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Creating a 'little piece of historic legacy'

Local decorative artist restores 19th century schoolhouse one warm weekend at a time

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The exterior of the old Nunnery School on Nunnery Road as it looked in mid-August when owner Heather Bruno-Sears was

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in the middle of replacing the roof and windows. The roof is being done in an English cottage-style using ornamental Hemlock wood. Photo by [Jason Emerson](#).

By [Jason Emerson](#)

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Photo by [Jason Emerson](#)

Heather Bruno-Sears stands outside her renovation work-in-progress, the old Nunnery School on Nunnery Road. In the background at left can be seen one of the multiple gardens on the property Bruno-Sears has spent years creating.

Spafford — Heather Bruno-Sears found the bones of an oxen in her front yard, a 1902 Indian-head penny by her front doorstep, a handmade glass marble in the interior dirt under the window, and a 19th century cast-iron toy pull horse in her garden.

She's not a treasure hunter, an intense antiquer or a "pawn star," but rather a lover of historic buildings who is restoring a circa 1814 one-room schoolhouse in Spafford one warm weekend at a time.

"This has been such a labor of love to me, and probably the accomplishment I'm most proud of — my little piece of historic legacy," said Bruno-Sears, a decorative artist raised in Spafford and currently living in Skaneateles who has been working on this project for the past three years.

"My mission is to save this little historic gem in the community," she said.

The building she owns and is working to restore is the old District No. 1 Nunnery School on Nunnery Road, one of only five original one-room schoolhouses left in Spafford, and the only one constructed of

stone. It was built in 1814 and utilized as a school in the Skaneateles district until the late 1940s or early 1950s, although its exact closing date is unknown, according to the Spafford Historical Society.

When Bruno-Sears first saw the building while taking a Sunday drive in 2008, it had a huge hole in the roof, crumbling walls, broken and missing windows, a dirt floor, an overgrown and out-of-control yard, and a "For sale by owner" sign out front. And she loved it.

"I grew up in an 1850s farmhouse in Spafford, and have always appreciated antiques and historic buildings," she said. But in the dilapidated Nunnery School she also saw — with the eyes of the professional artist that she is — the potential of the building to become a cozy, English cottage-style studio or artisan retreat. So she bought it.



Photo by [Jason Emerson](#)

The interior of the Skaneateles District No. 3 East Side Hill

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School, built circa 1813. This is the sister school to the Nunnery School and shows what the inside of Bruno-Sears' building would have looked like in its heyday. The East Side Hill School, located on the corner of Willow Dale and Stanton Road, is owned by the Spafford Historical Society and used for one-room schoolhouse demonstrations for area school students.



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