

School is Still In Session at this One-Room Schoolhouse

By Charles Jeffries
Photography by Bill Kamenjar

The inside of the Seneca Schoolhouse isn't much bigger than a child's bedroom these days, but when teacher Julie Shapiro rings the simple brass bell affixed to the front of the building, students file in and take their seats at the wooden desks and a day of lessons circa 1880 commences.

Shapiro makes the school day as authentic as possible – chalk and slate boards instead of tablets and smartphones, bonnets and simple frocks instead of ball caps and jeans, a dunce cap and stool for the class clown and even a pot-belly stove for winter heat. The windows have modern screens to keep the bugs out, but other than that the schoolhouse looks very much like it did when it opened in 1867.

Students from around the region make field trips to the small, red sandstone schoolhouse on River Road near Poolesville for the experience of what learning might have been like more than 100 years ago.

Until the Civil War ended, there was very little formal education in the county – or anywhere in the country for that matter. In 1865 Upton Darby organized the effort to build the Seneca Schoolhouse to educate children from up-county farms and settlements. Darby provided the land, the stone from a nearby quarry and the wood for the windows, floor and front door. Other area families contributed what they could, either in supplies or labor.

Classes met in the school until 1910 when education became more formalized in Montgomery County. For a while after that, the little schoolhouse was owned and lived in by a man who worked as a farmhand in upper Montgomery County. At some point it fell into a state of disrepair until renovation work began in the 1970s. In the early 1980s, it reopened as a one-room schoolhouse and museum and classes have been held there ever since. The schoolhouse is operated by the Historic Medley District, an organization dedicated to preserving the heritage of western Montgomery County.

"We have some teachers who have been bringing their classes here for 25 years," says Shapiro.

