

A historic renovation in North Billerica is officially underway

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BILLERICA — The vital role of the Middlesex Canal will never fade away, a fact celebrated Sunday morning when dozens of history buffs and public officials joined the Middlesex Canal Association for the groundbreaking of the Middlesex Canal Museum and observation deck at 2 Old Elm St.

The observation deck sits behind the former Talbot Woolen Cloth Warehouse. A historical interpretation of what the canal, an engineering marvel at the time it was created, looked like. A timeline is displayed on a plaque sponsored by the SuAsCo River Stewardship Council. SuAsCo is an acronym for three local rivers, the Sudbury, Assabet and Concord rivers.

Since 2001, the nonprofit association has run the museum and visitor center at 71 Faulkner St. The museum boasts multiple exhibits and hosts lectures and walks along the canal.

In 2014, Pace Industries donated a building at 2 Old Elm St. to the association. Located just across the canal from the museum's current spot, the building offered a rent-free option and a prime location significant for its location on the canal and its historical importance.

The vacant building is being rehabilitated for adaptive reuse as the museum, at a cost of more than \$300,000. The North Billerica location has historical significance in many respects, going back hundreds of years, according to the association.

Construction has begun on rehabbing the interior building. Currently, sand covers the ground, and three floors are in preliminary building stages. Across the street at 71 Faulkner St., the museum is open on weekends. Weekdays require an appointment.

Marlies Henderson, a local history buff and outdoors enthusiast, hosted the event and explained that the association accepted the new location for one dollar. But that came with its own set of challenges with rehabilitation — including a hole in the roof. She said the whole structure was about to collapse.

“Every month the hole looked bigger. They had to fundraise to fix it up. With Community Preservation Act funding, the project started and it was very complex with all the permits. Then the roof came on during COVID with a crane, I had a trip up in the crane,” said Henderson.

Between the CPA funding and the River Stewardship Council grants, Henderson contemplated how to allocate the funds, receiving \$12,000 toward the deck and the plaque.

“I asked Thomas Dahill, a great artist, would you as a director of the Middlesex Canal Association, make a painting of how you would think, with your artistic freedom, this looked in the heyday of the canal,” Henderson said.

Near the observation deck, Jeremiah Breen, association president, noted its historical significance.

“This is our summit pond. Without that you don't have a canal flowing to Boston and Lowell — it's the highest point,” Breen said.

Built between 1793-1803, the Middlesex Canal was used a blueprint for other canals around the country, including the Erie Canal. The canal ran between Boston Harbor and Lowell, providing a maritime avenue for 9-foot-wide boats that hauled up to 20 tons of cargo each, between the manufacturing mills and the city.

The canal served as a commercial network for Lowell, Chelmsford, Billerica, Wilmington, Woburn, Winchester, Medford, Somerville and Charlestown and is said to have been largely responsible for the development of many major cities and towns during the Industrial Revolution.

A plot of land beside the new location is vacant, and it is hoped that it could be used at some point for the museum to expand further.

“This canal is designed for the present and future generations — the future is the riverfront park right there,” Breen said, pointing next door. “This is the present, that is the future.”

“This is a big benefit for Billerica. A great benefit,” Henderson said. “A building that was about to cave in, to what it looks like now. It has lifted the historic mill district.”