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Making It in Central Mass: Mills reshaped as homes, workspaces

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During the height of the Industrial Revolution in the 19th and early 20th centuries, thousands of textile and machine mills and factories dotted the landscape in Central Massachusetts, powered by rivers such as the Blackstone, Mumford and Nashua.

Because of successful businesses attracted by the Blackstone Canal that opened in 1828, and later the railroads, Worcester garnered a reputation for being a booming industrial center and innovative incubator of businesses.

In 1914, at the National Metal Trade Association convention held in Worcester, the city was declared to be a “City of Prosperity,” with an estimated 1,500 industrial plants, employing 35,000 workers who manufactured \$80 million in products annually, according to information from the Worcester Historical Museum. The city’s manufacturers were known for their wire products, power looms and other machinery, and metals, textiles, clothes, shoes, thread, firearms and musical instruments. Local workers invented items still used around the world, including barbed wire and the monkey wrench.

William Wallace, executive director of the Worcester Historical Museum, said the story of the city’s industrial prowess is documented in the museum’s Fuller Gallery of Industrial History.

“The evidence of Worcester’s industrial past — the buildings, in particular — are the reminders of that industrial strength, a city of innovation and enterprise, a city of diversity — of population and people — all working together,” he said.



From left, brothers Mario and Gianni Romeo pose outside Felter's Mill in Millbury, which they renovated into commercial space. [T&G Staff/Christine Hochkeppel]

Photos: Central Mass. mills, yesterday and today

In the 1960s, the region was faced with growing competition from around the country and the globe. Some older companies adapted and thrived. However, many industries in the Northeast began closing their doors or moving to the South, lured by close proximity to raw materials, cheaper labor, lack of unions, federal tax breaks and warmer climates. Some companies later moved to Mexico and other places outside of the country.

What remained were old large brick buildings, some left vacant, leading them to become eyesores and fire hazards.

However, in other cases, developers with an eye for historic architecture and a love for history scooped up some of these old relics and rehabilitated them for reuse. Many of the old sprawling complexes that once housed mills and factories have been reincarnated into loft-style apartments, office space, restaurants, breweries and other businesses. The repurposed buildings are back on the tax rolls in Central Massachusetts, including in Worcester, Leominster, Fitchburg, Uxbridge, Southbridge, Northbridge, Gardner, Sutton, Sturbridge, Northboro, and in Millbury, which got its name from its long history as a mill town.

Felter's Mill in Millbury

The Romeo brothers, Gianni and Mario, have renovated two historic buildings: one in Millbury and another in Worcester.

They transformed the former Felter's Mill at 22 West St. in Millbury into a mini mall with 27 businesses, including retail, office, professional and medical space.

The brothers also converted the old vacant storage building at 274 Franklin St. in Worcester into retail space. That effort won them the Silver Hammer Award, bestowed by the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce for noteworthy renovation projects, in 2010.

Gianni, who was 5 when his family emigrated from Italy, said he had no idea when he used to see the "cool building with the rounded front" as a child that he would end up purchasing Felter's Mill, where many Italians worked during the 1800s and early 1900s.

"I love this country and I love history and architecture. I love what they did 100 years ago and how they did it with limited tools," he said of why he purchased the old building. "It's all brick and it has the old beams. It would have cost a lot more money to build a new building."

Frank Gagliardi, 74, a certified public accountant and president of the Millbury Historical Society, said he "has a fondness" in his heart for the old mill. His grandfather, Leonardo, who came from Italy in 1902, settled on North Main Street with other Italians who walked to work at the mill. His grandfather's seven sons later worked in the mill.

The lifelong Millbury resident said he remembers that as a child, he and his cousins would go to Felter's Mill to bring lunch to his father and his six brothers. He also remembers the large Gagliardi clan and other workers and their families attending the annual outings the company would host at Webster Lake.

But, in later years, after the building was vacant, it became an eyesore and a fire hazard. Mr. Gagliardi said because of the mill's oil-soaked floors, the entire neighborhood could have gone up in flames.

"It was a blessing when the Romeos bought it. Hats off to them because they brought it back and they're a credit to the town," Mr. Gagliardi said. "From the historical society's point of view, we appreciate what they've done salvaging this building that was thought of only being suitable for demolition.

Cordis Mills on Canal Street in Millbury, a huge former cotton manufacturer and later a manufacturer of woolen goods, has also been transformed into Cordis Mills Apartments.

Several historic buildings in Central Massachusetts that did not fall victim to vandals and fires were demolished in the mid-20th century as urban renewal swept the nation. Old buildings were being destroyed to make way for new developments.

Concerned with what was happening in Worcester, a group of volunteers in 1969 founded Preservation Worcester. The first successful goal was to save Mechanics Hall, which was threatened by demolition. The mission later expanded to include old factory buildings.

Deborah S. Packard, executive director of Preservation Worcester, said preserving the city's culture, architecture and history is important for future generations.

"I think that a building is a visible reminder of history. So, if you lose the building, you often lose the history as well," she said. "In its heyday, Worcester was known nationwide as an industrial manufacturing city, so that's part of our heritage."

