

The Sound

Person of the Week

Help Save Harrison House

By Pam Johnson, Senior Staff Writer | Published May 5, 2015

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At the door of Main Street's familiar red Harrison House museum, built in 1724, Branford Historical Society (BHS) President Ginny Page invites the community to get behind a push to help BHS buy the historic building lock, stock, and barrel. Thanks to a \$35,000 matching grant from Branford Community Foundation, right now, every donated dollar will be doubled. (Photo by Pam Johnson/The Sound)

Regional —

BHS President Announces Donated Dollars Doubled

A descendant of one of Branford's founding fathers is leading the charge to save the town's only historic house museum.

As president Branford Historical Society (BHS), Virginia "Ginny" Page is heading the effort to buy the 1724 Harrison House, located at 124 Main Street. While many may recognize the singular red Colonial at the very edge of Main Street as the town's only historical house museum, few may realize it doesn't yet belong to BHS.

Founded in 1960, BHS began leasing Harrison House in 1974 at a rate of a dollar per year from Historic New England. Previously the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, Historic New England is America's oldest and largest regional non-profit historic preservation organization.

The Harrison House was bequeathed to the Boston-based organization by its last owner, J. Frederick Kelly. A noted architectural historian, Kelly had the foresight to pluck Harrison House from obscurity in 1938 and restore it to its original condition.

Last summer, Historic New England notified BHS the Harrison House was among its properties that needed to be liquidated. The organization hopes BHS will be able to buy the house, but if not, it will be sold to another owner, says Ginny.

“Historic New England wants Branford Historical Society to own the house, and as a board, we agreed unanimously that we should find a way to raise the money to purchase it,” says Ginny.

Details of the sale were finalized between the two groups in January. Now, non-profit BHS is working hard to raise community awareness about the need to support BHS in its mission to make the purchase. As an all-volunteer society, the task is somewhat daunting, but with the help of Branford citizens—especially at this time when a generous matching grant campaign has just been announced—Ginny’s confident it can be done.

“The Branford Community Foundation is going to match every individual donation we receive up to \$35,000,” says Ginny. “We want to get the word out into the community that right now, everyone in Branford can make a donation of any amount and it will worth twice as much, thanks to Branford Community Foundation.”

Branford Community Foundation (BCF) connects Branford citizens with Branford causes to help preserve and promote quality of life for all, now and in the future. The decision to earmark \$35,000 as a matching grant to assist BHS is also the foundation’s way of marking its 35th year, explained BCF past president and board member Eunice Lasala (also a BHS member).

“In the past, at every fifth year, we gave out the amount of the anniversary. This year, we are being pro-active and donating a matching grant of \$35,000 to the Branford Historical Society to purchase the Harrison House,” says Lasala.

For Ginny and the BHS board, the grant couldn’t have come at a better time. Now, non-profit BHS is working hard to raise community awareness about the need to support BHS in its mission to make the purchase. While the Harrison House has its supporters and opens its doors to guests (as well as groups, including annual visits from Branford’s 3rd-graders), BHS has been going about its important work rather quietly.

For example, most residents might not be aware those are BHS volunteers whipping up fresh strawberry shortcake on the Town Green each June, working to raise money to maintain and preserve the Harrison House. The fundraising effort began even before the Branford Festival started up and has continued as a part of the festival weekend ever since. This year, look for the BHS Strawberry Shortcake booth on Saturday, June 20, during festival weekend.

“We’d love to have people support us during the festival, but we can’t sell enough strawberry shortcake to buy the house!” Ginny says. “So, we really hope to have community support for this campaign, especially during the matching grant.”

The grant begins this month. Ginny announced the BCF matching as a highlight of the BHS annual dinner on May 7. Together with the BHS board, she hopes to spread awareness throughout the community during the grant period. BHS hopes to raise enough to not only buy Harrison House, but to help create a capital budget to assist with the needs of maintaining a building that’s nearly 300 years old.

“We’re trying to raise \$225,000,” says Ginny. “We need \$132,000 to buy the house, but we’re adding on money and making it a capital campaign for us to have money to also maintain the house.”

Built in 1724 by Nathaniel Harrison II, the house is a treasure trove of Branford history and the Colonial era. Beyond carefully restored architecture and living areas, the contents include artifacts, items and unique pieces waiting for the public to experience. Many have gathered and contributed over time and there is no better repository for it all than this historic home, says Ginny.

“There are so many fascinating items in this house,” says Ginny, who has always had an interest in history. “One of our oldest is a Governor Carver chair (circa 1660-1670) made of black ash from Branford.”

A member of the BHS board since 2011, Ginny served as chair of Accessories before becoming president in 2013. A Branford native and lifelong resident, she’s a descendant of George Page, one of the signers of Branford’s original town charter in 1645.

In the centuries since, many Page family members have supported and contributed to Branford’s betterment, and Ginny says she’s honored to have the opportunity to follow in their footsteps.

“I’m in a position of being able to respect and honor my ancestors by helping to save and preserve this piece of Branford history.”

The Branford Historical Society is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Tax-deductible donations to help save the Harrison House may be made online at www.branfordhistoricalsociety.org or sent via check to BHS, P.O. Box 504 Branford, CT 06405. Guided house tours begin Saturdays in June (from 1 to 4 p.m. or by appointment). For more information, call 203-488-4828 or email info@branfordhistoricalsociety.org.