



# Biddeford-Saco-OOB Courier

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## Room with a view



Developer Nathan Szanton talks about the Mill at Saco Falls during an opening celebration Monday afternoon while surrounded by "before" pictures of the project. The renovation included removing the center part of the building shown in the before photo, which opened a view of the Saco River not seen in 200 years. (Gillian Graham photos)

# 'Solid and noble' Laconia mill gets \$14M makeover

By Gillian Graham  
Staff Writer

The first time he walked through the mill, Stephen Brewer knew he wanted to make a home inside the towering brick building that overlooks the Saco River.

On Monday, as darkness fell over Biddeford and the crowd drifted away from the building's opening celebration, Brewer backed a truck up to the front entrance and began moving into the Mill at Saco Falls.

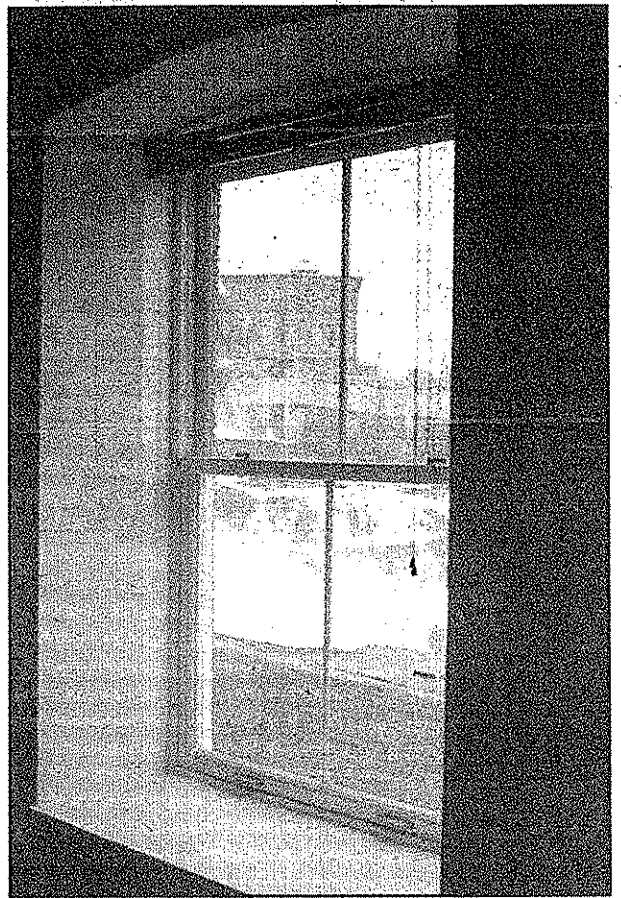
Brewer and Stefanie Baptiste are renting one of 66 units in the former Laconia Mill 1 building on the banks of the Saco River near Lincoln Street. Developers Nathan Szanton and Robert CS Monks, partners in Maine Workforce Housing, purchased the building in 2009 and converted the space to affordable and green apartments.

Forty of the apartments are reserved for households that earn 50 percent or less of the area's median income. The remaining apartments are rented at market rate. Building amenities include heat and hot water, parking, wireless Internet, a fitness center, communal theater room, laundry facilities, outside play area and kayak and bicycle storage.

The renovation began in January when crews knocked down a section connecting two mill buildings and opened a view of the falls City Manager John Bubier said hasn't been seen in 200 years. Nearly all of the apartments offer panoramic views of the river and mill district.

Walking through an empty apartment before the opening celebration, Monks said he is "really excited" about turning an empty space into something new. At 19, he worked nearby folding blankets in the dye house

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Most of the 66 units at the Mill at Saco Falls have views of the Saco River. The building includes market rate units and apartments designated for tenants who earn 50 percent or less of the area's median income.

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at WestPoint Pepperell.

"Biddeford is a really exciting place to be right now," Monks said.

Szanton said the building, constructed in 1845, was given new life in large part because of historic tax credits, which the Legislature expanded in 2008. The Maine Historic Preservation Commission named Biddeford's mill district a historic district and made available \$3 million in historic tax credits for the project.

The Maine State Housing Authority provided \$600,000 in deferred loans and an additional \$6.2 million in tax credit exchange and tax credit assistance program funds through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. The project's total cost was \$14.4 million.

The Mill at Saco Falls was designed by Archetype Architects of Portland and built by Wright-Ryan Construction of Portland.

Gov. John Baldacci toured the building with Monks before speaking to a crowd assembled in the front courtyard. After seeing the building's condition 11 months ago, he never imagined developers would be able to finish the property, he said.

Baldacci praised the project for providing affordable, quality housing units to working families and for its use of historic tax credits and public-private partnerships.

"This project wouldn't have happened without the tax credits," he said. "It preserves what is special about Maine's historic downtown areas."

Dale McCormick, director of Maine State Housing Authority, said the city can't have a vibrant downtown without more people living there.

"This housing will endure. It will help vitalize Biddeford," she said. "This is a lasting thing we can all be proud of."

Bubier said Monday was an "incredible day" for the city. He said developers could easily have said the building had no value, but "wisely put the effort into rebuilding the facilities to make them functional and viable."

"It's a masterpiece in the sense that there's nothing cookie cutter about it," Bubier said of the building's design. Each apartment is unique and there are no differences between affordable and market rate units.

Heart of Biddeford Executive Director Zeke Callanan said the project is "huge" because "it shows people are investing in this area."

"It lets others who are considering investing in the

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## Mill

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area see a really positive project. It shows the potential revitalization efforts can produce," he said. "This project is the result of a very creative use of economic development dollars."

Roxanne Efin, director of the Maine Downtown Center program, said the project demonstrates "great investment practices to bring back an irreplaceable landmark."

"It's a tremendous example of the use of historic tax credits and affordable housing credits being used together," she said.

Efin also said she loved the use of artwork to connect the building to the community. Framed historic photographs and maps of the community line the hallways and front lobby. On the first floor, a metal fire door salvaged from the mill is mounted in the hallway.

Sen. Barry Hobbins of Saco said he is in awe of the building and is excited for the future of Saco and Biddeford as mills are renovated and reused.

"This is just another example of the revitalization and Renaissance of the twin cities," he said. "This will lay the groundwork for the rest of the Renaissance in Biddeford."

Szanton said he is "very happy" with the way his first mill building renovation turned out and he is open to similar projects in Biddeford in the future. He is especially fond of the building's wood plank ceilings, exposed timber framing and large windows with beveled openings that let in lots of light.

"(Our) vision has been realized," he said. "This is exactly what we hoped it would be like. We wanted to bring this solid and noble building back to life."

Szanton said many historic buildings in Biddeford are underutilized. With other similar projects and more people living and spending money downtown, the city has the potential to have a thriving downtown like Portsmouth, N.H., or Boston, he said.

"It's like a shot of economic adrenaline. It can only be good for the downtown economy," he said. "I think downtown Biddeford has tremendous potential. I think in 10 years Biddeford will be thriving."

Brewer, like Szanton, fell in love with the building even before renovations were complete. A native Mainer, Brewer saw an article about the building six months ago and decided to check it out while it was still under construction. He and Baptiste, who moved from Tampa, Fla., were looking for an interesting apartment with plenty of space.

"The whole mill style, I just fell in love with it," Brewer said. "They should do all of (the mill buildings). It's been empty too long. I think it's a great use of space that just been sitting here. I think we're lucky to live here."