

# Preservation group working to restore historic Clark County school

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By Tom Stafford, Staff Writer, Springfield News Sun



NEW CARLISLE — At 11.30 a.m. Saturday, the Olive Branch School Preservation Society will unveil a sign that speaks to the historic importance of the “Little Round Building” in front of the Tecumseh schools. From 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., members will host an open house to provide a glimpse of their vision for a path toward the building’s brighter future.

Built in 1908, then rebuilt after a devastating fire in 1913, Olive Branch was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2009.

Although this put the school on what the society describes as “the official list of the nation’s historic places worthy of preservation,” funds were unavailable even to purchase a sign to share the news with passersby.

Enter the William G. Pomeroy Foundation, which since 2006 has funded 900 historic markers and plaques in 12 states.

Cyndie Gerken, a founding member of the Olive Branch preservation group, said word of the foundation’s grants for National Register signs seemed to arrive by happenstance. Under the impression that the Syracuse, N.Y.-based foundation did not give out-of-state grants, she almost gave up on the notion before discovering its ultimate willingness to do so.

For that, the preservation society will express its gratitude on Saturday.

The funding for the sign arrived after the Olive Branch group had taken renewed hope and encouragement from a visit by John Landess and Kevin Rose of the Springfield-based Turner Foundation.

“It was like a lightbulb going off,” Gerken said.

Jim Leathley, chairman of the preservation group, said Landess’ suggestion that the work be undertaken one room at a time struck him as a common sense path forward.

Focusing on the northeast of the four rooms - a room in which Leathley attended second grade — “we went in and took everything out that wouldn’t have been there when it was built,” Leathley said.

That included a drop ceiling, a tile floor, fluorescent light bulbs and other things that had been added over its years as a school and then a district warehouse.

With all that removed, “lo and behold, the ceiling is arched up,” he said. Protected by plywood added years ago, the 1914 floor, for years regularly oiled, is in “great shape,” he added.

He and Gerken said that in part because visiting contractors have seen the same potential in the building, the society has applied for grants to restore the northeast room’s windows, walls and a set of pocket doors that connect it to the central room that served as a cafeteria and auditorium.

The hope is to, room by room, bring back to life the building Dayton architect Charles Insko Williams’ stone-and-stucco vision of an ideal school imagined in the Craftsman style of that era - a style seen in bungalows all around the area.

A consultant’s review of the building says it retains much of its original architecture and stands out as “the only example of a Craftsman public or institutional building.”

At least as important to the community, however, are the memories of those like Gerken and Leathley who attended the school.

For Leathley, that includes a spanking that came his way the day he managed to knock the sun out of the display of the planets that been strung up in the auditorium with a bean bag.

For Gerken, it includes teacher Thelma Studebaker stopping by her home when Gerken was ill as a child so she could do projects other Olive Branch students had been doing during her absence. Having written three books about the National Road, the school’s location on Route 40 is also of special import to her.

Both also have hopes for the project because of their regard for other school alumni who worked on the project, among them the recently deceased Peter Scarff and John Sipe.

For more information about the preservation efforts, visit [olivebranchschool.org](http://olivebranchschool.org).