

Roosevelt School Fireplace finds a Home at Last

By Vic Bary



In August, 2010, as the town was about to demolish the old Roosevelt School (more recently known as the Solomon Schechter Day School) in order to build a park on the site, members of its Historic Preservation Advisory Board (HPAB) obtained permission to enter the school to photographically document it before its destruction. They were surprised, upon entering the former kindergarten room, to find a magnificent tile fireplace. The fireplace measured about 10 feet wide by 6 feet high and featured a scene made up of 10 tiles, 6 inches by 6 inches each, portraying a duck and two hens in a barnyard scene. The fireplace had been featured in a number of class photographs and was remembered by many Cranford residents. For these reasons, as well as its beauty, the fireplace appeared to be worth saving.

HPAB quickly reached out to tile historians for confirmation that the fireplace warranted preservation. Joseph Taylor, president of the California-based Tile Heritage Foundation, confirmed that the tiles had a great historical value, and referred HPAB to Rago Arts and Auction Center, who assessed an auction value of \$7,000 to \$12,000. Mr. Taylor stated that the fireplace was created by the Michigan-based Flint Faience Company for the kindergarten room when the Roosevelt School was built in 1927. Our particular mantel was featured in Flint's 1926 company catalog (design #6778). He further noted that the tiles, which were only made until 1933, were "increasingly rare as one by one public schools are either modernized, transformed for reuse or demolished. Flint is among the highly revered and collectible tiles on the antique market today." He also recommended Larry Mobley as one of the very few individuals able to remove, restore, and reinstall such tiles.

In 1921, Flint Faience & Tile Company was organized as a subsidiary of the Champion Ignition Company, which later became the AC Spark Plug Company, located in Flint, Michigan, where it had been in operation since being incorporated on October 26, 1908. AC Spark Plug wanted to keep the spark plug kilns that were idle during part of the production process, active, so decided to go into tile manufacturing. The tiles were made by hand and glazed to order in over 150 colors and more than 7,000 designs. The tiles won prizes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NY and were used in the palace of the President of Peru and in the swimming pool at the New York estate of John D. Rockefeller. In 1933, the company ceased the profitable production of tiles when increased spark plug production demanded full use of their kilns.



When Cranford Township indicated that it could provide no funds for the safe removal of the fireplace tiles, HPAB reached out to the New Jersey Historical Society, New Jersey Historic Trust, several historic architects and to the Union County Cultural and Heritage Programs Advisory Board for help. On Thursday, August 19, literally hours before the school was to be demolished, the Union County Freeholders approved a request to use Open Space Trust Fund money to remove, pack and store the tiles until an appropriate new location could be determined. Destruction of the school was delayed so that Larry Mobley could be brought in to remove the tiles. While doing this, Mr. Mobley noted and removed a band of animal tiles ringing the class room that have been long buried under layers of white paint.

Then followed a three-year period, during which HPAB awaited a determination from Union County that it would return the fireplace to Cranford, rather than locating it elsewhere within the county. During this period, HPAB worked to raise \$7,000 to pay for reinstallation of the fireplace. Cranford Township offered the Community Center for this purpose, but, once again, could provide no funds. Through sales of reproductions of the classroom animal tiles, fund-raising events, and generous donations from individuals, organizations (including the Trustees of the Cranford Historical Society) and local businesses, the necessary funds were raised. In early October, 2013, the Roosevelt School fireplace at last came home to grace the town's Community Center. HPAB thanks all who worked so hard to make the preservation of this important and beautiful piece of Cranford history possible. Dedication ceremonies will be held at the Cranford Community Center, 2:00pm to 4:00pm, Saturday, November 16, 2013. All are invited to attend.