

# The Easton Curiosity Shop

A curiosity shop is a place of odds and ends in a wide range of categories. One never knows what one will find on any visit, and that is the goal of this blog. Here you'll find postings on doings around Easton, the world's environment, history, recipes, fly fishing, books, music, and movies with many other things thrown in as well. Hope you enjoy it and keep coming back.

Sunday, August 19, 2012

## A Visit to the Ames Shovel Works

I was lucky enough to participate in a tour of the Ames Shovel Works project yesterday. It was my first visit to the site since the ground breaking ceremony and my third tour since Beacon took over the property. Like many other people I've been driving around the periphery almost daily, but you can't really get an idea of how much has been done unless you are on site.

The first question people have been asking me is has any archaeology been done on the site. The answer is complicated. If you are talking about the typical Discovery Channel special with sweaty interns working with picks, shovels, and tiny brushes, the answer is no. Beacon has deadlines and the project right now is on schedule and on budget. The project has its own preservationist on site and the Easton Historical Commission has its expert watching over the project as well. Their conclusion is that the typical archaeological dig would only delay the project with little reward.

Remember that when the site was originally sold to Arnold Tofias in the early 1970s. The buildings were loaded with "junk" that had been accumulated over the century that the company had been in business there. Most of what was valuable and visible found its way to the Tofias Industrial Archives at Stonehill where it is safely preserved today. Mr. Tofias then had concrete flooring poured so he could reuse the buildings as warehouses and offices.

The experts on site have concluded that the usual sifting of dirt outside the buildings would not reveal the usual layers of human occupation since the ground has been turned over so many times by the building and rebuilding on the site over the "short" span of 150 years. Indeed, most of the interesting small artifacts that have turned up have not been found outside. It turns out that by pouring the floors, Tofias sealed in a number of artifacts and site features. With the floors being jackhammered up to be replaced, these things have been revealed and saved. The small artifacts range from some tools to large dies used to shape the shovels. These artifacts are being conserved so that they can be displayed on site.

Outside, the construction crew has been remarkably sensitive to any important underground features discovered such as the original raceway with water wheel or the wooden supports for the hammers in the Steam Hammer Shop. One goal of the shovel company after its move to this site was to begin the transition from water power to steam power. However, a large raceway with a large waterwheel still provided power for many years. When it was no longer used for power this covered raceway became part of the on site drainage system. The raceway was clearly marked on the plans so it was no surprise when the construction equipment discovered it, but no one was prepared to find the large granite slabs that lined and covered it or the remains of the waterwheel. Work went on around this feature while the archaeologists and preservationists

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came in and measured and photographed everything.

The interesting result of this work-around was two fold. First a plan was devised to remove and save both the original wheel and the granite slabs, second it was discovered that the waterwheel was an overshot wheel. Waterwheels come in three varieties overshot where the water goes over the wheel, breastshot where the water hits the wheel halfway down, and undershot where the water flows under the wheel. Everyone thought that the wheel would have been a breastshot wheel which was the most common one in use during the industrial revolution. However, the careful measurements allowed by the extra time given by the project managers showed that there was just enough room to make this an overshot wheel. Overshot wheels had the highest efficiency for getting the most out of the water's energy, but needed a relatively complex water system to make them work. The use of an overshot wheel is another example of Ames technical skill.

The discovery of the wooden footings in the steam hammer shop also led to the discovery that traditional trip hammers were used there instead of other more modern designs. Old Oliver Ames had received a patent for an improved trip hammer so perhaps the company felt comfortable using this particular kind of hammer. Lest you should think about these hammers as something you might have in your home workshop, please note that the wooden beams supporting them were 22 feet long!

Other large discoveries like parts of the steam power system and the door to the company safe will also be preserved on site. The landscapers are adapting their plans to use the granite from raceway in the landscaping.

In conclusion I was greatly impressed with my visit from a historical perspective. For the first time in decades you can see the overall design of the site in its heyday. Important new information about the history of the operation has been uncovered, but more even more important is the quality of the historic preservation in the construction. This quality gets down to things as minute as choosing the appropriate color of the shingles on the roof or the type of window to be used. Remember that Beacon is committed to having the best example of historic preservation coupled with LEED certification for green buildings. Remember also what a challenge that is-windows have to be historically appropriate, fitted in non-standard window openings, and energy efficient. This site will be a showplace when its completed. Join the Beacon project with the revitalization of Main Street, and the opening of the Governor Ames estate plus all the other interesting historical and environmental attractions in North Easton and we will have something really unique in the state.

Posted by The Easton Curiosity Shop at 7:57 AM



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