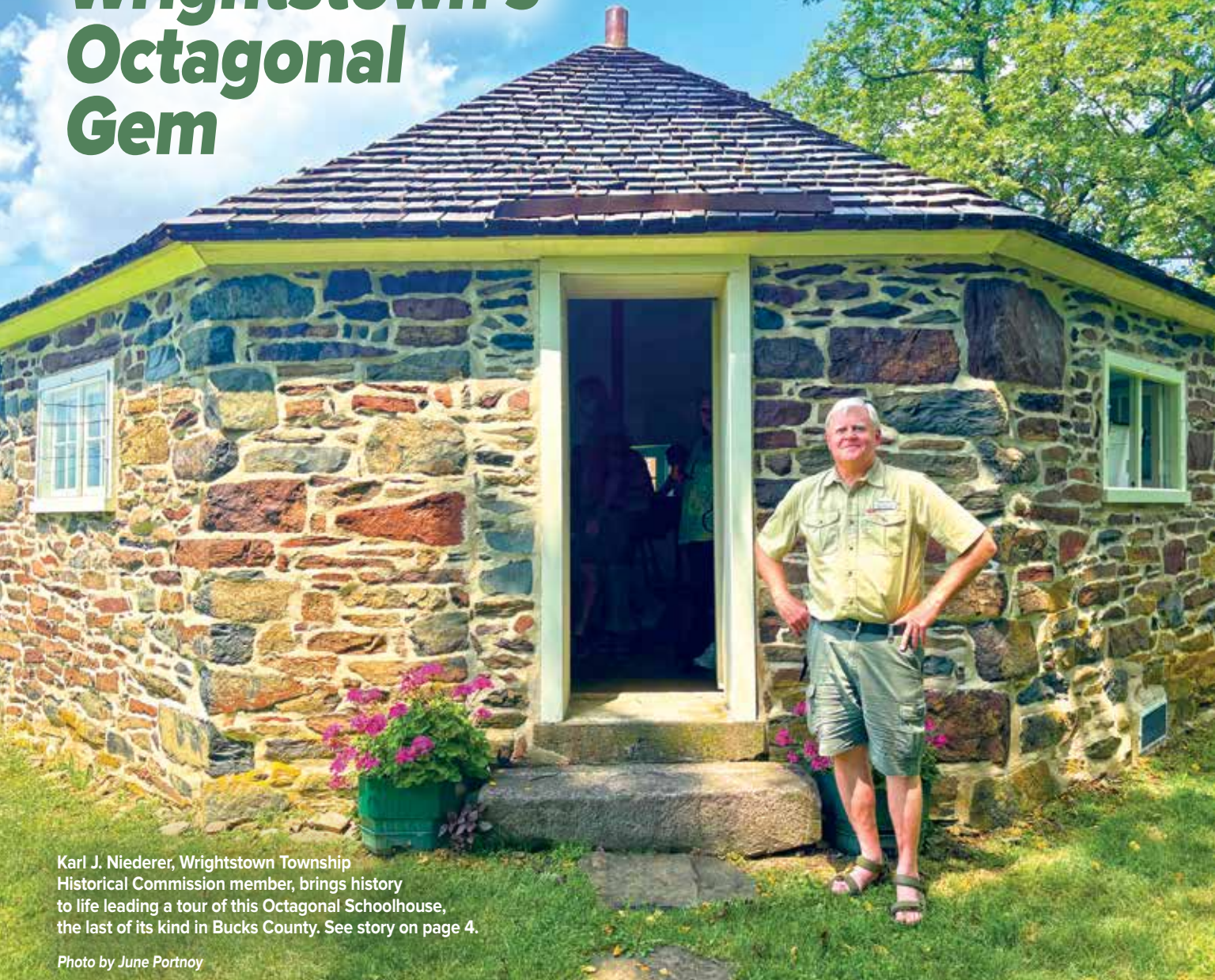


Newtown GAZETTE

Wrightstown's Octagonal Gem



Karl J. Niederer, Wrightstown Township Historical Commission member, brings history to life leading a tour of this Octagonal Schoolhouse, the last of its kind in Bucks County. See story on page 4.

Photo by June Portnoy

A step back in time: Touring the Wrightstown Octagonal Schoolhouse

by June Portnoy

At the intersection of Swamp Road and Second Street Pike in Wrightstown Township sits an octagonal stone structure that has withstood centuries of change, a rare monument to Bucks County's early educational roots. Step through its doorway, and you'll find yourself transported back to a schoolhouse from 1802.

