to the secretary of interior’s standards of rehabilitation.

Today, the Old Wallville School serves as far more than a historic curiosity. Rather, it is a living document of the African American experience. It bears witness to the resilience and resourcefulness of African Americans in the era of segregation. All fourth-graders in Calvert County participate in a day-long program on African American life from the turn of the century to 1930. They learn about education in the post-Civil War years, when there was no public school funding for blacks.

After emancipation, African Americans took the first tentative steps to educate themselves, which was often done in churches, since no schools were available to them. In Calvert

County of the 1880s, black communities began occupying buildings vacated by the white school system. The Old Wallville School was one of these. Through the educational curriculum designed around the schoolhouse, 21st-century students come face-to-face with what, to their ancestors, must have seemed a nearly insurmountable injustice. The schoolhouse acts as a catalyst for broader examination of race relations in the United States, from the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision supporting segregation, to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, to the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, to the eventual desegregation of American schools. According to Uunila, the experience allows students “to take on issues deeper than technology: moving from how far you had to walk, and keeping the fire going in the stove, to publicly discuss[ing] segregation and how the values that supported it affected everything else.” The Old Wallville School’s new incarnation as a teaching tool, says Uunila, “can enable conversation about the continuity of passing down black history that was lost for decades after desegregation.”

One of the aspects of local African American culture that becomes clear through the Old Wallville School is the effectiveness of the social activism network that made education—and many other things—possible. This was particularly evident from the Depression years through the 1950s, when African American schools got little public funding. The same network has been instrumental in keeping memory of this experience alive. According to Barbara Stewart Mogel, administrator of the exhibit services program at Calvert County’s Jefferson Patterson Park, it was crucial to producing the “Strive Not to Equal, but to Excel” traveling exhibit. Writing in *Primary Source*, the online newsletter of the Institute of Library and Museum Services, she states that the project “elicited memories and artifacts from people who had taught at or attended local public schools before integration. In this instance, every personal narrative was of equal value since each participant had experienced the subject matter—the segregated school system.”

Preserving the Old Wallville School and using it as a teaching tool is a case of successful civic engagement. Uunila points out that her responsibilities as an anthropologist coincide with those of the Calvert County Department of Planning and Zoning—that citizens must be involved in decisions that will affect them, that they should have ample opportunity to express their opinions and their concerns. This is not only true in the conventional sense of planning and zoning, but in matters of heritage, identity, and collective experience. While it may not be stated as such in county code or policy, this is an issue of social justice, the rescue and adaptive reuse of the Old Wallville School being a case in point. Projects such as this achieve what is most important in heritage tourism and education: encouraging public discussion, mending differences, learning from the past, and showing the way to a better future.

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