

The Citizen ^{of} Laconia

The voice of New Hampshire's Lakes Region

2012-08-14 / Local

Anniversary of Belmont Mill fire today

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THE BELMONT Mill, as it stands today, is home to a number of groups and organizations in town. Pictured is the mill during the winter months. COURTESY FILE PHOTO

BELMONT — Today marks the 20th anniversary of the fire at the Belmont Mill, an event that seemed like the last chapter for the historic property, but years later it was saved and named a state and regional historical landmark.

The mill, built in 1833, was home to a spinning and weaving operation that was later converted to 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 following story appeared in The Citizen of Laconia on Saturday, Aug. 15, 1992, in Vol. 66, No. 194, written by Staff Writer Paula St. Louis.

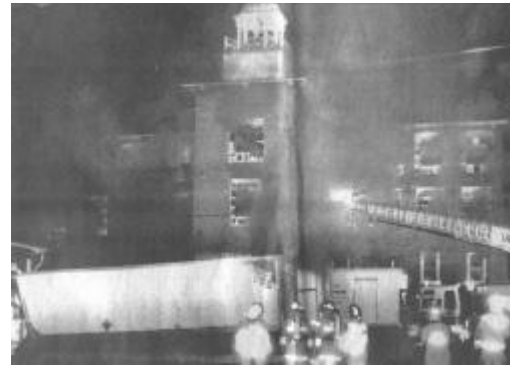
A fire the equivalent of a five-alarm blaze ripped through the six-building mill complex on Mill Street late Friday night, gutting DLM Labs and the four-story high mill.

The raging fire was still burning through the complex at press time Friday as dozens of firefighters battled the blaze that exceed the four alarm system used by the Lakes Region Mutual Fire Aid Association.

Calls for additional manpower were still going out after 11 p.m., nearly two hours after the first notification of the fire came in.

Fire Chief Albert Akerstrom said, at 11 p.m., that he knew of no injuries thus far, but said there had been a close call. The roof of one building in the complex collapsed shortly after firefighters had been ordered out of the area where they were launching an interior attack.

"We no more than pulled them out, within five or 10 minutes the roof fell in," Akerstrom said.



PICTURED HERE is a photo scanned from the front page of The Citizen on Aug. 14, 1992, of the scene of the fire. CITIZEN FILE PHOTO/PETER CARVELLI

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Firefighters also had to grapple with closely connected buildings, hazardous chemicals in the DLM Labs building, and a dwindling water supply.

"Right now, we're laying lines from the brooks and the ponds about 3,500 feet away," Akerstrom said.

Authorities were unclear at press time of the names of the building owners. DLM Labs produces pool and spa chemicals.

"You do have hazardous materials in there," Akerstrom said.

When Belmont firefighters arrived on scene, there was smoke coming out the third story windows in the mill, Akerstrom said. The fire immediately jumped to a third alarm as departments from throughout the Lakes Region responded with equipment and manpower.

At approximately 10 p.m., flames erupted from the roof at DLM Labs, spewing fiery sparks high into the sky. Firefighters climbed ladders to the rooftop in an effort to extinguish the rolling flames.

Many of the dozens of firefighters on the ground below, manning ladder trucks and on the rooftops, began to concentrate their efforts on containing the fire and black smoke pouring from the roof of the DLM Labs building.

They also worked to contain the fire to the two buildings. Akerstrom said a woodshop at the rear of the complex was in danger of catching fire.

As 11 p.m. approached, firefighters close to the fiery structures radioed that the first floor of the four-story mill was fully involved with flames.

Akerstrom asked that the Environmental Protection Agency, owners of DLM Labs and the mill, and members of the Belmont Board of Selectmen be notified of the fire. At press time, selectmen Ward Peterson, Donna Cilley, and Arthur Horan were at the scene, and DLM Labs and EPA officials had reportedly arrived.

In addition to the dozens of firefighters called in from Lakes Region communities, a number of police officers helped with traffic and crowd control were from neighboring locales, including Gilmanton, Tilton, and Laconia.

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

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 Belmont 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.

In 2010, 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 in June 2010, helped citizens craft another charrette, still anchored by its signature building.

In 2011, the Belmont Mill 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 in April 2011.

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.

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

[Return to top](#)



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