

Belmont Mill Named one of 25 Milestone Projects in New Hampshire Preservation

The historic Belmont Mill is among a distinguished list of 25 of New Hampshire's greatest preservation achievements of the past 25 years, unveiled April 8 by the N.H. Preservation Alliance (NHPA) at its 25th Anniversary Conference. "All 25 Milestone projects exemplify themes of leadership, creativity, tenacity, and community and economic benefit," according to Jennifer Goodman, NHPA executive director.

The statewide group includes rescues of two grand hotels, two town hall preservation efforts, mill revitalization, a museum's stewardship of a modern building, and two bridge "saves." "This list also illustrates the work that's being done every day to preserve New Hampshire's heritage, and, in the process, create jobs, support tourism, conserve existing resources, and strengthen community connections," said Jennifer Goodman, executive director, N.H. Preservation Alliance.

Built in 1833 and converted to hosiery production in 1865, the Belmont Mill was the economic heart of Belmont village until its 1970 close. Years of neglect, capped by a five alarm fire in August 1992 appeared to be the final chapter – until the Belmont Historical Society, led by Wallace Rhodes, began its legendary preservation effort.

Bolstered by a report from State Architectural Historian James Garvin and legal advice from Carolyn Baldwin of Gilmanton, imminent demolition by the town was halted with an injunction in 1995.

In January 1996, Plan NH and the Office of State Planning held a first-in-the-state charrette, resulting in options for mill re-use. The efforts led to two Community Development Block Grants totaling \$1M supported by Belknap County and aided by the Belknap County Economic Development Council, for the town to rehab the building. Local voters approved a \$215,000 bond issue as its match, along with private donations, including an anonymous \$25,000 gift. The mill was adapted as "Belmont Mill Community Center" from designs by Meredith architect Christopher Williams and rededicated in August 1998.

As the heart of Belmont's National Register eligible "Factory Village District" the red brick building houses the culinary arts program and its Food for Thought Cafe of Lakes Region Community College, the Senior Center, a family practice of LRGHealthcare and a children's day care center. Its fundamental and iconic role in the town center has been reinforced through the last community master plan update, and multiple village revitalization initiatives since 2008. Selectmen last year approved repairs, beginning with roof replacement, and the Heritage Commission applied successfully for federal funding to replace building and ornamental lights with energy efficient LED fixtures, in period style to illuminate the bell tower exterior. A return visit from a PlanNH team last June, helped citizens craft another charrette, still anchored by its signature building.

The NHPA solicited nominations for the 25 Preservation Milestones in 2010. A panel of experts judged local favorites and well-known landmarks alike on their significance, challenges overcome, innovation, public support, and ability to serve as a model for others.

Those who guided these projects to success, notes Goodman, built on the ground-breaking work of a previous generation of preservationists in Portsmouth, Harrisville, Laconia and elsewhere, and benefited from a growing preservation movement and new tools. Awards presentations are scheduled for May 10 in Concord, and reservations and details are available at www.nhpreservation.org