Belmont Keeps Moving Forward With The Past

by Brendan Smith
Weirs Times Editor

The Town of Belmont, New Hampshire, has become a shining example of the importance of heritage preservation.

A recent unearthing of a good portion of 100 year old metal penstocks, only happened as a result of another preservation project.

A penstock is conduit used to carry water to a water wheel or turbine; in this case, they once powered the Belmont Mill, which was built in 1833 to manufacture cotton and wool goods and even hosiery under its last owner.

Originally the water power came by construction of a dam which diverted a portion of the Tioga River (then known as The Great Brook) through a canal which joined a small stream which then flowed to a

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small pond. The water then flowed to the rear of the mill through a canal. On the river bank behind the mill was a large water wheel which connected to a system of belts and pulleys which transferred power to the mill.

Around 1890, wooden penstocks were used to bring water from Fellows Dam, bringing greater water pressure. In 1910, the wooden penstocks were replaced with steel ones; these were the ones recently unearthed. The Belmont Mill saw its final days in that capacity in 1970. Over the years following, some small industries occupied the building but lack of maintenance caused its decline.

Wallace Rhodes and Linda Frawley of the Belmont Heritage Society, in front of the Tioga River. In the background is a metal penstock which has been a fixture in the town for years. Frawley laughs as she notes that people don’t realize its historic significance and call it “that old rusted pipe.” Rhodes is Belmont Historical Society President & Vice Chairman of the Belmont Heritage Commission. After chairing Belmont’s Master Plan in 2001-2 and advocating rural and historic assets, Frawley led establishment of the Heritage Commission, founded by citizens at the 2004 Town Meeting, supported by Rhodes and others as “another needed voice to celebrate Belmont’s past and future relevance.”

The bandstand was moved during the extension road renovation and will have some work done to it to make it more stable before being put back into use.

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The bandstand in Belmont was built in 1909 and continues to serve the community with concerts in the summer. This photo shows an early concert. The Belmont Heritage Society is looking for old photos of the bandstand.

BELMONT from 22 deterioration.

On August 14, 1992, a five-alarm fire ripped through the mill, virtually destroying it. It was left in that condition until it was acquired by tax deed through the town. Belmont had applied Community Block Grant for another building in town that was denied. They decided to use $100,000 that had already been appropriated towards the denied project and use it for demolition and cleanup of the mill.

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BELMONT from 23

Wallace Rhodes, Belmont historian, and others decided it might serve the town better to save the Mill.

State architectural historian, James Gavin examined the building as the demolition of the mill was planned to begin. He prepared a report on the capacity of the building to be rehabilitated.

“We went to court and said they weren’t authorized to demolish it,” said Rhodes.

Along with Rhodes was attorney Carolyn Baldwin. The court ordered and injunction to halt the demolition.

At the time, the demolition crew was already at the mill site and had taken down the existing outbuildings which were part of the mill.

At a town meeting in November of 1995, the voters denied the selectman the permission to finish the demolition and approved further study of the building.

It proved to be a wise decision in keeping, what would soon be a valuable asset to Belmont once again.

In January 1996, Plan NH and the Office of State Planning held a charrette that resulted in three proposals for re-use of the mill and recommended another year of study. It was the first “PlanNH Charrette” ever; dozens have since been held in communities around the state.

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 as its financial match at another special town meeting in October. Aided by private donations, including an anonymous $25,000 gift, the mill was rehabilitated as “Belmont Mill Community Center” from designs by architect Christopher Williams of Meredith during the summer of 1997.

Today, the renovated mill houses the Belmont Senior Center, the Belknap Family Health Center and the Food For Thought Café, a culinary arts program of Lakes Region Community College that serves lunch and dinner to the public (a great story for another issue).

The mill stack was taken down in 2001 as it was considered unsafe.

“Saving the mill wasn’t enough for Rhodes.”

“We saved the mill and nothing happened around it after that,” said Rhodes. “Now things are happening around it and I think we are going in the right direction.”

The unearthing of the penstocks was a surprise during the second phase of the renovation which included a new extension road, as suggested by the charrette, which runs behind the library to the mill.

“Of course, there might be some of the penstock there,” said Rhodes. “But wasn’t sure how much.”

What was uncovered was 12,000 pounds, once part of the 2000-foot conduit feeding the mill.

“Of course, we thought it would be the perfect storm of business, history and possibilities,” said Linda Frawley, chairman of the Belmont Heritage Commission.

It is uncertain at this point where the bandstand will be placed after its renovation.
A five alarm fire in 1992 destroyed the mill and years later it was in danger of being torn down until an effort was made to save it.

Belmont Heritage Commission.

Frawley contacted Tom Sleeper, a juried member of the NH League of Craftsmen who admired the artisan and hand-pound rivets of the penstock fragments. Frawley then showed the discovery with the Chairman of the Planning and Zoning Board, Peter Harris who was on board with preserving the penstocks.

On Friday, November 9th, Rusty’s Towing and Recovery donated their truck for the mill.

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Belmont Heritage Commission.

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services in transporting the penstocks to Sleeper’s welding studio as well as some to Blaney Auto Crashing on Hurricane Road, where they now sit as they figure out their best use.

“We are looking for artistic ways to use the penstocks,” said Frawley. “Maybe something to help educate children about the town’s history.”

Using a penstock for educational purposes makes sense as penstocks aren’t unknown in Belmont. Penstock Park in Belmont, got its name from an old, above ground metal penstock which comes out from the ground and hangs over the Tioga River.

“People always call it ‘that old rusty pipe,’” laughed Frawley.

As Belmont awaits the final use of the unearthed penstock, they are at no loss in pursuits in keeping the heritage alive.

Before the extension road was built, the 104-year old bandstand behind the library needed to be moved. The bandstand had been located on the Town Green in Belmont Village since it was built. It was moved to the Tioga River bank in the late 1920s to make room for the new library. In the most recent move, it sits on a temporary spot where it will be re-stabilized and be back in action, hopefully, by the spring of 2013.

“We’re not sure where it will be located yet,” said Frawley.

While waiting for the second phase to be completed, Wallace Rhodes has killed a little time with smaller projects, like the complete exterior restoration on the Province Road Meetinghouse on Rte 107.

Seems like there will always be some good work going on in Belmont to help preserve that town’s heritage.

The Heritage Commission is looking for any old photos of the bandstand, especially those from the 1950’s and 1960’s. If you have any or know where some might be located, you are urged to contact the Belmont Heritage Commission at Belmonthistory@gmail.com or contact Chairman Rhodes at 603 267-6272.