

A Report of the NNEC Fall Tour

The Fall Tour of the Northern New England Chapter was hosted by the Belknap Mill, Laconia, New Hampshire, on October 26, 1991. Mary Rose Boswell, Executive Director of the Belknap Mill Society welcomed the group of forty and told them about the mill and its history. The former hosiery mill is possibly the "oldest largely-unaltered mill of its type in the New England region," ca. 1823-28. Presently the first floor is occupied mainly as an art gallery, a gift shop and a museum exhibit of the 1918 hydroelectric system. The second floor has office space which is occupied by community service organizations. The third floor has remained unchanged for about 100 years, except for the addition of a small kitchen and rest rooms, and is used for meetings. The fourth floor, also largely unaltered, is used as a studio by artists and craftspeople. The 1823 bell and the early freight elevator are visible on the fourth floor.

During the early years of management by the society, beginning twenty years ago, the Belknap Mill was promoted as an art center rather than an industrial museum because many people in the community who once worked there harbored ill feelings. Preservation of the mill was deferred until recent years partly because of the nonsupportive public attitude and partly for economic reasons. The mill narrowly escaped demolition for a parking lot in Laconia's episode of urban renewal. Now there is increasing pride in Laconia's mills among old workers, strengthened by oral workshops and exhibits. Roof repair, stabilization of the foundation, and wheelhouse preservation work is being accomplished with funding from several sources.

A permanent exhibit of machinery has been developed largely by Roger Gibbs, a retired mechanical engineer and NNEC member, who spoke briefly to the group about the power system



The Belknap Mill (left) and the Busiel Mill in Laconia, New Hampshire, site of the NNEC fall meeting and tour.



The power train in the Belknap Mill is inspected during the NNEC fall tour.



The B&M Railroad station in Laconia, New Hampshire (circa 1892, Bradford Lee Gilbert, architect).

and machinery. Some of the mill's machinery was manufactured by the W.D. Hayes Company and the Scott and Williamson Company. The latter was located in Laconia from 1916 until its closing c. 1981 (it was founded in Philadelphia in 1860). These companies made the knitting machines (out of hundreds once utilized) which have been preserved and displayed at the mill along with the electrical power switchboard. During its final manufacturing phases, the Belknap Mill was powered by three 100 h.p. water turbines (which are still in place and may be viewed) and a 100 h.p. steam engine which provided backup during low water flow.

Roger told the group that the Belknap Mill Society worked with architect Paul Mirsky, who received a commendation from the National Trust for his preservation of the building. The NNEC members had the opportunity to tour the mill from its turbine boxes to its bell tower, literally.

Historian Warren Huse provided the group with a slide presentation of Laconia's industrial history and later led the group on a walking tour. Among the notable structures which were viewed were the B&M Railroad Station (1892; attributed to Bradford Lee Gilbert of New York) and the Gale Memorial Library (1901-03, by Charles Brigham of Boston). For these, see *New Hampshire Architecture* by Bryant F. Tolles, Jr., with Carolyn K. Tolles. The Mediterranean style hotel building (c. 1910) is also interesting. Besides the mill and station, the Laconia Car Company buildings were of special interest to the Chapter. The huge chimney, ventilators above (presumed) forges and the huge doors with the remains of tracks coming out—all give evidence for the impressive industrial past of this complex and the City of Laconia.

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