

Victorian Society in America/New England Chapter Honors Belmont Mill with Preservation Award – presented 6/24 in Boston

The saga of New Hampshire's Belmont Mill, which survived shifting economic times after 135 years of manufacturing ceased in 1970, a colossal August 1992 fire, and a 1995 Town demolition order – was retold on Friday, June 24 in Boston's Back Bay, to the Victorian Society in America, New England Chapter.

The Mill project received a preservation award from the Society, marking only the fourth New Hampshire endeavor honored by the national and international non-profit organization. Belmont Heritage Commission Chairman Wallace Rhodes, leader of the 1990s "Save the Belmont Mill" group and Linda Frawley, Commission Vice Chairman and village revitalization advocate, accepted the award for the community.

"We only wish all of the citizens, businesses and organizations that were fundamental to this success story were there," they said. Both cited the PlanNH organization, which sponsored a first 1996 "charrette" – an intensive community planning session, State Architectural Historian James Garvin, the New Hampshire Planning staff, Division of Historical Resources, Atty. Carolyn Baldwin of Gilmanton, Belknap County officials including the Belknap County Economic Development Council, and architect Christopher Williams of Meredith – among many others who protected the mill for future generations.

The Mill still serves as the principal identity for the historic village and its recently stepped-up revitalization efforts. "Belmont was and is all about the mill," according to Wallace Rhodes, a native resident, and Town Historian for the local historical society. "It is truly gratifying to see the complex still active, serving a regional and diverse community – and as a role model for others."

Besides Selectmen-approved priority Mill repairs including a new roof and sidewalk additions, lighting upgrades featuring lantern-style replicas of lights that once lined Main Street and energy-saving LED lights are among recent improvements. Beautification was another element and some 4000 daffodils and other spring bulbs have been planted in the mill area and community since 2008 by Belmont Girl Scouts and other volunteers.

This April, the Belmont Village landmark was cited by the New Hampshire Preservation Alliance as one of the state's 25 Milestone Preservation Projects over the last quarter century. That recognition was based in part on the high degree of challenges overcome, and role as a catalyst and inspiration for other preservation initiatives.

Today's Belmont Mill houses the Lakes Region Community College culinary arts program and its Food for Thought Café, the Belknap Family Health Center – a department of Lakes Region General Hospital, Senior Center and a children's day care center.

Since 1973 the Boston-based group has recognized some 100 individuals and projects, including architect Graham Gund, the Boston Swan Boats and Oak Bluffs Carousel on Martha's Vineyard.

Prior Victorian Society recipients from New Hampshire include a 1976 Currier Gallery of Art exhibit, Saint Gaudens National Historic site, the Rye Driftwood Garden Club for care and upkeep of Celia Thaxter's Appledore Island garden, and restorations at Strawberry Banke in Portsmouth. Other New England honorees this year were the Fort Andrews, Gate Houses of the Sudbury Aqueduct and noted preservationist John Burrows.

Summary of Belmont Mill story (with appreciation to Architectural Historian James Garvin and the New Hampshire Preservation Alliance) --

Belmont Mill, Belmont. Preserved 1995-1998. On September 6, 1995, the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources (NHDHR) received anxious calls from citizens of Belmont requesting assistance in preventing demolition of the Belmont Hosiery Company Mill, a brick structure built in 1833 for the Gilmanton Village Manufacturing Company. Originally a textile mill, the structure was converted to hosiery production in 1865 and remained the economic heart of Belmont Village until its closure in 1970. The vacant main building was damaged by a fire that destroyed its dye house and picker house in 1992. Belmont voters appropriated \$100,000 in March 1995 to redevelop the property with an anticipated \$700,000 Community Development Block grant, reserving the mill building, despite its damaged condition, for future use as a town hall. The grant was not awarded because the town did not yet have title to the property. When Belmont acquired the property by tax deed later in the year, the board of selectmen proceeded to use the town's appropriation to begin demolition of the complex.

As demolition equipment approached a corner of the 1833 building on September 8, 1995, state architectural historian James Garvin examined the structure and prepared a four page report analyzing the construction and condition of the building and its capacity to be rehabilitated. With this report, Belmont Historical Society president Wallace Rhodes employed attorney Carolyn Baldwin to petition Belknap County Superior Court for an injunction to halt demolition. The injunction was granted on September 18. With conflicting opinions about feasibility of rehabilitating the building, voters at a special town meeting in November 1995 denied the board of selectmen permission to complete the demolition and approved further study of the building. In January 1996, Plan NH and the Office of State Planning held a charrette that resulted in three proposals for re-use of the mill and recommended another year of study. At the regular town meeting in March 1996, voters approved that study and appropriated \$48,000 to cover its costs. During the summer of 1996, the town and Belknap County won two Community Development Block Grants totaling \$1 million, and the town approved a \$215,000 bond issue as its financial match at another special town meeting in October. Aided by private donations, including an anonymous \$25,000 gift, the mill was rehabilitated as "Belmont Mill Community Center" from designs by architect Christopher Williams during the

summer of 1997. Wallace Rhodes and Friends of the Mill were recognized with an NHPA Preservation Award in 1997 and the project received a second NHPA award in 2000.

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