

## SPOTLIGHT

*Where the past meets the present: Uxbridge's Blanchard School has been transformed into new affordable housing that is steeped in history*

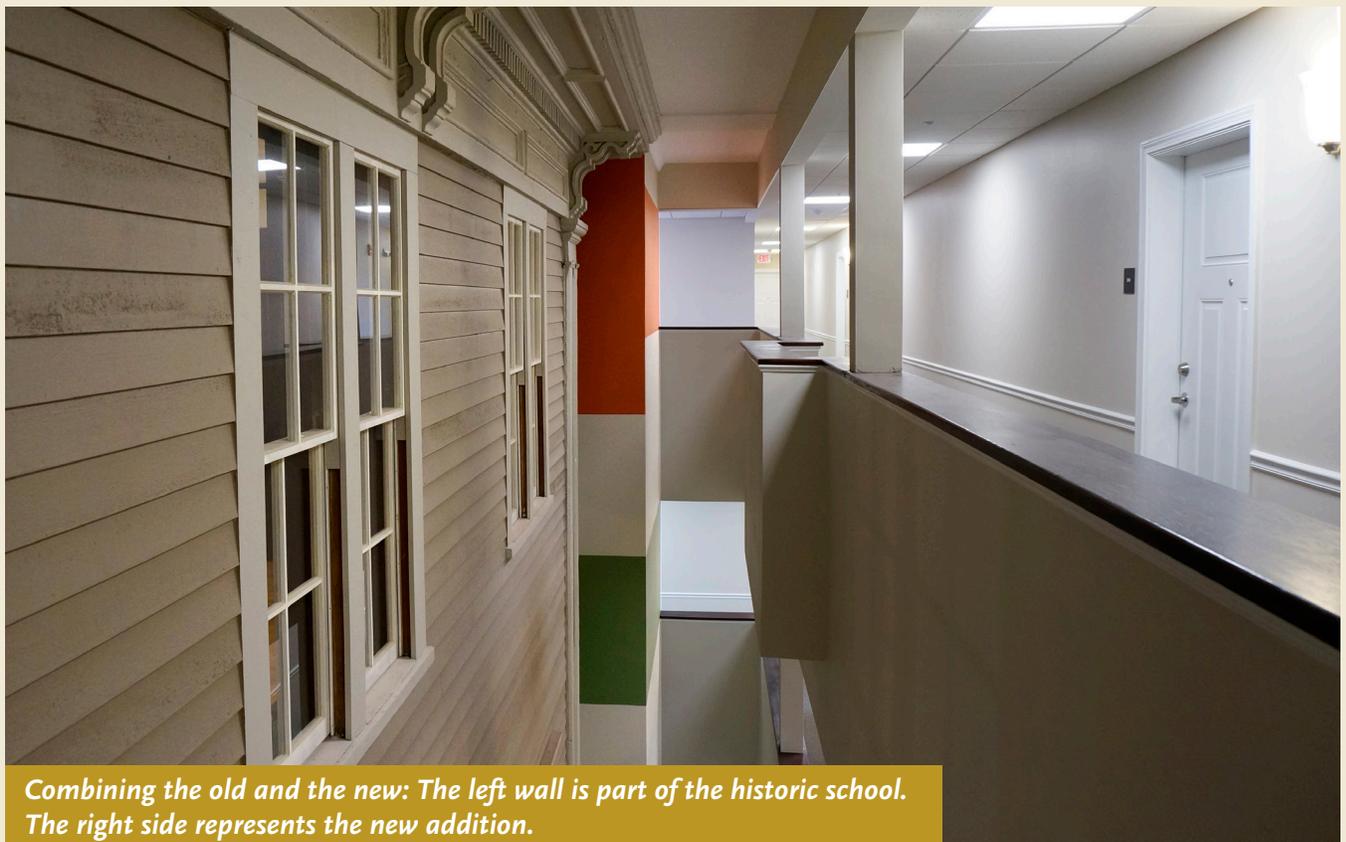
### Blanchard School

#### UXBRIDGE

History comes alive at the newly-restored Virginia Blanchard school, now an apartment complex, in the small town of Uxbridge in south-central Massachusetts. In the interior lobby of the former four-room elementary school, you will see child-sized antique desks and chairs on a restored, polished hardwood floor facing a large blackboard, an original mural on the wall, and dark brown wainscoting and moldings around the walls and ceiling. The exterior of the building is equally stunning with a bell-shaped cupola at the center of its hip roof. It took nearly a decade to bring this project to fruition, and now the town has the benefit of 25 new and much needed affordable housing units. By the name, it will commemorate Virginia Blanchard, a local legend who taught and served as a principal at the school for 45 years from 1939–1984.

The Blanchard school, originally built in 1873 on land donated by a cotton mill, has been meticulously restored and transformed by the Virginal Blanchard Memorial Housing Association (VBMH) and Jon Juhl of JNJUHL & Associates into 25 new affordable rental apartments. Nine units are in the original structure and 16 are in a 20,200-square-foot addition at the rear of the building. The former third-floor gym/auditorium has been converted into a large community space with a small community kitchen.

Restoration and adaptive reuse of this property was an important goal of the town and its residents, many of whom attended the school. The building served as a school until 2002 at which time it was the oldest district school in the state still in active service. While the school was vacant, the town maintained the property as it considered various options for its reuse. Over time, however, the building faced deterioration from the elements and was in danger of irreparable damage to the historic features that had earned the



*Combining the old and the new: The left wall is part of the historic school. The right side represents the new addition.*

building its place on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983. The town and its residents were eager to preserve a piece of local history and make productive use of a valuable underutilized resource.

Realizing its potential for redevelopment, Uxbridge Housing Associates, a nonprofit development corporation and predecessor of VBMH, and Jon Juhl had been interested in the building for many years and worked with the town on a redevelopment plan starting in 2010. For Harry Romasco and Mike Potaski, both VBMH officers and long-term residents of Uxbridge, there was an emotional connection to the school. Harry had attended the school, as had his children, parents and many relatives. This emotional connection, he said, “brought a level of passion to what we were doing.” Mike lives two blocks away from the school and is very active in Uxbridge civic life. Jon had been working with Uxbridge Housing Associates and VBMH for many years and knows Uxbridge well. Along with the emotional attachment, they had a vision of what could be done.

After numerous feasibility studies, appraisals, plans and other preparatory work, they unveiled their plan before the town and in 2012 entered into an agreement to purchase the property. In 2014, they secured a comprehensive permit to develop the property as affordable housing and closed the partnership with MHIC in November 2017. During this period, the developers engaged in the hard work of securing financing, including, among other sources, MHIC’s \$6.2 million federal and historic tax credit financing as well as state historic and low-income housing tax credit financing. Through the whole process, the town and the community offered overwhelming support. UniBank, based in nearby Whitinsville, purchased the state credits.

The developers are now putting the final touches on the building and are in the process of lease-up, with preference given to residents of Uxbridge. More than half of the apartments, all of which are affordable, are already occupied. Jon Juhl and Mike Potaski are enthusiastic about showing the historic units with



their large, restored windows, some with tin roofs and walls, and an original blackboard in each unit. Where the old and new buildings connect, you can see the school’s wall with its restored crown moldings and original architectural detail.

Restoration of the Blanchard school into modern, energy efficient and affordable housing took perseverance, ingenuity, and an outstanding public-private partnership. It has resulted in the preservation of an important historic asset for Uxbridge residents to be proud of for years to come.