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## Miss Issie’s Schoolhouse

Sunday 23rd August, 2009 Posted: 13:34 CIT (18:34 GMT)

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If you were born in the early 1900s in the district of West Bay, chances are you were probably taught by Miss Isabel Powell, affectionately known as “Miss Issie.”

Miss Issie’s Schoolhouse was a late 19th Century rectangular wattle and daub cottage in West Bay and believed to have been built circa 1896, making it about 108 years old when it was destroyed by Hurricane Ivan in 2004. It was originally built as a private residence, but functioned as a private school from 1934–1984. Today, all that remains of the property is a small portion of the back wall and a small section of the original roof.



Miss Issie’s Schoolhouse. Photos: National Trust

### Who was Miss Issie?

She was born in 1910 and was 19 when she began teaching in 1929. After she finished her own schooling, she worked as an assistant teacher in the government school system for a while. She was approached by a parent in the community who asked her to consider tutoring her two children, which Miss Issie agreed to do, and this marked the start of her remarkable teaching career, with her first classroom in the dining room of her family’s home. Subsequently, when Miss Issie’s Aunt Arabella and family moved to the United States, Miss Issie was able to move into her aunt’s home about 100 yards away from her own family’s home and thus Miss Issie’s Schoolhouse came into being.

But what makes Miss Issie’s Schoolhouse and her legacy so significant?



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The following excerpt is taken from Miss Issie’s Schoolhouse Conservation Plan, Unit B and was written by Sonya Carlesso of Complete Writing. The excerpt also supports this article.

“In this case, the historic significance rests with Miss Issie, who was a prominent teacher in the community with a remarkable 50–year career, who successfully started and operated her own private school. The structure itself is representative of historic private education locally. Thus the structure’s most pronounced historical statement occurs within 1934–1984 when the building was used as an educational institution and had an ‘educational’ character.” (p.7)

Miss Issie’s Schoolhouse and the current economy

In light of the present economy and budget constraints, is it feasible to restore the historic integrity of the schoolhouse? Certainly. The Trust is charged with preserving historic sites of interest threatened by development or natural erosion as concerned community members bring these sites to the Trust’s attention and the board approves receipt of the donation.

However, within the community there are target groups that need to participate jointly with the ventures of the Trust such as the Central Planning Authority, teachers, students, politicians, and residents in each district. There also needs to be some form of communication on not only the importance of replication, as would be the case in this instance as the site is destroyed, but how this process differs from renovation, rehabilitation or restorative work. In the majority of the cases, restoration is the preferred choice.

Plans for the future

Miss Issie’s schoolhouse presents numerous educational opportunities and challenges to the community of West Bay and has historical significance for the people of the Cayman Islands though only fragments of the original structure remain today. One of the original business plans for the schoolhouse called for the site to be primarily used as a Traditional Thatch Arts Centre that would enable locals and visitors alike to experience the historical and cultural dynamics of the site first hand, while promoting sustainable Heritage Tourism. However, those business plans have not been executed due to a variety of reasons, but leaves much to be discussed about the future of the site.

Upon Miss Issie’s passing in 1984 the schoolhouse was immediately closed and her students were relocated to other schools. Subsequently, the .11 acre parcel of land, on which the school was situated, was vested to the Trust on 2 February, 1999, by Miss Issie’s sister, Miss Ivy Powell.

District committee involvement with historic and environmental sites

Provisions for district committees were provided for in the National Trust Law of 1987. Each committee has several responsibilities; some of which include establishing goals or proposing projects for the Trust, which council must approve prior to the District Committee commencing work and participating in those projects. District committees have also been charged with surveying, inventorying and monitoring the condition of properties (private and public) on the District Heritage Resources Inventory. Additionally, the committees are to promote the ideal of preserving Cayman heritage.

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Perhaps through this means the Trust can generate interest, understanding and respect for historic preservation of the built environment in the Cayman Islands. So celebrate a place you like, sound an alarm about a place that is threatened, or start a conversation about a place that matters to you. How can this be effectively utilised while preserving our build heritage?

Join your local National Trust and be an active member of the District Committee for West Bay in its restorative, educational and fundraising efforts. Upon reflecting on the present situation of the schoolhouse, Denise Bodden, Historic Programmes manager at the Trust stated, “Today it may be best utilised in the interim as a small community park with interpretative signage until a more permanent solution could be found and funds raised.”

Look out for future articles on Nurse Leila’s House and Uncle Sammy’s Pond, both of which are National Trust properties. In the meantime, if you would like to share your stories on Miss Issie’s Schoolhouse or would like more information about the National Trust as a whole, please visit [www.nationaltrust.org.ky](http://www.nationaltrust.org.ky), call 949–0121 or send you queries to [dbodden@nationaltrust.org.ky](mailto:dbodden@nationaltrust.org.ky).

Come out and make a difference and participate in the next Annual General Meeting of the West Bay District Committee of the National Trust, which will be held on 3 September at 6pm at Nurse Leila’s House on West Church Street in West Bay. Questions or comments relating to the West Bay District Committee are also welcomed by the West Bay Committee Chairman (Alice Mae Coe) who may be contacted at [amcoe345@gmail.com](mailto:amcoe345@gmail.com)

This column is submitted by Erica Daniel, Education Programmes coordinator at the National Trust for the Cayman Islands.



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