



Hunterdon Land Trust

Protecting the places you love

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‘Mystery’ Building at Dvoor Farm to Become Rustic Classroom

Many times when Catherine Suttle walked up the gravel driveway at the Hunterdon Land Trust’s Dvoor Farm headquarters, she wondered about the old white wagon shed on the property. Clues abound that the pre-Civil War era building served some other purpose years ago, but what exactly? Was it an old farm office moved to its present location from somewhere else on the property? Perhaps it was home to a miner searching for copper in the nearby brook in the 1840s?

“It’s a very complicated, intriguing building,” said Suttle, director of cultural resources for the Hunterdon Land Trust. “Trying to figure out why this building was originally built is a bit of an enigma.”

While the building’s past is steeped in mystery, its future certainly isn’t: The Hunterdon Land Trust will restore the wagon shed for use as a rustic classroom while preserving its aesthetic as a farm outbuilding. The shed may also serve as the future home of the Land Trust’s winter Farmers’ Market.

Rustic means the building will have electricity, a wood stove and lighting, but no other heat, insulation or running water. The three-season classroom will host environmental, gardening and historical talks, and be available for community gatherings.

“This is the first conversion of a building at the Dvoor Farm dedicated for public use,” Suttle said. “It clearly demonstrates we’re fulfilling our promise to make this beautiful land a place where people can connect.”



The classroom will be a perfect place to host environmental programs for children, Suttle said. “We recently created a trail head adjacent to the wagon shed,” she said. “It meanders between the wetlands and the Mine Brook, and leads to Mine Brook Park. So, kids can learn in the classroom and then explore the trail or participate in an activity on the farm.”

Grants from the New Jersey Historic Trust, the 1772 Foundation, Church & Dwight and Hunterdon County funded the project.

Restoring the shed isn’t a simple task. First, a later-era connector shed that’s not historically significant needs to be removed because it’s in poor condition and harming the wagon shed by dumping rainwater on it. Then part, perhaps all, of the wagon shed will be carefully disassembled so the foundation can be rebuilt. And finally, the shed will be reassembled using as much of the original lumber as possible.

Architect Chris Pickell, whose firm specializes in working with historic buildings, said dismantling the shed is the most cost-effective way to restore it. “The building is leaning now and there’s some temporary braces holding it in place,” Pickell said. “And the timber frame was designed to be cut on the ground, so they are designed to be taken apart and reassembled. It’s the right way and the easy way to do it.”

The shed is actually two buildings joined together. At the front is a timber-framed structure dating back to the early 1800s, which was moved from another location; at the back is a younger, sawn-frame building.

“The building is a bit of a mystery,” Pickell said. “The (hand-hewn timber) frame is telling us that it was once a house.” The notches in the wood, for instance, indicate that plaster may have been nailed to the frame, which would have been unlikely in a typical farm outbuilding.

The building’s foundation also poses a puzzle. “During the recent archaeological study of the property, we discovered that for the back half of the building there’s a brick foundation that sits atop a stone foundation, and even further down, there’s a much heavier stone foundation that spans just beyond the entire building,” Suttle said. “We’re not even quite sure what the footprint is.” The larger stone foundation indicates another building probably existed at this location.

Dismantling the shed will provide the opportunity to better examine the building and foundation, and to learn more about its history.

The Land Trust anticipates the rustic classroom will welcome guests in mid-2015.

“We’re going to reopen the back, where there were once doors, so anyone learning about wetlands can look out the window and have this beautiful view of wetlands,” Pickell said. “It’s a wonderful use for the building.”



Photo caption information: Hunterdon Land Trust Executive Director Patricia Ruby (left) and Director of Cultural Resources Catherine Suttle review plans to renovate the 19th-century wagon shed on the Dvoor Farm into a rustic classroom.

