

## **SNEC Ames Shovel Shop Tour**

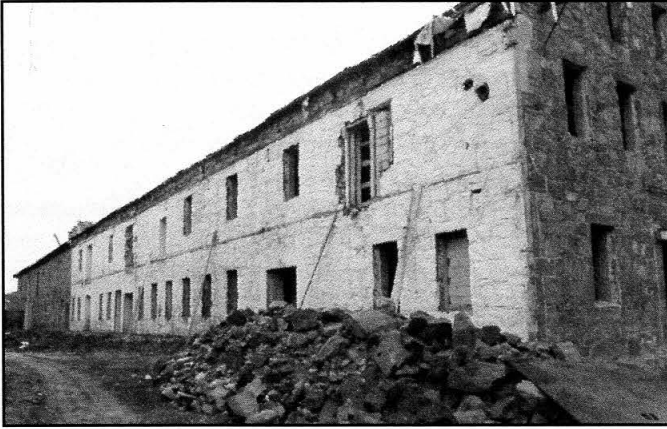
Light to heavy rain fell as the Southern New England Chapter and the Vernacular Architecture Forum had a joint tour of the former Ames Shovel Shop factory complex and other buildings in North Easton, led by SNEC member Greg Galer and Ed Hands of the Easton Historical Society. The tour began at the factory complex itself, which is located in the village of North Easton in southeastern Massachusetts.

The Oliver Ames Company, later known as the Ames Shovel Works, came to Easton in 1803 and moved to the site visited in 1853. It produced shovels and tools on this site until the early 1950s, growing to become the world's largest shovel manufacturer. Three-fifths of the world's shovels were made by Ames in the latter 19th century. Here Ames produced millions of shovels and employed upwards of 500 people at its peak. This unique 13 building complex is at the center of the North Easton National Register District and H.H. Richardson National Landmark District, and the income generated here allowed the Ames' family's involvement in a host of nationally significant enterprises, including funding the Union Pacific Railroad and the renowned designs of H.H. Richardson, F.L. Olmsted and others which permeate Easton. However, the Shovel Works was nearly lost to demolition. Through an multi-year, coordinated, local effort, supported on the state and national levels (including listing on the National Trust's 11 Most Endangered Resources list in 2009), the purchase of the site by the Beacon Communities, and significant contributions from the Community Preservation Act, the site is currently undergoing a \$40 million redevelopment into housing, with preservation oversight of the Easton Historical Commission and the NPS under Secretary of the Interior Guidelines due to state and federal historic tax credits. [From the tour announcement]

The tour first wandered through the construction zone where the factory was located. We started in the long shop (easily the longest building in the complex) and proceeded through the hammer shop and then through the boiler house. Along the way, the history of the company was related as well as the plans for development of this property, which will in-

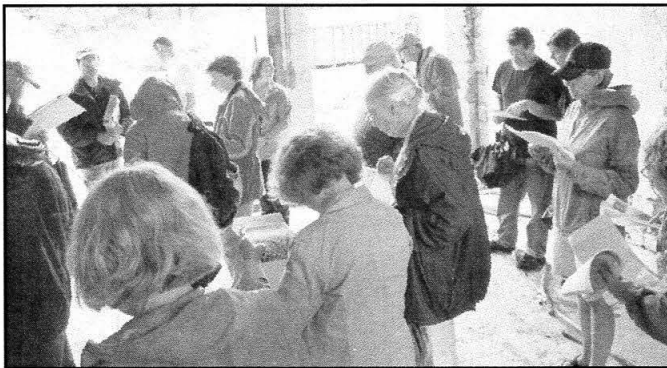
clude residential and commercial space. At the time of the visit, most of the insides were gutted, leaving great brick caverns that showed the roof supports and numerous holes where windows once were.

The tour next walked to the mansion of Oliver Ames, Jr. This house is an example of a Victorian era structure with Italian Renaissance architectural style. Behind and beside it were beautifully landscaped lawns. On the other side of the street

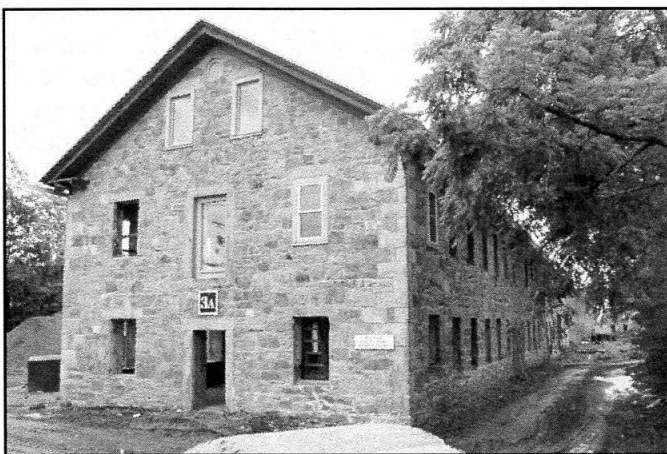


*This building was once the boiler house. Extensive work was being done both inside and outside the buildings.*

