

Renovated Long Shop Building at Ames Shovel Works Apartments

Photo © Andy Ryan



Dig This

Historic Former Shovel Factory Is Renovated to Create Unique Apartment Community

In North Easton, Mass., 30 miles south of Boston, Beacon Communities LLC has created a unique mixed-income apartment community through the rehabilitation and adaptive re-use of eight historic buildings dating between 1852 and 1928 that were once part of the Ames Shovel Works factory complex.

Employing linear assembly methods long before Henry Ford and the Model T, the Oliver Ames & Sons Shovel Company mass produced iron-blade and later steel shovels used in the California Gold Rush, for building the Transcontinental Railroad and Panama Canal, and as standard field issue for U.S. Army soldiers in every conflict from the American Civil to Korean Wars.

At its height in the second half of the 19th century, the company employed more than 500 workers at the complex, produced 1.4 million shovels a year, and controlled 60% of the world shovel market. The Ames family was prominent in business and politics, boasting a U.S. congressman, a governor of Massachusetts, and the

president of the Union Pacific Railroad.

The shovel company ceased production at the site in 1952.

Modern Unique Development

Boston-based Beacon completed the Ames Shovel Works apartments in December 2013 and is in the lease-up process with about 25% of the units rented, said project director Josh Cohen of Beacon Communities LLC.

Seven of the historic, one- and two-story buildings have been redeveloped into 113 apartments, some with studies, ranging from 570 to 2,650 square feet. One building contains the management office and a club-room for residents. "There's a really wide variety of apartment types," says Cohen. "Everything from traditional one- and two-bedroom flats up to unique two-story loft-like apartments."

An eighth building will be leased to the Easton

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Chamber of Commerce and the Easton Shovel Town Cultural District. The development features two large open green spaces and is adjacent to a YMCA.

Of the 113 apartments, 30 are low-income housing tax credit (LIHTC) units. Of these, 12 are restricted to renter households making no more than 30% of the area median income and 18 are for households at or below 60% of AMI. At 60% of AMI, the current annual income cap is \$43,260 for an individual and \$49,440 for a two-person household.

Another four apartments are restricted to households at or below 100% of AMI and the remaining 79 units are market rate.

Gross initial monthly rents range from \$537 to \$1,339 for the affordable units and \$1,510 to \$3,100 for the market-rate apartments. Eight affordable apartments have project-based Section 8 rental assistance.

A Community Jewel

Beacon Communities entered the picture in 2009 shortly after the town of Easton, which encompasses the village of North Easton, rejected a redevelopment proposal by a prior developer that would have demolished or seriously marred many of the historic buildings, which were vacant or underutilized.

A local group, Friends of the Ames Shovel Works, formed in response to the controversial proposal, prepared a concept to preserve the historic structures. Building on the group's work, Beacon presented the community with an alternative plan for preserving the buildings while creating apartments as part of a larger local redevelopment effort, eventually gaining support from public officials and residents through a series of town meetings that began in 2010.



Pam Goodman

"It was a long process – but a very positive process," says Pam Goodman, president of Beacon Communities Development LLC. "There was a lot to work out with the town."

Goodman said the Ames Shovel Works buildings "were very important to the town. They played a very important part in its history, and the town was very committed to preserving these buildings as a resource."

"This project could not have happened without the strong support of the town and the state," she says. "It was one of those times where everyone was rowing in the same direction."

Complex Financing, Challenges

The complex transaction entailed some time-consuming financial and architectural challenges to work through.

It took Beacon some time to line up the necessary financing for the transaction, which closed in April 2012. Funding sources include equity generated by federal and state historic and low-income housing tax credits, a permanent mortgage from the Massachusetts Housing Partnership, a loan from the town, soft loans from a HOME loan consortium and the state, and a deferred developer fee. Bank of America Merrill Lynch provided equity in exchange for all of the tax credits and made a construction loan.

Another financial challenge, Cohen noted, was matching the timing of Massachusetts' competitive LIHTC program and the state's equally competitive state historic tax credit program. In Massachusetts, LIHTC awards are issued through single funding rounds while state historic tax credits are awarded for projects over multiple rounds. Accordingly, Beacon had to submit applications and accumulate state historic credit awards over several rounds. The company ultimately closed on the financing and began construction before receiving all of the state historic credits needed for the development, using its own funds already in the deal to bridge the gap until the final credit award was received.

The architectural features and unique character of the historic buildings – most were very long and narrow granite-block structures with open space inside – presented design and construction hurdles that had to be overcome.

"Architecturally, the buildings were challenging to convert to housing," says Cohen. "Most were too narrow for doubled-loaded corridors. So the first challenge was how do you fit housing units into these narrow buildings?"



