

HATCH MILL RESTORATION PROJECT



By Judy Enright / Photos: Mike Sleeper



Back in the day, the story of Scituate, Norwell, Marshfield, Hanover, and Pembroke was the story of the North River.

There was no Route 3; there was no Route 53; there was no Route 139. In fact, there were no roads at all except for Indian trails leading to, from, and along the water. The river was the highway for early settlers who also relied on marsh grass growing along its banks to feed cattle and horses since most of the adjacent land had not been cleared.



As trees were felled and homes built and inhabited, the North River became a locus for shipbuilding. The industry spawned numerous sawmills that cut and planed timber for the dozen or so shippards along the river's banks where more than 1,000 ships were built and launched during two centuries of shipbuilding. Perhaps the most famous North River-built vessel was the privately owned Columbia, a 3-masted, 212 ton square rigger that carried Captain Robert Gray and his crew to the Pacific Northwest to trade for fur. In 1792, Captain Gray discovered the Columbia River in Oregon and named it after his ship. Two years earlier, the Columbia had become the first American ship to circumnavigate the globe.

The shipyards are gone now and the buzz of that industry has left the river. Some of the sites are marked with plaques but many have completely disappeared. Sawmills too, once found on ponds made by damming up streams that flowed to the North River, have gone the way of the shipyards.

But one – the Hatch Mill – remains. Marshfield builder Roy Kirby and a band of dedicated and caring area residents, historians, artists, and preservationists from all over, are determined to salvage and restore the mill and open it someday as a living museum for all to enjoy.

"The Hatch Mill," Kirby said, "is all about education. We plan to turn it into a museum about technology before the circular saw was invented." The mill was originally built as a gristmill in 1752 but converted in 1812 to a water-powered up-and-down sash sawmill.

Kirby is president of the Hatch Mill Restoration and Preservation Group, which bought the mill from the Marshfield Historical Society in 2004, along with 3.5 acres of land, a millpond, the dilapidated buildings and, their biggest treasure, the original up-and-down blade, which was still at the site. The property abuts about 25 acres of land owned by the Town of Marshfield that leads to the North River.

Helping Kirby with fund raising are project partners Jack and Bobby Clancy and many other well-known artists, craftsmen,

and personalities including Laura and Rick Brown, co-founders of Handhouse Studio, Inc., of Norwell, a non-profit educational organization that crosses the boundaries of conventional learning.

In a Hatch Mill Restoration and Preservation Group brochure, the Browns write, "It is important to understand our history. We stand on the shoulders of those before us. History helps us to understand who we are, and where we live."

The Hatch Mill, the Browns add, is "living history. It represents all the stories of the many mills that once lined the North River and all the jobs and people that worked in those mills. Once a building is gone, that living history is gone forever. We must save the Hatch Mill for the future. It is our responsibility to our past. When it is restored, it will be a place of living history as well as an educational center and museum for the preservation and teaching of traditional technologies and trades such as timber framing, boat building, and furniture making."

Another supporter of the restoration project is noted landscape photographer Mike Sleeper, who grew up around the corner from the mill. He said, "Everyone who grew up in North Marshfield used to hang out or play in the mill at some point. That represents 30 years of kids hanging out there and it was never damaged or burned down. It shows that this was our heritage and a relic from another time that everyone respected."

Sarah Messer, a poet and author, was raised in Marshfield, in a house built in the 1600s that was the subject of her book, "Red House: Being a Mostly Accurate Account of New England's Oldest Continuously Lived-In House."

She is currently an Associate Professor in the Creative Writing Department at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington.

Sarah wrote, "For centuries the Hatch Mill was a focal point for the most vital industry in this small section of Marshfield called Two Mile, or 'Hatchville' (named for prolific and inter-marrying Hatches). As a girl, I walked by the mill everyday

and watched high school boys in black rockstar T-shirts learn to hammer and saw in the first of many restoration attempts in the 1970s. Boards sawn from this mill have travelled around the world in the bellies of ships, have become shoe boxes shipped to soldiers in the civil war south, and become the beams supporting many local houses in Marshfield, including the Red House. The mill should be used as a resource to teach the public of how things were, how they came to be, and how all things, no matter what the time period, are intimately connected."

To further the quest for monies to restore the mill, Kirby recently took a 12-week course in professional fund raising, along with Joan Clancy at Boston University and is confident that this fund drive will go as well as his successful efforts with a volunteer group.

This is a different type of project though and I've learned that we need to go outside of Marshfield to raise the money. I feel the big thing is that this is on the North River, where all the shipbuilding was, and that the restoration would benefit the surrounding communities too.

"This is the only sawmill still standing on the river," he said, adding that the wood used to build many of Marshfield's antique houses also came from the Hatch Mill. "We have been evaluated and found eligible by the Massachusetts Historical Commission for listing for the National Register of Historic Places and are now in the application process for nomination to the National Register of Historical Places."

To learn more about the mill and the restoration project, contact The Hatch Mill Restoration and Preservation Group, Inc., 125 Furnace St., Marshfield, 02050, click on the Hatch Mill link at www.craftsmanshipwithpride.com, or visit www.hatchmill.org. You may also call Kirby direct at 781-834-9647 or 781-760-5749. Donations are held at the Scituate Federal Savings Bank.