Incentives to preserve

As communities began to appreciate the relics from the industrial era, they established incentives to encourage their preservation. Several communities, including Worcester, have Adaptive Re-Use Overlay districts that provide flexibility in parking and other standard requirements.

Two of the districts in Worcester helped with the rehabbing of two mill buildings into apartments - the Junction Shops Manufacturing Co. on Beacon Street and the Ashworth & Jones Woolen Textile Factory on Main Street near the Leicester town line.

To help offset some of the costs of repurposing historical buildings, the federal government in 1977 established a Historic Preservation Tax Incentive Program. Massachusetts began a similar pilot program in 2004. Each program provides 20 percent of the rehabilitation costs in tax credits over time. The developer can use the credits to offset taxes generated from the project or sell the credits to investors. They must be used in the rehabilitation of a qualified historic property that will be income generating when it is completed.

The state [program](#), which is capped at \$50 million annually, is administered by the Massachusetts Historical Commission. According to the latest report, through 2015, the MHC issued 379 project certificates, resulting in \$353 million in tax credits. The program has also generated tens of thousands of jobs.

The state program, considered a pilot program, is scheduled to expire in 2022. But Brian McNiff, spokesman for Secretary of State William F. Galvin, who chairs the MHC, said because of the benefits of the program he expects it will be extended as it has been in the past.

"You see the economic impact of it ... bringing buildings back to reuse, which has a double effect," he said. "You get the housing, which the community didn't have before. But, even if it's (used for commercial purposes), you put bodies in a building that was vacant.

"You also preserve the history of the area," he continued. "Factories played a big role in our history ... in our country's history. The Industrial Revolution began on the Blackstone River, which begins in Worcester."

The tax credits, however, are not for all developers of historic buildings.

The Romeo brothers didn't apply for them when they renovated Felter's Mill in Millbury. Gianni Romeo said they needed the money, and the process for the tax credits can take years to complete. Also, the tax credits are not issued in a lump sum.

The brothers purchased the building as the sole bidder at auction for \$155,000. They needed another \$2.5 million to redo the mill. Halfway through the renovation, the brothers were ready to sell the property until they were able to get Millbury Credit Union to provide some of the construction money.

"To get that stuff (historic rehabilitation tax credits) takes years ... a very, very long time. We had our money tied up and we couldn't wait," Gianni Romeo said.

Many developers in Athol, Uxbridge, Fitchburg and other communities have had success with the tax credits. Some have current factory rehabilitation projects underway with the use of the assistance.

"I think it does take a particular type of developer in order to really make it work for them. It's good and bad in that respect," Andrew Shveda, an architect who chairs the Worcester Historical Commission, said of the historic rehabilitation tax credits. "We're always working with a very limited amount of funds for tax credits so I think it deters some people. But it is a great benefit to help get these buildings repurposed."

Mr. Shveda, who is also a member of Preservation Worcester's board of directors, said he would like the city to compile a list of old historic buildings that hold the possibility of being reconstructed. The list could be used to attract developers who are more attuned to these types of projects.

He said the old mill buildings are ideal to transform into apartments and office space because of the way they are constructed.

"Really, these spaces, they're just very solidly built. They're comfortable. They have high ceilings, large windows, open floor plans, usually wood or steel structures on the inside and floors made out of two layers of 2-inch boards of solid wood," said Mr. Shveda, who has converted old buildings in Boston. "They do not build buildings like this anymore."

John F. Hill, spokesman for the city of Worcester, said Mr. Shveda's idea of a list of historic buildings with potential for renovating is worth considering for posting on the city's website.

Preservation Worcester makes an annual list of endangered historic buildings, but factory buildings are not usually on it. But two vacant buildings, Melville Shoe Co. at 38-44 Hammond St. and J.H. and G.M. Walker Shoe Co. at 28 Water St., have made the list in the past.

"You really want to draw attention to these buildings and find new use," Ms. Packard said. "If it's empty, the owner doesn't have funds to keep it up. If someone can't rent it or do something with it, and the owners have to pay taxes on it, they think about demolishing it."

A few years ago, the oldest surviving factory building in the city was demolished. The Adriatic Mill on Armory Street was originally a textile mill and then a pistol factory during the Civil War.

“It was an old stone building, which was rare in Worcester ... built in the 1840s. It was certainly an important one that needed to have had someone to find a way to save it,” said Susan Ceccacci, a local historian and education director for Preservation Worcester. “Industry is what made Worcester, Worcester. To lose the buildings makes us forget.”

Ms. Packard said the successful mills and factories that produced all sorts of goods — including shoes, looms, corsets, wire, envelopes, organ reeds and automobile crank shafts — also made Worcester what it is today: a diverse thriving city.

“If there hadn’t been the mills and the factories, Worcester wouldn’t be as populated as it is now. I think we would be a very small town. And, we wouldn’t have the diversity that we have,” she said. “People from Ireland, Sweden, Italy and other countries came here in waves to work in the plants ... This diversity is a real strength of Worcester.”