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Mill Town Roots

By John R. Mullin

The end of the 20th century is a good time to check on the progress of the towns where the U.S. industrial revolution began.

Virtually every planner I know has visited some part of New England as a tourist, student, or participant in a professional meeting. Invariably, the visitors recall with pleasure Boston's idiosyncrasies; its crooked streets and compactness; even its residents; driving habits; the vast beaches of Cape Cod; the tidy villages nestled in the hillsides of rural Vermont – model towns for many of today's new urbanists.

Those who are about to subsidize their children's higher education often combine business with a side trip to one of the region's unique college towns – Hanover, New Hampshire, for instance or Northampton, Massachusetts.

But there's another, more utilitarian New England attraction that gets less attention: the mill towns. The villages and cities that grew up along such rivers as the Androscoggin, Deerfield, Merrimac, Nashua, Housatonic and Blackstone were the first centers of industrial power in the U.S. Jane Jacobs summed up their importance in *The Economy of Cities*: "In the nineteenth century," she wrote, "saws and axes made in New England cleared the forests of Ohio; New England ploughs broke the prairie sod; New England scales weighed wheat and meat in Texas; New England serge clothed businessmen in San Francisco; New England cutlery skinned hides to be tanned in Milwaukee and sliced apples to be dried in Missouri; New England whale oil lit lamps across the continent; New England blankets warmed children by night and New England textbooks preached at them by day; New England guns armed the troops; and New England dies, lathes, looms, forges, presses, and screwdrivers outfitted factories far and wide."

Downward slide

By the beginning of this century, faced with competition from other regions, the mill towns had lost their competitive edge. They gradually entered into a decline that in some cases persists to this day. There are plenty of examples of such "losers" in the isolated areas along the banks of the Quinebaug River in Connecticut, the Kennebec River in Maine, and the Shetucket River in Rhode Island.

Some communities were able to adapt. Villages like Peacedale, Rhode Island, have attracted a variety of small businesses to their mill complexes. The larger industrial town of Dalton, Massachusetts, has continued to succeed as a paper producer, and in Clinton, Massachusetts, the Nypro Corporation, a plastics manufacturer, has revitalized an old factory complex. The small city of Lowell survived in part by becoming the nation's first national park with an industrial theme.

The mill towns have always struggled. From the beginning, they depended on the vagaries of water flow. If the flow of the river was slow in late summer, production would come to a halt. If the owners' financial condition was unstable, the machines stopped. And, of course, there was always competition, even from within. How, for instance, could the mill villages compete with the efficiencies and technological advances found in the larger industrial cities such as Lowell, Lawrence, and Chicopee?

The downhill slide hastened after World War I. Mill owners had to look farther afield for raw materials and spend more to transport finished products. More important, the skills of southern workers had dramatically improved. Health regulations and labor reforms in New England added new costs to production while companies scrambled to keep pace with technological and infrastructure advances.

World War II and the Korean War temporarily bolstered the market for New England products, but by the 1950s, the mill communities were clearly failing. Industrial analysts and planners alike saw little hope for these depressed – and depressing – communities.

Miracles don't last

In the 1960s, a miracle occurred, at least a temporary one. Even as factories closed all over the region, entrepreneurs began spotting the empty buildings as a resource. A new set of industries began to replace those that had closed or relocated. Stimulated by inventions, innovations, and licenses acquired from and by the region's universities, laboratories, and research and development centers, new companies emerged, enticed by the mill towns' inexpensive space and available labor.

At the same time, the region's service industries began to realize that there could be substantial cost savings if they were to locate in these old structures. And finally, planners, industrial development officials, and historic preservationists began to realize the potential of the old mill buildings, which were even beginning to develop a kind of cachet.

One building that caught the eye of investors was the behemoth Assabet Mill in Maynard, Massachusetts, just west of Boston. Built in the 1840s, the mill complex had been expanded to over a million square feet by 1952, when it was closed by the American Woolen Company.

Thanks in part to the efforts of town officials, the old woolen mill gradually began to fill up with some of the growing industries that were emerging in the Greater Boston region. The new users included plastics and paper companies, millworking operations, warehousing firms, printers, and stereo manufacturers. A major coup was the attraction of the Digital Equipment Corporation.

By the early 1960s, the mill was virtually fully occupied and the town had become relatively prosperous. In a strange turn of events, Digital continued to grow and

grow until, by the 1970s, the mill was again occupied by one company, and Maynard was once again dominated by one industry.

But then came a new bust. By the late 1980s, as the Massachusetts computer boom declined and the severe recession of 1989-90 struck, Digital consolidated its operations. The company closed its Maynard operation in 1990 and sold the mill. Four years later, the new owners began to market the structure and expect to fill it, once again, over the next three years.

Winners and losers

The Maynard story is not unique. The same sequence of boom-bust-recovery takes place in all six New England states. At times the sequence occurs rapidly, while at other times it happens painfully slowly.

Three types of mill communities can be clearly noted: There are those that continue to struggle, those that are performing quite well, and those with promise.

