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Culture as Catalyst: Historic New England Launches a Transformational Initiative in Haverhill, Massachusetts

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Preservation organizations and museums of every discipline work to make the past relevant to the present. How can these cultural institutions also help to shape the future of communities they serve? Historic New England, the largest and most comprehensive independent preservation organization in the United States, is embarking on a transformative initiative to enrich the future of Haverhill, Massachusetts, through the Historic New England Center for Preservation and Collections.

Led by Historic New England President and CEO Vin Cipolla, this ambitious initiative aims to invigorate the revitalization of downtown Haverhill by reimagining over three acres of historic factory buildings and vacant properties as a centerpiece for a mixed-use arts and culture district, strengthening local and regional businesses, arts, environmental and social institutions, and substantially attracting new visitors and revenue to the area.

The idea is to employ culture as a catalyst for livability and vitality at a local to global scale. Historic New England, now 113 years old, welcomes hundreds of thousands of visitors each year to its thirty-eight museums and landscapes, including several coastal farms, and presents award-winning exhibitions, programs, and publications. As part of a commitment to sharing the full New England experience, beginning in 2020, Historic New England began a multi-year initiative called *Recovering New England's Voices*, deploying staff research scholars to its site regions. To date, the research has produced nearly 350 previously untold stories of the history of people who called the museums home, particularly BIPOC and immigrant histories.



These stories and more are still being recovered and are reflected in Historic New England's vast collection of New England objects, comprising more than 125,000 decorative arts pieces, and 1.5 million archival documents. Since the 1980s, a growing portion of the collection has been housed in a historic shoe factory on Essex Street in Haverhill. The space is also a hive of innovative collections care practices, including a state-of-the-art pest treatment system that uses nitrogen gas in an impermeable, plastic bubble, known as a modified or controlled atmosphere treatment. While the collection and its care have been important resources for scholars and professionals, access by the general public has been extremely limited.

At its annual convening in 2022, the Historic New England Summit, the organization presented a new goal to dramatically expand access to the collection and create a dynamic cultural destination and economic driver in Haverhill and the region through the creation of a reimagined Haverhill Center. Three world-class architects—Brandon Haw Architecture, Höweler + Yoon, and TenBerke—presented inspiring, thought-provoking concepts for the undertaking. Their presentations explored the depth and meaning behind Historic New England's collection and its relationship to contemporary makers and artists. They considered Haverhill's important history and development as a center of industry and design, exploring the power of architecture to unite people and ideas and build better societies.

In June 2023, Historic New England acquired the neighboring factory building and two additional open lots and launched planning efforts for the Haverhill Center. The two historic factories and three open lots adjacent to the Amtrak and Commuter Rail station create an incredible opportunity for the organization to play a key role in the ongoing revitalization of downtown Haverhill.



This vision resonates with the history of the two factory buildings in Haverhill; the structures were always intended to be key aspects of revitalizing the city. In 1882, a raging fire gutted the historic downtown and the Haverhill shoe industry quickly rebuilt using fireproof brick and other masonry materials. Historic New England's buildings, built in 1911 and named Lang and Burgess for the Boston bankers who financed them, were made of a relatively new material: reinforced concrete. They were publicized in trade journals as case studies in innovative new building technology and reflected the optimism of the city and its resilience after a disastrous fire.

By the early twentieth century, Haverhill was the third-largest producer of shoes in the country and nicknamed "Queen Slipper City." But beginning in the 1920s, with raised hemlines creating a revolution in consumer demand (with shoes now visible, women now desired multiple pairs in a variety of designs), increasing overseas competition, the Great Depression, and management-labor disputes, the Haverhill shoe industry went into a decades-long decline.

In recent years, the city has made great strides in revitalizing the downtown through creative placemaking efforts, new development projects, business resurgence, and adaptive reuse of historic buildings. Haverhill's Washington Street, largely spared from urban renewal that razed other parts of the downtown, is energized with new restaurants, bars, and emerging retail housed in Victorian-era brick buildings.

In the midst of this rejuvenation, Historic New England envisions a key role for culture. With the city's easy access to multiple modes of transportation, the Haverhill Center will welcome visitors from across the globe and from down the street. Visitors will be invited to explore a living archive, including visionary exhibitions, programs, performances, and experiences, community partnerships, and lifelong learning offerings. Links between the past, present, and future will connect visitors with such topics as sustainability, preservation, collecting, design, and culture in dynamic public indoor and outdoor spaces.

To bring this grand vision to fruition, Historic New England has assembled a team of experts and is actively seeking partnerships from both the public and private sectors. In addition to reimagined access to Historic New England's work, collection, and cultural experiences, early concepts for the Haverhill Center consider uses that will enhance the livability of the downtown and nearby neighborhoods, such as residential, commercial, entertainment, hospitality, retail, and dining facilities, utilizing the historic factories, compelling new architecture and an enhanced streetscape that would include public art, lighting, signage, and greenspace.

The project aims to build on the city's rich history, architectural heritage, and potential for growth, positioning Haverhill as a cultural and economic hub in the region. This redevelopment initiative follows the successful examples set by similar projects worldwide, such as MASS MoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts, and Powerhouse Arts in Brooklyn, New York, where culture has revitalized former industrial areas.

Recognizing that the most important resource in the process is the community of Haverhill, Historic New England has actively engaged with civic leaders, community members, and local businesses to ensure that the project aligns with the city's unique needs and aspirations. The city also benefits from a robust network of collaborative community organizations, from social service providers to cultural and educational institutions, artists, and civic organizers.

Developing relationships and eliciting feedback and input is a multi-faceted and rapidly expanding process, involving countless conversations with area residents and neighborhood associations, attending community events, and hosting activities such as the Merrimack Valley Black and Brown Owned Market.

Said Historic New England president and CEO Vin Cipolla, "We envision using culture as a catalyst for developing dramatically improved amenities that contribute to a more sustainable, livable, and resilient Haverhill, anticipating that the impact of the downtown cultural district will reverberate internationally. Given Haverhill's easily accessible location in New England, this district presents a major opportunity for transit-oriented mixed-use development in the city, with a nationally recognized civic and cultural institution at its heart. We look forward to being a strong part of the continued revitalization of Haverhill's downtown."



Images:

Haverhill Massachusetts on the Merrimack River formerly Merruasquamack

495hpr Postcard, c.1910-1920 "Burgess & Lang Buildings, Haverhill, Mass. / Burgess and Lang Buildings / Design Concept Rendering for the Haverhill Center, TenBerke Architects [View From Station]

Design Concept Rendering for the Haverhill Center, Brandon Haw Architecture

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