*Photo by Craig Austin.*



*Greg talking before the group about the history of the site, while within the Long Shop.*



*Looking South to the end of the Long Shop from Oliver Street. Most of the buildings in the complex were made of stone, with the exception of the steel beam building, of which the steel frame has been retained. Photo by Craig Austin.*

were workman homes, and along Elm Street were examples of duplex tenement houses. We briefly walked into property formerly part of another Ames Mansion – now Trustees of Reservation property, before heading down Washington Street. Along the way, we passed by a factory once operated by a rubber shoe heel manufacturing company, then walked around to see more company houses and back to the start just as the heavy rain came in.

Some members visited the Easton Historical Society museum that is in the old North Easton Depot, a beautiful stone structure designed by H. H. Richardson, who designed many buildings in North Easton.

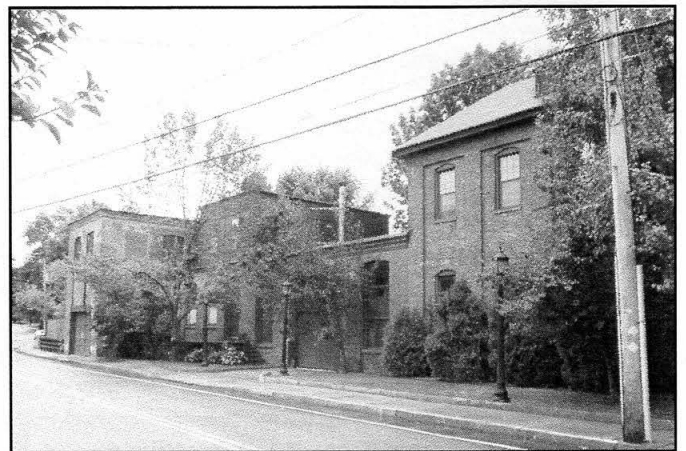
This was a rare opportunity to be able to see the buildings exposed, to see the buildings in process of development, and to see the structure underneath. Thanks go out to Greg Galer for organizing the tour and being one of our guides, and to Beacon Properties for allowing us on the property during construction!

### **Continued Drive Through Easton**

Subsequent to the tour of the shovel shop in Easton and a visit to the Easton Historical Society headquartered in the railroad depot, I took a drive through other parts of Easton to learn about other industries there. I learned that while the shovel shop dominated the northern part of town, a bottling plant, an automobile factory, and early iron forges were located in other parts of town.

My first stop was about a mile south of North Easton, near the intersection of Central and Washington Streets, known as South Easton. Here, the Easton Machine Company produced the Morse Car from 1902 to 1917. Alfred B. Morse held 80 patents for machinery including the first thermostat for home heaters. The main building is situated along the south side of a pond and appears to have been converted to residences. The building on the south side of the road was for the Crofoot Gear Company and is now vacant and in poor shape.

My second stop was about a half mile south of this location to Simpson Spring Company. This company started in



*The Easton Machine Company Building on Central Street, where the Morse Car was produced. Photo by Craig Austin.*



*Simpson Spring Company. Photo by Craig Austin.*

1878 and claims to be the oldest bottler in the country. They are still bottling at their original spring south of Washington and Depot Streets. In addition to spring water, they make several flavors of soda.

The third stop, a few miles west of the Simpson Spring Company in Furnace Village, was where two ponds were located next to each other. Today, there is a turnout on the Old Pond, with a historical plaque and millstone that mark the area where early mills existed along the two brooks that included gristmills, sawmills, cider mills and early iron forges that dated back to 1751.

Though I did not know it at the time, iron foundry activity continued at that location for many years. The longest lasting of which was the Belcher Malleable Iron Company, which was active until 2007, when its parent company closed the company. As of the end of July, the buildings were in the process of being demolished.

## **References**

Easton Historical Society, *History of Easton*, accessed on the web site for the Ames Free Library at [http://www.amesfreelibrary.org/Popups/History\\_easton.html](http://www.amesfreelibrary.org/Popups/History_easton.html).

Map: Easton Historical Society, *Historic Easton Welcomes You*, Easton MA.

Massachusetts Historical Commission, *MHC Reconnaissance Survey Report, Easton, MA*, accessed on the MHC web site at <http://www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc/mhcpdf/townreports/SE-Mass/est.pdf>.

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Craig Austin,  
SNEC Acting Secretary