



Hamilton Primary School Festival Helps Preserve History, Has Large Weekend Attendance

by Randy Manning

September 24 2022 9:41 PM

Photos may be purchased for personal use at: <https://www.randymanning.com/Hamilton-Primary-School-Festival>



OTTERVILLE - The 39th annual Hamilton Primary School Festival drew a large crowd Saturday, Sept. 24, and Sunday, Sept. 25, from noon to 4 p.m. on the grounds of the Hamilton Primary School, located at 107 E. Main St. in Otterville.

Hamilton Primary School was the first free and integrated school in the United States. The original school building was built in 1835. It was added to the National Register of Historic Places on August 6, 1998.

Dr. Silas Hamilton, for whom the school is named, was born in New England, but eventually landed in the Otterville area.

George Washington, one of Hamilton's former slaves, bequeathed \$1,500 upon his death in 1864 to build a monument to Hamilton. The marble monument, erected in front of the school the same year, is currently maintained by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. The original building was demolished in 1872, and the current school building was built from the same stone the following year.

Sonny Renken, president of the Otterville Historical Society and coordinator of the event, said funds from the event have been used to date for the following:

- Building tuckpointing.
- Repaired, waterproofed, and painted the roof.
- Updated the plumbing and installed a bathroom and kitchen sink.
- installed a furnace, repaired and painted all the windows on the outside and trim.
- Installed waterproofing system in the basement.

Overall, the festival has been huge for the preservation of the building.

There were children's games at the event, a variety of crafts and vendors, and many food offerings at the festival and much more.



Sonny Renken's mother was one of those who started the school festival. Sonny has carried on his mother's work with the event and also worked to preserve the history of the location. He believes the school tells an important story for that time period.

Renken is fascinated by the relationship that Silas Hamilton and George Washington had and they are buried side by side. He left money for a monument to be built for his master.

"I think it is important to know Silas picked this community that used to be in Greene County back at one time because he knew neighbors would take care of neighbors," Renken said. "It is the first integrated school and has a lot of historical significance."

Rodger St. Peters and Debbe Kyle both attended school at Hamilton Primary School.

He laughed and said it really was "uphill both ways and two miles to school."

St. Peters last went to school there in his graduation in 1958. St. Peters described teachers there as excellent but "very strict."

One of St. Peters' favorite memories is playing on a baseball team for the school. He said one of the teachers would use an old farm truck with straw in it to take area boys to games. He said the squad had some exceptional players.

"I remember going to play at Kane and Kane had lights on its field," he said. "It was special to play there, but we beat them pretty bad. We had some great players on our team."

Kyle, too, remembered how strict the school was when she attended and said the teachers were especially hard on the boys. She said she enjoyed her time at the school.

One time, St. Peters had to go home because his hands were stained deeply with his off-school work with walnuts. He said it is something he was never able to forget and his mother washed and scrubbed his hands with lye soap.

“As you can see, we have done a lot of things, but there so many more things left to do. The top floor has not been touched as of yet,” Mary Drainer said prior to the event. She is another one of the coordinators each year. “Our immediate project is to have the outside windows repainted, and in the next year or so, the roof will have to be painted again which is on a 10-year schedule.

“It is my hope that people will take the time to come and see this beautiful school and what it stands for. It's a piece of history that we cannot let be forgotten.”

[Dan Brannan also contributed to this story.](#)