

Historic penstock found long-buried beneath center of Belmont

Big surprise:

The water transmission line was dug up during construction in the center of town.

By DAN SEUFERT

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BELMONT — Construction work on the ongoing downtown revitalization project in the center of town uncovered a century-old metal “penstock,” a link to the historic Belmont Mill and town center, town officials say.

The 1910-era penstock — a structure that controls water flow, often an enclosed pipe that delivers water — was found last week, and a community coalition of businesses and preservation advocates gathered Friday to remove and protect it while new options, including educational and artistic uses, are considered, said Belmont Heritage Commission chairman Linda Frawley.

“It was really fun to find something like that and have the community respond,” Frawley said. “We don’t know what we’ll do with it yet. Maybe we’ll save remnants of it, we don’t know yet.”

The penstock was found near the Tioga River, close to the former location of the town bandstand.

“There are very likely several more sections of the penstock still buried along its path from Fellows Dam to the Belmont Mill,” town historian Wallace Rhodes said.

In the 1800s, the penstock conducted millions of gallons of water each year from the Tioga River and Badger Brook to the Belmont Mill, creating hydroelectric power for mill production and for the village.

In the early days of the Belmont Mill, according to Rhodes, water was sent to the mill by a canal which ran from a long-ago removed dam. The canal was replaced by a wooden penstock in the early 1890s which in turn was replaced with the just-found metal penstock in 1910 after the wooden structure failed.

The metal penstock, once one-third of a mile in length and held together with handpounded rivets, was in use until 1955, when power generation at the mill was discontinued, Rhodes said. Last week, contractors lifted two large sections of the mill’s penstock from the ground and set them aside for shortterm storage, Frawley said. After learning of the discovery, Frawley consulted with New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources’ planners and archaeologists about the significance of the penstock section and its reuse possibilities.

Those discussions will continue if the selectmen decide to give the historic penstock to the heritage commission.

With the help of planning board chairman Peter Harris, New Hampshire League of Craftsmen artist and steel artisan Tom Sleeper, tower Rusty Drew of Tilton, resident Jeremy Perkins, and Blaney Auto Crushing, the penstock was removed and stored in sections at Sleeper’s art studio on Route 106 and Blaney’s business on Hurricane Road.

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The penstock as it was used more than a century ago.

COURTESY



The historic penstock section in Belmont after it was uncovered last week.

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