

TRANSCRIPT BULLETIN

A history in plain sight

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Jan. 29, 2020, 7:00 a.m. ET

The Mother Brooks Arts & Community Center auditorium was completely full with Dedham community members eager to learn more about the Mother Brook Corridor Study.

The community meeting, titled "Hidden in Plain Sight: East Dedham's Mill Village," took place on Tuesday, Jan. 21. So many neighbors and community members attended this meeting that the MBACC ran out of chairs, so some attendees opted to stand for the presentation.

Judy Neiswander, a member of the Dedham Historical Commission, and the chair of the Mother Brook Corridor Study Oversight Committee, discussed the study. She explained that after the 375th anniversary of the construction of Mother Brook Canal, "Town Meeting allocated funding for survey and documentation of the canal and related buildings and structures in East Dedham, and to identify districts, properties and sites eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places."

This project includes significant properties, buildings, structures and areas surrounding the waterway from the canal entrance on the Charles River to the town line with Readville.

"The purpose of this project will be to undertake an intensive-level survey of cultural and architectural resources along the Mother Brook Corridor in the East Dedham neighborhood of the Town of Dedham," said Neiswander.

The project recently conducted a neighborhood survey to assess and document approximately 65-70 selected cultural and architectural resources, following Massachusetts Historical Commission survey standards and methodology. The Historical Commission will then submit a list of individual properties and/or districts that are recommended for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.

Neiswander explained that there are many benefits to being registered to the National Register of Historic Places. Listing on the National Register places no restrictions on property owners, but owners of income-producing properties in NR districts may be eligible for Historic Tax

Credits to rehabilitate their buildings. Nonprofit organizations, such as churches, that own NR listed properties may be eligible for matching grants from the Massachusetts Historical Commission to rehabilitate their buildings."

In September 2018, Dedham hired historians from Heritage Consultants in Newington, Conn., to conduct the survey project and fill out the National Register of Historic Places forms. Christina Volpe, the architectural historian and outreach coordinator at Heritage Consultants, discussed the survey project at the community meeting.

"When we started this process, it was a hard take on what we were going to decide upon. In the end, we have a total of 69 forms. One form, for the Maverick St. area, had over 70 resources. This was everything from former factory buildings, the school that we are in right now, former tenant buildings and single-family houses," said Volpe. An example of one of these historic sites is the Centennial Dam, built in 1894.

With each form, the historians included an old photo, present-day photo, census data and/or historical maps. Volpe said that when Heritage Consultants started the survey process, they had a "treasure trove" of archives to work with at the Dedham Historical Society.

Many Dedham residents are aware that the Mother Brook Canal is the first man-made canal in the United States, dug by English settlers in 1639 to build mills to grind corn. Volpe said that many people often ask how the English settlers knew how to create this advanced method of engineering - the answer is that many of these settlers learned these skills back in England.

Volpe presented the history behind the surviving features of the five mill privileges in East Dedham. Volpe explained that the word 'privilege' refers to "the right to use the mill on that section of the brook."

"The first fabric mills on Mother Brook began with the Norfolk Cotton Manufactory in the second privilege [located at present-day Maverick Street] in 1807. The operation failed shortly after due to the War of 1812. Benjamin Bussey purchased the factory to manufacture wool. Bussey was a visionary entrepreneur who began his career in Dedham as a silver and goldsmith," Volpe told meeting attendees.

Bussey erected machine shops, dye houses and dwellings at both of his mills. Mill privileges one and two under common ownership during this time.

Volpe explained that Bussey's treasurer kept amazing records of the Dedham Woolen Mills. She presented present-day photos of houses on Maverick and High streets, which were originally

boarding houses for mill workers.

“In 1829, rent to be paid on these properties was \$1.50 for men per week, and a \$1.25 per week for girls,” Volpe stated.

Volpe also discussed Thomas Barrows, one of the wealthiest mill owners: “Barrows lived on High Street near the Maverick area. Immigrants made up the bulk of the workforce at that time. He was a skilled Irishman, who hired other skilled Irishmen who were arriving in the 1820s from Scotland and Ireland.”

Working at the mills was laborious work, and the workforce included young children.

“Mill workers worked from 5 a.m. to 7 p.m. with a 30-minute break. Children often did the most frivolous work because of their tiny hands,” said Volpe. “We know a lot of this history, yet the fact that this happened here is remarkable.”

Despite these harsh conditions, many immigrants were able to rise and become members of the middle class. A compact group of houses on Hill Avenue were constructed by Thomas Murphy, an Irish immigrant who arrived in Dedham in 1850. Irish immigrant mill workers lived in these houses, which were constructed in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

“But the residents in these areas needed somewhere to go - they needed merchants and services around them. A cluster of buildings on Curve Street, including 29, 42, 62 and 84 became places of business and residence. Curve Street had mixed-use buildings during the first half of the 20th century - merchants, mechanics and grocery stores,” Volpe said during her presentation.

Mother Brook Community Group member Dan Hart said that he always wondered why Dedham students take field trips to the Lowell Mills, when there is so much mill history here in Dedham.

“Many people don’t grasp the significance of the Mother Brook Canal,” Hart said.

For more information on the Mother Brook Corridor Study, contact Economic Development Director John Sisson at 781-751-9175 or jsisson@dedham-ma.gov.