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Friday, July 3, 2009

Historic Former Factory Will Provide Affordable Homes for the Elderly

NORTH BERWICK— In its glory vanguard days, the Olde Woolen Mill building used steam power to manufacture woolen blankets for the Union Army during the Civil War. The mill closed in 1955 and, with the exception of it being used as a set location during the filming of Jumanji in 1995, the building has mostly been vacant until recently when The Caleb Foundation bought the property to redevelop into affordable housing for the elderly. This innovative reuse of a historic property is the first preservation project funded by Maine's State Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credit Program signed into law last year.

In September, residents will be moving into 40 newly created apartments in the rehabilitated Olde Woolen Mill, a centerpiece of the community overlooking the Great Works River, the town green and town hall. Once the largest employer in town, it is now

the largest complex of affordable housing for elders with 33 one-bedroom and seven two-bedroom apartments. And whereas the building was at one time powered by one of the earliest steam engines in the country, it is now powered, in part, by green technology, including solar panels that will provide enough non-polluting energy to heat hot water. The property has a patio in the back that overlooks the river, offers a walking path along the river to local residents for fishing and recreation and is easy walking to town services and local shops.

The complex, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, also boasts a community center where the steam engine will be on display. There will be an exhibit on the historical role of the property in the Civil War and in the community open to the public periodically. In 1995, the landmark Greek Revival style building was used as the Parrish Shoes Factory for the filming of Jumanji.

The Olde Woolen Mill is an important reminder of the very beginnings of the Industrial Revolution. Manufacturing operations were powered by one of the first steam engines in the country, housed in the basement, along with a floor to ceiling flywheel that powered the looms. The river water was diverted into the base of the building via a dam and fed a boiler, which turned the water into steam energy. The steam engine and the Bell Tower remain intact and are part of the preservation and reuse of a neglected, but historically valuable, property. The town, for example, will continue to be able to ring the Bell Tower to celebrate 4th of July, as has been community tradition.

The Woolen Mill was built in 1832 by John Lang and in 1850, William "Friend" Hill, a Quaker, became Lang's partner and principal owner. In 1861, the original wooden building was burned to the ground, but was quickly rebuilt with locally made bricks and the company was commissioned to weave blue woolen blankets for the Union Army. Friend Hill found himself in a precarious position, since, like his fellow Quakers, he was committed both to peace, but also the equality of mankind. Quakers were among the earliest abolitionists.

"We are thankful for the support of the North Berwick community and we are grateful to Maine State Housing Authority, TD Banknorth, Key Bank and Northern New England Housing Investment Fund for funding the acquisition, construction and operations of this project. We believe this innovative reuse of such a historic property will be an asset to the community and lives up to the vision that legislators had in mind when they passed the Maine State Historic Tax legislation last year," says Debra Nutter, Executive Director of The Caleb Group and The Caleb Foundation.

The Caleb Foundation operates 2,000+ units of affordable housing at 22 facilities in four New England states, including residences in Bangor, Lewiston, Portland, Old Orchard Beach and Saco, Maine. The Caleb Foundation, a non-profit organization, has created and maintained homes for low-income residents since 1992. Its affiliate, The Caleb Group, was created to connect families, elderly and disabled residents with services in order to achieve and maintain self-sufficiency.

As part of the resources provided to residents of the Olde Woolen Mill, a Caleb service coordinator will be on staff and on site at the complex. Anyone who is age 55 or older with a yearly income of \$27,000 to \$39,000 depending on the number of people in the apartment is eligible. For more information about apartment availability or to submit an application, contact Nancy Huffman at (781) 595-4665 or visit www.thecalebfoundation.org.

Photo caption: the newly renovated Olde Woolen Mill building in North Berwick.

(Courtesy Photo)

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