The strugglers are isolated. They do not have easy access to modern highways, they don't have modern telecommunications, and in some cases they lack water or sewer capacity. They also have a history of attempting to keep industries that are destined to leave anyway.

Some of the most vivid examples can be seen in the mill towns along the Mohawk Trail in West Central Massachusetts. Once proud centers of furniture, cutlery, and precision tool manufacturing, these towns have not for the most part been able to attract or develop new growth industries.

It is these towns where a cycle of despair has set in and where state statistics on high school dropouts, unemployment, teenage crime, and children needing medical help show the depths of the troubles they face. The mills remain, the people remain, but the jobs are gone. Pockets of such mill villages can be found in all six New England states.

Meanwhile, the good performers continue to grow and attract (and shed) new industries on a regular basis. Most noticeable are the communities clustered around the plastics center of Leominster, Massachusetts. Firms throughout this region have slowly and steadily shifted their focus from low-end products (e.g. plastic forks) to sophisticated high-value products such as night visioning devices. They have also placed high value on research and development and have even created a plastics museum. The firms (and even the museum) are located in old, revitalized structures.

As for the communities that show promise, there are too many to name. In my consulting work I have noted a significant growth in requests for proposals concerning the revitalization of old mills throughout the six-state region. As the economy continues to boom and industrial land becomes scarce, firms are looking at these mill communities with renewed interest.

Some lessons

The experience of these towns is not confined to New England. The American landscape is littered with old mining towns, railroad towns, and factory towns that have lost their reason for being. Many of these towns, because they developed much later than the New England mill communities, may be undergoing changes for only the first time.

These are some of the things planners in such communities should keep in mind:

- Don't count on an industry staying put. Planners should focus more on the structure than the occupant. Everyone gets excited when IBM or Mercedes comes to town, but what happens when the high-end company leaves and is replaced by "Average Warehousing, Inc."? Make sure that enough industrially zoned land is available for a variety of companies.
- Preserve what should be preserved. Work with the owners of empty mills to make sure that the structures are minimally heated and protected from vandals. Once water damage or frost buckling occurs, the expense of renovation increases dramatically.
- Recognize that not all structures are worth saving. Selective demolition can create open space, eliminate the most blighted buildings, and allow the best structures to be seen – a key marketing feature. Our rule of thumb is that 10 percent of New England's vacant mills are economically recoverable.
- Make sure that regulatory problems are addressed. Few of these structures comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act, OSHA standards for elevators, floodplain standards, and local zoning and building code ordinances. As long as such problems remain, there will be little incentive to revitalize the structures. Some of the problems cannot be overcome (i.e., the mills are often within 15 feet of a frequently flooding river). However, local zoning, ADA, and OSHA issues can be resolved.
- Work through a public-private partnership. Grants from the Economic Development Administration may be obtained through local and county planning agencies or state economic assistance agencies.
- There must be tax relief. Too often, communities see the mills simply as a source of property tax revenue. They are reluctant to provide abatements or to lower a structure's assessed value. That approach may be shortsighted. Tax abatements and tax increment financing programs are frequently key to stimulating revitalization.
- Target your marketing. In New England, industrial marketers are rarely able to attract firms from distant regions. It is generally best to identify firms that are expanding in your region and to develop packages that will attract them to the community.
- Move quickly after a firm leaves the mill. Any industrial occupant is better than none. An occupant will at least maintain the building. Moving quickly is also a way to make sure that the community's skilled workers stay put.
- Most important, commit to a long-term strategy. The recovery of mill towns is almost always slow, incremental, and complex. Nonetheless, it is worth the effort.

Predictions

The future of these communities is quite mixed. Those that are close to the region's major economic engines (metropolitan Boston, Worcester, Providence, Springfield, Portland, Nashua) are likely to do well because there is steady demand for inexpensive space. With long-term economic strategies, tactical grant writing, regulatory assistance, infrastructure improvements, and a public-private partnership, I am confident that the mill towns within commuting distance will survive.

Those that have cachet will also recover. For example, the mill communities located in the Blackstone and Quinebaug river valleys are now part of federally designed heritage corridors and will be the beneficiaries of direct and indirect federal assistance. Further, they have the good fortune of being located along newly improved state and interstate highways.

I am less optimistic about the small and isolated communities that are well beyond an easy commute to metropolitan areas and that have not benefited from tourism. It is here that planners' skills will be most tested.

But there's reason for optimism. These small mill communities are indelibly a part of our national psyche and our heritage. They were envisioned as the answer to Blake's dark Satanic mills" and Dicken's "Coketown." And in many cases, they fulfilled their mission. The motto on the town seal of Thetford, Vermont, summarizes the ideals of these towns: "Scenic Beauty-Industry-Agriculture." They are indeed special places.

Special places. The best place to see the impact of the Industrial Revolution is at the Lowell National Historic Park. For more on the smaller mill towns, go to the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor visitor's center in Uxbridge, Massachusetts. And to explore the roots of industrialization, visit the Old Slater Mill/Wilkinson Mill Complex in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. For a glimpse of an intact mill community that is now struggling, travel to Harrisville, New Hampshire.