Josh Cohen

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“The solution,” says Cohen, “was to have direct entry apartments on the first floor and a single-loaded corridor on the second floor with apartments on one side and windows on the other. And then those second floor apartments utilized the spaces in the roof trusses, becoming two-story apartments with loft-like spaces that would otherwise be the attic. That was all very tricky to put together architecturally.”

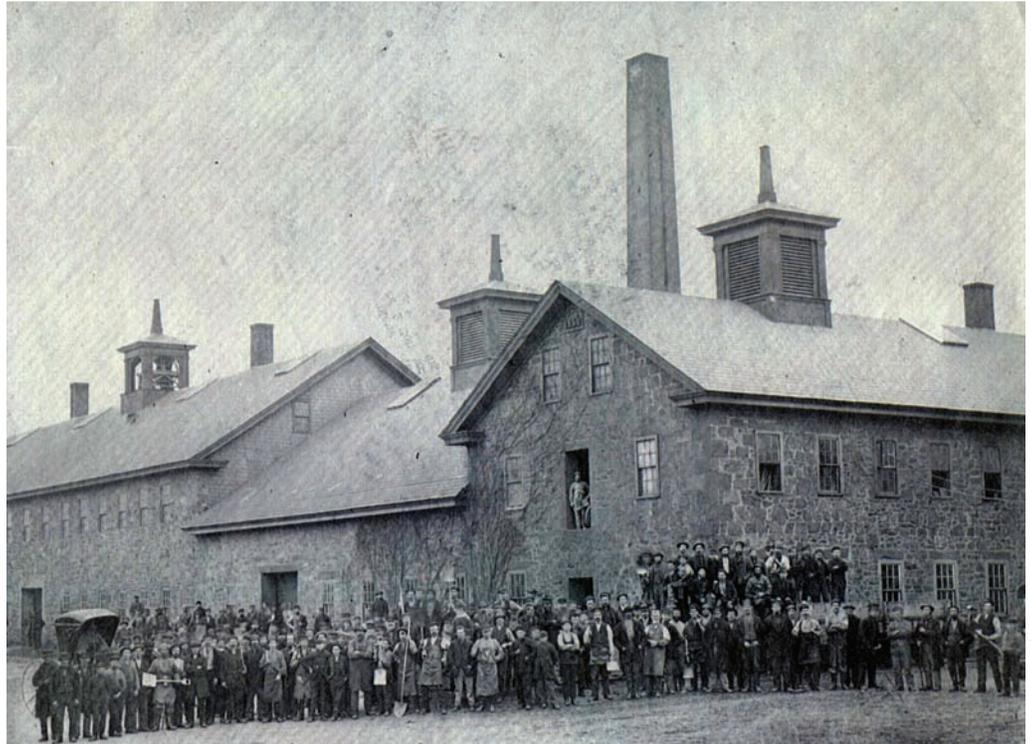
Beacon had to negotiate compromises with National Park Service reviewers over some of the elements of its proposed historic rehabilitation plan. For example, Beacon proposed adding dormers on the roofs of some buildings to bring in light to the living spaces within the roof trusses. To address Park Service concerns about preserving historic rooflines, the number of dormers was significantly reduced. Another compromise involved creating new points of access to the buildings. To provide access to the apartments without creating new door openings on the exterior of buildings where none existed before, Beacon’s team expanded original window openings to create entries into vestibules. These provide access to the first-floor direct entry apartments and contain stairways leading to the second floor.

Almost none of the original windows were left. New historic replica windows were installed throughout.

Beacon is pursuing LEED certification for the development, which has many green features. “We insulated all of the buildings with spray foam insulation, installed energy-efficient heat and cooling systems and low-flow plumbing fixtures, and used environmentally sensitive materials throughout to craft energy- and resource-efficient apartments in these historic buildings,” says Cohen.

About Those Shovels

Beyond just creating an apartment community, Beacon is commemorating the site’s rich history through



Historic Photo of Long Shop and Machine Shop Buildings

Photo courtesy of Easton Historical Society

various features woven into the development.

An old water wheel discovered beneath one building – used to generate power at one time – is displayed on the site, as is a large bell that rang to signal the work day for employees. The doors from a company business office safe were removed and installed in the entrance to the new management office.

In addition, Cohen said signs installed around the site provide a brief description of the history of each of the buildings.

And lastly, there is the crowning touch.

“We’re working with Stonehill College in the town of Easton and the Easton Historical Society to get eight original Ames shovels that we’re going to display next to our management office in the lobby,” says Cohen. “Stonehill College has a large collection of original Ames-made shovels.”

According to Goodman, the Ames Shovel Works development has been “well received” by the community.

“The people who have moved in are really enthusiastic,” says Cohen, “and we’re getting rents above what we projected in our pro forma.” **TCA**