

The 'Miracle on Mill Street'; Historic Belmont Building Saved by Townspeople

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BELMONT Some people here call it the "Miracle on Mill Street."

The mill was the focus of a heart-warming saga played out here in recent years and culminated yesterday with townspeople celebrating the rebirth of the historic 165-year-old building that was very nearly lost forever.

For more than a century, residents of **Belmont** Village awoke to the tolling of the mill bell that summoned hundreds of people to work in the four-story brick **Belmont** Mill and the complex of buildings that had grown up around it on Mill Street.

But three years ago it looked as though the mill badly-damaged in a 1992 fire that left it a smoke-stained eyesore with shattered windows was about to come tumbling down and join a long list of buildings that outlived their economic usefulness and fall prey to the wrecking ball.

The mill's cupola is featured on the town seal.

The town's bid for grants to rehabilitate the mill failed to pass muster with the Office of State Planning, and selectmen started tearing down other buildings surrounding the mill.

"It looked like a hopeless cause. The bell had just been removed from the tower the day we went to court. It was literally a matter of hours before it would have been just a pile of bricks," recalls Wallace Rhodes, president of the **Belmont** Historical Society.

But Rhodes and a group of like-minded townspeople won a temporary injunction preventing the demolition by the town. The town had fallen heir to the building through tax deed and was looking to rid itself of what was seen as a costly and potentially dangerous liability.

The 11th-hour court-ordered reprieve gave supporters one final opportunity to come up with a plan, and more importantly, the financing, to save the historic old structure.

Voters approved of continuing efforts to save the mill at a special town meeting in the fall of 1995 and several months later Plan New Hampshire, a group of planners, engineers, architects and real estate development professionals helped the town formulate plans for rehabilitating the mill.

These efforts eventually led to \$1 million in Community Development Block grants being approved by the Office of State Planning for the \$1.35 million project, which got underway last fall and is rapidly nearing completion.

During Old Home Day yesterday a dedication ceremony for the mill, which now looks like it did when it was built, was held to celebrate the renovation project. "The whole village looks so much different now," said Rhodes. Not only has the town preserved an important part of its history, it has also created an environment that will encourage people to invest in improving the appearance of nearby homes and businesses, he said.

The mill will be the site of a daycare center, the local Community Action Program and a Lakes Region General Hospital health clinic as well as a culinary arts program for Laconia Community Technical College.

"It puts the heart back into the community," said Linda Wilson of the State Office of Historic Preservation. "It's an example other communities can look at," she said, adding that successful preservation projects energize a community and bring tangible economic benefits as well as a renewed sense of pride and cooperation.

"People saw the opportunity and instead of wringing their hands, went out and did something by working with like-minded people. It shows what can be done if you focus on the opportunity rather than the problem," says Wilson.

She said there may actually have been a benefit and cost-savings to the town by the earlier removal of parts of the fire-damaged mill complex. Wilson said her office determined that the site did not meet the criteria for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places because of the removal of the other buildings. But that allowed the renovation project to proceed without having to meet the strict standards imposed by the historic place designation.

Selectman David Mika said the mill should become a focal point for the community and encourage other developments in the village.

Some parts of the mill complex that were torn down have found a useful life, like the 1898 warehouse building that was dismantled by Canterbury furniture maker David Lamb and carted away to become an addition to his Shaker Road wood working shop.

Lamb said the 90-foot by 45-foot building was "on its way down" when he talked with the demolition contractor and was allowed several weeks to save what he could of the structure.

He said the post and beam style of construction with its authentic 19th century

look is the perfect complement to his existing woodworking shop and will provide a realistic backdrop to the 19th century woodworking machinery that he collects.

Since his addition was only 50 feet long he was able to install a complete basement underneath his shop with the remaining timbers. A clerestory which allows light to enter his shop from above was salvaged from another building at the mill complex.

And the basement will be faced with bricks which came from the **Belmont** mill complex when he finishes his woodworking shop, a project which he fits in between his commissioned works for Shaker style furniture that he builds for such people as former tennis champion Ivan Lendl.