On the third Sunday of each month from May through October, the Wrightstown Township Historical Commission invites visitors into this one-of-a-kind schoolhouse, offering an immersive tour of a time when education was paid for not by public tax dollars, but by the collective commitment of local Quaker families. "This was a private school that operated from 1802 to 1850," explained Karl J. Niederer, a member of the Historical Commission, during the July outdoor tour. "There were no public schools in Pennsylvania at that time. The parents paid a tuition of about a dollar and a half a year, which was significant back then."

The schoolhouse, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, owes its unique eight-sided shape to practicality. "It's octagonal for a reason: light and ventilation," Niederer said, gesturing toward the building's seven windows and single door. "You could open everything and get airflow from all directions.



Above: Sign outside of the schoolhouse. Left: Wrightstown Township Historical Commission member, Mary Lee Johnson, gives a tour of the interior of the schoolhouse.

Plus, whether or not the sun was in the sky, during the day you had enough light to read and study inside without using candles or lamps."

Inside, visitors find a meticulously preserved and authentically restored interior, complete with replica desks modeled after those from an 18th-century Mount Holly, New Jersey school, a circular layout ideal for teacher supervision, and a centrally located stove. "This building allowed one teacher to manage an individualized education for every student," Niederer noted. "There were no grades like we think of them today. Instruction was based entirely on each child's needs."

Mary Lee Johnson, another dedicated Wrightstown Township Historical Commission

member, led the indoor tour with equal enthusiasm and depth of knowledge. She pointed to an original 1826 contract, displayed inside, between the school's trustees and a schoolmistress named Rachel Twining. "Rachel taught here for many years," Johnson said. "She taught reading, writing, arithmetic, and needlework. At the time of that contract, she had all boys and one girl. So yes, the boys were also learning how to sew."

For families unable to afford the tuition, Bucks County often stepped in with subsidies. "No child was denied an education here," Johnson said. "Education was incredibly important to the early Quaker settlers. They valued it so much they pooled their resources and built this school themselves, stone,

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Octagonal Schoolhouse

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wood, everything, with their own sweat equity.”

Niederer, standing outside the schoolhouse near the large cedar shake roof, explained, “The land was previously part of a working farm. The farmowner offered this corner of his property on a long-term lease at no charge. The rest, materials, construction, was all provided by local residents. They didn’t hire a contractor. They built it themselves.”

That effort is why the building still stands today. “It’s the only one of twelve octagonal schoolhouses in Bucks County to survive,” Niederer said. “Probably because it was built out of solid stone. As long as you kept a roof on it, it wouldn’t fall

apart.”

After it ceased functioning as a school in 1850, the building lived multiple lives, as a chicken coop, a residence, and a general farm outbuilding, until the township acquired it in the 1990s and turned it into a public park and museum.

“We painted the interior plaster, added storm windows, and installed a security system,” Johnson said. “Everything else is either original or restored with precision. The window sills, for example, are now concrete. We believe that’s because Henry Chapman Mercer, the renowned Bucks County historian, archaeologist, museum collector, and tile-maker, visited here in the early 1900s and saw they were rotting. We suspect he added the concrete ones, which

helped preserve the structure even more.”

Visitors who take this tour are often struck by the simplicity and authenticity of the schoolhouse. “They’re fascinated by the desks, the small chalkboards, the mid-20th-century rotary phone we keep here for security,” Johnson laughed. “The children especially love the chalkboards. They’re shocked when we tell them there was no paper or ink available to students; those were too expensive, so kids would write on the slate boards and wipe them clean with a wet rag.”

The experience is especially powerful for young visitors. In 1976, during the nation’s Bicentennial celebrations, two fourth-grade classes from Wrightstown Elementary School were bussed to the site for a full day of education reenactments. “One class stayed inside while the other was outside, and they switched halfway through the day,” Johnson recalled. “They got a real taste of what life was like here, then 170 years ago.”

While such school trips are no longer feasible due to safety concerns at the intersection and lack of restroom facilities,

public tours remain a popular draw. “We get 50 to 80 visitors on open house days,” Johnson said. “Many have driven by for years and finally stop in. They’re amazed it’s still here. Young or old, they ask a lot of questions and truly engage with the history.”

Niederer believes that part of what makes the schoolhouse so compelling is the window it provides into the earliest days of Wrightstown Township itself. “This was one of the first townships in Pennsylvania,” he said. “Settled in the 1680s by English Quakers fleeing religious persecution, William Penn gave them the opportunity to build a society based on freedom of conscience, and they placed enormous value on education. This schoolhouse is a direct product of that commitment.”

And thanks to ongoing care and dedication by the Wrightstown Township Historical Commission, the building remains a rare, tangible link to that legacy.

Upcoming public tours of the Wrightstown Octagonal Schoolhouse will take place on Sunday, August 17, Sunday, September 21, and Sunday, October 19, from 1 pm to 5 pm. Admission is free.

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