

# History Comes Alive at Seneca Schoolhouse

BY KNIGHT KIPLINGER



The notes from teachers gush over the experience:

*“The best field trip ever!”*

*“An amazing and transformative opportunity!”*

*“The highlight of the entire year!”*

In a region full of great outings for elementary school kids, these teachers aren't talking about their students' day at an amusement park, ice cream factory, science museum or colonial farm.

The object of their enthusiasm is a low-key, unassuming but totally engaging experience for kids: a day of authentic 1880s education at the Seneca Schoolhouse, an historic one-room school on River Road in western Montgomery County, a mile west of Seneca Creek. It's a hands-on, role-playing immersion in an earlier time. The classroom lessons and rules of conduct are unfamiliar and fascinating to today's children.

Students assume the name and identity (assigned in advance) of a local child who attended the Seneca school—the son or daughter of a farmer, blacksmith, quarry worker or boat family on the nearby C&O Canal. They are encouraged to dress in clothes of the era—work shirts and dungarees for the boys, long dresses, skirts, aprons and long-sleeved blouses for the girls.

They leave behind their cell phones and computer tablets, using instead the original personal digital device—digital as in “finger”—a small slate on which they write their spelling and arithmetic lessons with a soapstone stylus.



*More than a century separates the generations of children at the Seneca Schoolhouse pictured here, but under the guidance of teacher Julie Shapiro, who authentically follows in the footsteps of the school's first school teacher, Miss Darby, today's children share in the one-room classroom experience of their predecessors, happily taking on their persona and enjoying the lesson plans, activities, and chores of times gone by.*

There are chores to do, with the girls sweeping the floor and wiping the big blackboard. The boys bring in small split logs for the pot-bellied stove that heats the big room and warms the baked potatoes some kids bring to eat for lunch or toss in a game of “hot potato.”

Children willingly embrace—at least, for one day—the ritual courtesies of the Victorian classroom, such as bows and curtsies to their teacher, whom they greet in unison, “Good morning, Miss Darby!” They sit quietly at their desks—girls on one side of the room, boys on the other—with their hands folded in front of them, silently raising their hands to be called on, then standing up next to their desks to give their answer.

The children go to the recitation bench at the front to say their memorized poems and multiplication tables, stand beside their desks to read didactic stories from *McGuffey’s Reader*, the most popular all-in-one textbook of the 19th century (still in print today). They all stand for spelling bees, sitting down one by one until the winner is declared. They learn some geography and local history too.

What do modern kids seem to find most intriguing? The corporal punishments and humiliations long ago banned in public classrooms. Miss Darby wields her stick and switch with a light touch to the back of the hand or knees. Failure to bring firewood to school? Go sit on the front stoop in the cold. Poor academic effort? It’s the dunce cap and stool in the corner. A boy who laughs at the dunce must don a girl’s bonnet. A girl who laughs must stand with her nose touching the

blackboard (inside a chalk circle), with her arms out straight in a T.

A very few teachers and parents have requested that the historic punishments be omitted. Miss Darby will accommodate them, but she notes the authenticity of the punishments—and the kids’ delight in seeing them meted out.

And what’s a school day without recess? Here it’s spent in relay races, jumping rope, rolling wooden hoops, and playing baseball with sticks and fat black walnuts, still in their husks. (And using the outhouse out back.)

Seneca Schoolhouse (SSH), where field trip classes began in 1981, is the longest-running and most active reenactment of its kind in the Washington metropolitan area, and historical groups from all around seek to emulate its success.

In addition to field trips from public, parochial and private schools in Maryland, Virginia and D.C., SSH is very popular with networks of homeschooling parents, some of whom have come from as far as West Virginia and Pennsylvania. And on weekends it hosts birthday parties and outings of local Scout groups. At Thanksgiving and Christmas students make crafts and decorate a small tree with garlands made in class.

SSH is the core educational program of Historic Medley District (HMD), a historical society based in Poolesville and named for Montgomery County’s Election District No. 3, which coincides roughly with the northwestern side of today’s Agricultural Reserve, bounded by Seneca Creek, the Potomac River and Sugarloaf



*Built in 1865 with funds and materials gathered by the local community, the Seneca Schoolhouse provided education for local children until 1910. Right: The Seneca Schoolhouse before its 1978-'81 restoration, taken by James Reber. Above: Today's children play at recess with wooden hoops from the past.*





The original Seneca Schoolhouse experience is depicted in the 1976 children's novel *Country School Boy*, written by Beth Paterson Shipe and illustrated by Carol Stuart Watson. A key source for their book (available for purchase at the schoolhouse) was the remarkable memory of Lewis P. Allnutt, Sr., who attended SSH as a boy living on Sugarland Road. Mr. Allnutt was interviewed in his 100th year, a few years before his death in early 1975 at 103.



Mountain. The Medley election district was named for its polling place, John Medley's tavern at the crossroads in Beallsville.

The schoolhouse, solidly built of Seneca red sandstone, ceased being a school in 1910, and it was an abandoned tenant farmer residence in Seneca Creek State Park when HMD, under the leadership of Mary Ann Kephart, began the restoration project in 1978 with state and private funding, completing it in 1981. Historic Medley District also owns two historic properties in downtown Poolesville, the 1793 John Poole House and Store (the oldest building in Poolesville) and the 1907 Poolesville Bank building, later the town hall. All three HMD properties will be open for Montgomery Heritage Days on Saturday and Sunday, June 25-26, from noon to 4:00 p.m.

The modern schoolmarm is longtime Poolesville resident Julie Shapiro. She portrays Miss Alice Darby, whose father, Upton Darby, owned the grist mill on Seneca Creek (later known as Tschiffely Mill) and was instrumental in gathering community support to start the school in 1865-'66.

Julie schedules the school

groups, which fill SSH most weekdays from mid-fall through early June. HMD typically charges \$225 for a four-hour session, and visitors provide their own transportation and lunches. The program is ideal for second- to fourth-graders but can be tailored to other ages. (Homeschoolers often bring a wide range of ages, which makes for a more-authentic one-room school experience.) Weekend parties of two hours typically cost \$150.

Many schools have been coming to SSH for years, and some visiting teachers and parents tell Julie Shapiro that they came to SSH as students themselves and remember the experience vividly and fondly.

For information about this wonderful experience for children, visit [www.historicmedley.org](http://www.historicmedley.org) and leave a message at [info@historicmedley.org](mailto:info@historicmedley.org), or phone 301-407-0777 and leave a message.

*Knight Kiplinger was raised and still lives at Montevideo, the 1830 farm across River Road from Seneca Schoolhouse, and he first knew the overgrown, abandoned building as a boy in the early 1960s. A financial journalist and historic preservationist, he is board chair of Historic Medley District.*



Boys carry firewood to heat the pot-bellied stove, while a few girls wait patiently for a big potato to heat up on the stove. Then it's on to a rousing game of "hot potato" at recess.