

New Haven Independent | Branford Eagle

# Golden Opportunity for Historical Society, Harrison House

by Bill O'Brien | Published May 20, 2015



*Harrison House | Photo by Bill O'Brien*

What started out to be routine meeting between the tenant and the landlord turned out to be an opportunity of a lifetime for the Branford Historical Society.

The story unfolded at the historical society's recent annual meeting held at the Owenego Inn when members learned the historical society has been given the chance to buy the historic Harrison House for \$132,500, instead of leasing it as they have since 1974. The 1724 Harrison House is located at 124 Main St.

Ginny Page, president of the historical society, told the members how the prospective sale came about. "About a year ago, Jane Bouley (the town historian) and I met with Historic New England, an organization which owns the Harrison House. We anticipated getting another 20-year renewal of our lease at a dollar a year, but instead they offered it to us first (to purchase) as they saw us as the best match for the sale."

"They told us they very much approve of how we cared for the house and property for 40 years, and to help us they would give us two years to come up with the funding." Historic New England now oversees 36 historic sites, spanning five states and four centuries of New England life.



*Ginny Page (L) and Jane Bouley | Photo by Bill O'Brien*

Bouley, a longtime member of the historical society, and also a past president, was the main speaker at the meeting which drew about 100 people. She reported that the Harrison House was built in 1724 and passed on to a variety of owners over the years, the last being J. Frederick Kelly, a well-regarded architectural historian of the time.

“He purchased the house in 1938 to restore it to its original condition. He wanted to preserve it for posterity,” Bouley said.

### **Strawberry Shortcake and More**



*Strawberry Shortcake at the Branford Festival*

Page said after their meeting with Historic New England, she and Jane “just looked at each other stunned and bewildered. Our first thought was... What the heck are we going to do? And a second thought was ‘we can’t sell enough strawberry shortcake to purchase the property,’” a humorous reference to the society’s major fundraising activity at the Branford Festival each year.

After hearing about the offer last year, the board approved the purchase of Harrison House. Since then, they have worked for eight months, getting advice from the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation, finalizing the lease to cover that period and getting an appraisal. “It was an eight-month learning curve, a true education,” Page said. “We signed our two- year lease last December 31 and our campaign began January 1, 2015.



*Board members and officers for the current year include L-R: Josh Russo, Mike Russo, Anne Hitchcock, Maryann Hall, Ted Eastwood, Nancy Gaylord, Virginia Page, John Daley, John Ifkovic, Mary Hitchcock and Anthony Solomine. Not present were Joe Naylor and Matt Radulski.*

“Not soon after, the board made a decision that since we were asking for money, we should ask for more,” she said. The reason? “Seeking more funds would create a financial reserve for Harrison House and take care of ongoing expenses that will be beneficial to the community and to Harrison House.

So, the funding campaign was increased to \$225,000, which will allow the historical society to fund other projects and needs, such as programs, access or larger maintenance projects.

## **Enter Eunice**



*First Selectman Jamie Cosgrove and Eunice Lasala attended the event*

After the historical society sent an informational letter to their members about the turn of events, Page said she received a call from Eunice Lasala.

“Well, if you know Eunice, then you understand. She reaches out and she reaches far.” Lasala is a member of the historical society and a leader in the Branford Community Foundation. The call from Eunice blossomed into a truly exceptional partnership between the BCF and BHS.

The Community Foundation kicked off the campaign, offering a matching grant to the historical society for \$35,000, matching individual donations dollar for dollar.

“This offer is outstanding and exceptional,” said Page. “We are so excited and thrilled and grateful. If we can raise \$35,000, then with their match of \$35,000 we will have \$70,000 toward our goal.

“Tonight is the kick-off of this grant and I anticipate it will hit the ground running,” she said.



*Stephanie Farber (L) and Ginny Page*

Current Community Foundation president Stephanie Farber said the foundation was thrilled to provide this grant to help the historical society purchase the Harrison House.

The meeting concluded with reports from various board members. Then Bouley gave the membership and officers “A Guided Tour” history of the Harrison House, including its architecture, families and importance to Branford.

Donations may be made by sending a check to: P.O. 504, Branford, CT. 06405 or by visiting the historical society’s [website](#) and using PayPal.