Mt. Airy Schoolhouse: Preserving Local History
Written by: Rick Story, Sue Chapman, Sara Hand, & Hannah Tosch

The Mount Airy School, located in the town of Mount Airy in Habersham County, was originally commissioned in 1919 after the previous community schoolhouse burned down. The school was open from 1922 until 1955 after a new consolidation act called for the modernization of Georgia buildings. Since then, it has housed a variety of tenants and slowly deteriorated in condition.

In the spring of 2013, the City of Mt. Airy and its mayor, Gary Morris, sought help from the Habersham Archway Partnership to aid in efforts to restore the historic site. The community was interested in repurposing the building to accommodate offices for the Georgia Crime Information Center, the Mt. Airy Police Department, an office for the town clerk and assistant, a break room, a conference room and a meeting room for the monthly town hall meetings. The overall goal of this project was to create a multi-use space that will be “an anchor for the whole community,” according to Mayor Morris. Several changes would have to be made to accommodate the new use, including ensuring that the building met building and historic preservation codes and complied with the American Disabilities Act.

Concepts for the preservation and revitalization of the building and grounds were developed in three phases. The first phase was a comprehensive historic preservation plan by Elizabeth Elliott, a candidate for Master of Historic Preservation from the University of Georgia (UGA) College of Environment & Design (CED). Included in her report were diagrams, research, an analysis of the building and its current condition, and a number of recommendations for accurate restoration.

During phase two of the project, Rebecca Freitag, a candidate for Master of Fine Arts degree in Interior Design from the UGA Lamar Dodd School of Art, joined the restoration by creating an interior design plan to match Elliott’s original designs for the site.

The third phase of the project began in summer 2014 and called for a landscaping design and plan of the building’s exterior and grounds. Genna Mason, candidate for a Master of Landscape Architecture from UGA CED, designed a plan to complement the historic setting and celebrate the native species of the region. The landscape plan was consistent with the ecology of northeast Georgia, low maintenance in scale and upkeep, and can be divided into phases as funding becomes available. The landscape includes a pavilion and park area, promoting a safe and inviting gathering site for area residents.

“The potential for impact is huge,” said Mayor Morris. “We expect that this project will make Habersham County a happier, steadier community. It will provide a gathering place, a place of security and a place of rich history.”

Advancing Community Priorities
The restoration of the Mount Airy Schoolhouse allows the community to capitalize on its historical significance while securing a long-term occupant to the site. The building and grounds will become an even greater asset as local citizens utilize the facility for governmental and community activities.