Belmont celebrates iconic mill

BELMONT — As the town continues its village revitalization this summer, an anniversary approaches that will be remembered by most residents, but not celebrated.

Aug. 14 will be the 20th anniversary of the five-alarm fire that destroyed two of the three buildings of the historic Belmont Mill, a downtown landmark that had been the major employer in town since its construction in 1833.

Firefighters from area towns battled the fire through the night and well into the next day, tapping the town’s million-gallon reservoir until it was almost dry. They managed to save most of the main building, but when the smoke cleared, it was in bad shape, and the town ordered its demolition in 1995.

But a group of residents, led by Belmont Heritage Commission Chairman Wallace Rhodes, started a Save the Belmont Mill campaign that stopped the demolition with a court injunction.

With the help of government grants, the mill has since been restored to its old form, and now is home to local businesses and
on the New Hampshire Preservation Alliance’s list of the state’s greatest preservation efforts of the past 25 years.

The restoration of the mill helped heal the sadness of town residents, generations of whom were lifelong workers there. Originally a textile mill, it was converted for hosiery production in 1865 and remained the economic heart of Belmont Village until its closure in 1970. In the years that followed, the mill buildings were mostly unoccupied and fell into disrepair.

On Aug. 14, 1992, then-fire Chief Albert Akerstrom, whose home isn’t far from the mill, was awakened from a nap at about 7 p.m. by children yelling “fire” outside his window.

“I went outside and all I could see was black smoke, everywhere,” Akerstrom said.

He called for a first alarm, then a second, bringing firefighters, tanker and ladder trucks from around the Lakes Region. As the fire spread, Akerstrom called a fifth alarm, bringing a total of 20 fire engines and four ladder trucks to the scene. Fire crews attacked the blaze, the cause of which was not known, from many angles, laying down 2,000 feet of fire hose to five town hydrants. They pumped 10,000 gallons of water a minute for several hours, but couldn’t save two of the buildings.

A shell remained of the primary mill building.

“The volume of fire was just too much in the other two buildings, but saving the main building was something we were very proud of,” he said.

Belmont voters approved $100,000 in 1995 to redevelop the property with an anticipated $700,000 Community Development Block Grant in hopes of restoring the building despite its condition for future use as a town hall. The grant was not awarded because the town did not
yet have a title to the property.

When the town received the deed later in the year, the selectmen tried to use the voters’ appropriation to begin demolition of the complex, but voters at a special town meeting denied the board permission to complete the demolition and approved further study of the building.

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 to match the grant at another special town meeting in October. Aided by private donations, the mill was rehabilitated as Belmont Mill Community Center with designs by architect Christopher Williams during the summer of 1997.

Since then, the mill’s iconic role in the town has been solidified by the town’s master plan, and with several improvement projects in the last decade, the mill is again a vital part of downtown business and a historic reminder of the town’s roots.

So as Aug. 14 approaches, there are no plans for a formal remembrance of the devastating fire. Town residents and the Heritage Commission are instead celebrating its restoration as revitalization efforts continue around the mill.

According to Rhodes, 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,” he said.

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