

Belmont Mill gets preservation accolade

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BELMONT — The Belmont Mill has won the distinction of being among the Top 25 greatest preservation achievements in the state over the past 25 years.

The New Hampshire Preservation Alliance announced the selection of the landmark during the organization's 25th anniversary conference last week. Other rescued properties to make the Top 25 list included two grand hotels, two town hall preservation efforts, mill revitalization, a museum's stewardship of a modern building and two bridge "saves."

"I think it's fantastic that the NHPA is recognizing it," Belmont Historical Society historian Wallace Rhodes said of the distinction. "I think it was a vital first step in village revitalization project. Without the Belmont Mill, Belmont wouldn't be Belmont."

Today the four-story brick structure houses a senior center, day-care facilities, a medical clinic, and restaurant operated by Lakes Region Community College's culinary arts program.

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

"All 25 Milestone projects exemplify themes of leadership, creativity, tenacity, and community and economic benefit," according to Jennifer Goodman, NHPA executive director in a news release. "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."

The mill, built in 1833, was home to a spinning and weaving operation that was later converted over to a hosiery production in 1865. Serving as the economic center of the town village, the Belmont Mill was closed in 1970 and for the next 22 years it was rented out to small businesses before a five-alarm fire heavily damaged the structure in August 1992.

The fire was almost seen as the last chapter of the building. Before it could be demolished, members in the community came together to help bring back what was once the heart of the community.

Bolstered by a report from State Architectural Historian James Garvin and legal advice from Carolyn Baldwin of Gilmanton, plans by the town to demolish the building were blocked by a court order in 1995. The Belmont Historical Society, led by Wallace Rhodes, began a preservation effort that some saw as the "almost impossible."

“For a while, it looked like it was going to be gone for sure,” said Rhodes.

Plan NH and the Office of State Planning held a charrette in January 1996 to determine what some of the uses for the mill could be. Two grants totaling \$1 million were supported by Belknap County and aided by the Belknap County Economic Development Council for the town to rehabilitate the building.

During town meeting, voters approved a \$215,000 bond which was issued as a grant match. Other private donations were received from citizens, including an anonymous \$25,000 donation. The mill was adapted as “Belmont Mill Community Center” from designs by Meredith architect Christopher Williams.

“The actual restorative work took about a year, but from start to finish the project lasted close to three years,” Rhodes said.

The mill was reopened during a dedication ceremony on Aug. 8, 1998 when a walk-through was done during Old Home Day. Shortly after the dedication, various organization moved in and started operations.

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.

Last year selectmen approved several repairs to the building, including the replacement of the roof. 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.

Other local properties on the Top 25 list included Castle in the Clouds in Moultonborough and the Plymouth Town Hall. Goodman said that those who guided these projects to success 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.