

NNEC-SIA SPRING 2009 TOUR

During a spring and summer of rain, the NNEC was fortunate to have a beautiful day in Bartlett, N.H., for its spring tour. It was organized by our vice-president Rick Russack and the nice day led to a large turnout of members.

In the morning we had a long and informative tour of the Kearsarge Peg Mill by owner Paul Soares and one long-time employee. Open in 1878, this is the only remaining wooden peg mill in the world. Modern peg mills exist in Italy and Germany but they use plastic to make their pegs. These pegs of various sizes were used to join the soft leather shoe uppers to the hard soles. At one time, there were 5-6 peg mills running in the White Mountains, supplying pegs by the millions to the many shoe factories in N.H. and Massachusetts. Originally the company mill was located further south in Andover, N.H., but in time the wood supply was depleted, so the mill relocated to Bartlett in 1878. Another former peg mill once owned by the same company is now the Common Man restaurant in Plymouth, N.H. Beech and birch are the two wood species used in the manufacture of the various sizes and shapes of pegs. In addition to pegs,

other items once manufactured at the mill over the years included toothpicks, bobbins, and tongue depressors.

Today very few shoe factories exist in the U.S., and fewer still use wooden pegs. A small market still exists at historic sites such as Old Sturbridge Village which demonstrate shoemaking and the cobblers trade. Recently an order of 2,000 pounds of pegs was sent to Texas for the manufacture of cowboy boots. The company has survived for over 140 years by finding new markets and uses for wooden pegs. Since the 1920's the pegs have been used for polishing and burnishing stones. Other dry media such as corncobs, walnut shells, and sawdust are now used to polish items. The business has recently doubled its orders by further expanding into polishing. Kearsarge Peg Mill uses 190 different compounds to polish fishing lures, buckles, golf club heads, woodstove pieces, even artificial knee parts, and dozens of other small items. Another modern source of income that helps the Peg Mill stay open is a cell tower attached to the tall brick smokestack at the mill.

For our tour, Gerry Demuro, board chairman of Heritage Mills, had arranged for the mill to run as we observed the various steps in the manufacturing of the small wooden pegs. Many steps and specialized equipment are required to turn a 4-ft. log into a peg less than one inch long and thin as a pencil lead. First the log needs to have the bark removed and this was demonstrated by hand and also with the more recent debarking machine. Then a slice of wood approximately an inch thick is sliced off the end of the log and moved to the next step by a conveyor belt. Much of this equipment was "hand made" by company employees and is one of a kind. A pointer machine is then used to make hundreds of small points on one side of the slice. Even this unique machine has to be versatile as there are 19 peg sizes that are made with points on one end. This pointed wood slice is then broken apart by more machinery and steps until all that should remain is a lone shoe peg. Next they are sent to one of four large rotating drums holding 300-400 gallons for drying. These drums are half filled with the pegs and hot air is blown into them to dry them.

After drying, the pegs are screened by one of eight different screen sizes that allow only the individual pegs to drop through them. They are then bagged and ready for delivery.

The afternoon portion of day was a tour of the former sawmill town of Livermore. The mill was built in 1876 with the Sawyer River Railroad being completed soon after. The Saunders family were lawyers from Massachusetts that had extensive timber and landholdings in the area. Because they were not completely dependent upon timber for income, they selectively cut Red Spruce, leaving the forest in better condition than most logging operations at the time. The finished lumber was sent to Massachusetts by railroad. At its peak, between 200-300 people lived in the town. There was a company store, houses, schoolhouse, a mansion built by the owners, large sawmill, millpond, powerhouse, charcoal kiln, and numerous other structures.

In 1918 the mill burned down, causing residents to start moving away. Nine years later a flood destroyed the railroad line that ran into town. In 1951 the town of Livermore was unincorporated and ceased to exist. Peter Crane gave a detailed description of the former town with many excellent photographs from the past. We were shown the schoolhouse foundation, home foundations, and the heavy safe still inside the company store foundation. The most interesting ruin is the large sawmill area full of walls, bricks, and iron. Despite the millpond, it ran on steam power. The millpond was used to clean off the logs and prevent the drying and cracking of them before they are sawn into lumber. Those who made the long drive to northern N.H. had the opportunity to step back in time and see the current and past remnants of a once thriving wood products industry.

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