

A Shovelful of History: Preserving North Easton's Industrial Past

Brian Roche

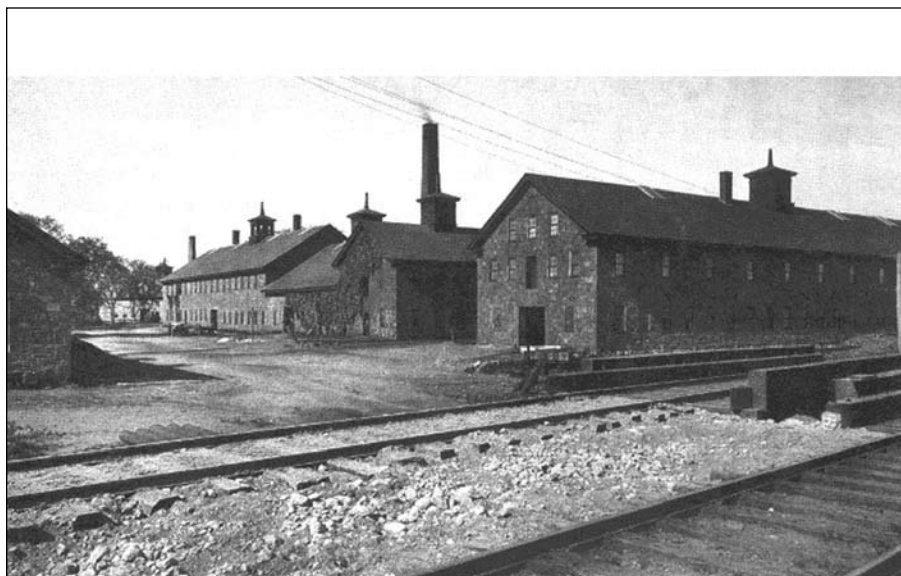
The nineteenth-century Ames Shovel Works (or Shovel Shop) complex in North Easton, Massachusetts is currently being threatened with demolition and radical alteration. A proposed redevelopment would demolish some historic buildings and drastically change most of the remaining structures, in order to create new four-story buildings with 182 mixed-income apartments and 35,000 square feet of warehouse or office space, with new parking lots to service these tenants.

While they certainly are not against development of the eight-acre Ames site, the Friends of the Historic Ames Shovel Works and other groups oppose both the large scale of the project, as well as its insensitive approach to the historic character of the buildings and surrounding area.

To be successful in an historic preservation campaign, it helps to start early. Organizing community support, gathering expert advice, educating the public, negotiating with developers, dealing with local, state and federal agencies, and pumping up the PR machine can be a daunting task for any individual or group embarking on such a crusade. But the Friends of the Historic Ames Shovel Works at North Easton may be just the type of group that succeeds in its preservation quest – the group entered into the process early and seems to be making all the moves that can lead to victory.

The Shovel Shop

In architectural circles, North Easton is already world famous for its collection of buildings by H.H. Richardson – arguably the greatest American architect of the nineteenth century – including the Town Hall, Ames Free Library, and the Old County Train Station. But the source of the vast wealth that funded these commissions lies at the heart of North Easton: the Ames Shovel Shop complex.



Ames Shovel Works, c. 1900, showing part of the Long Shop, the oldest and largest building on site, closest to the railroad tracks. *Photo courtesy of the Easton Historical Society.*



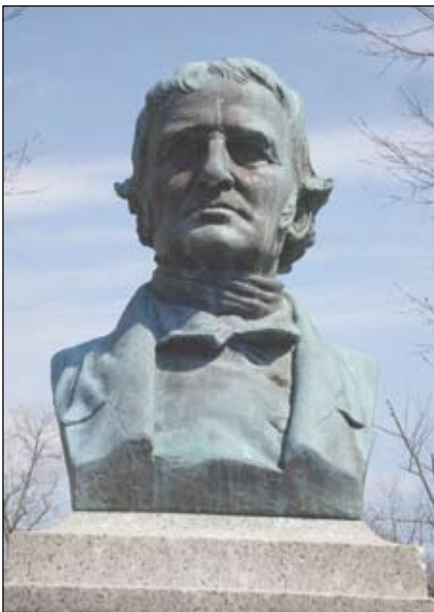
The Long Shop as it stands today is in a good state of exterior preservation, with few changes made over its history. It is currently being used as leased office space for a variety of tenants. The proposal calls for cutting out the center of the building and incorporating one half into a new structure. *Photo by Gregory Galer.*

This includes five major granite buildings built between 1852 - 1885, along with a number of additions and outbuildings of masonry, concrete, metal and wood. The granite buildings have survived in a good state of exterior preservation with surprisingly few changes.

Along with the Richardson buildings, the Shovel Shop complex forms the core of a National and State Register Historic District, and is one of the best preserved and most significant historic factory sites



1865 Antrim Hammer Shop. *Photo courtesy of Chris Milford.*



Sculpture of Oliver Ames, Sr.; Ames built a vast industrial fortune running the family business in the mid-1800s. *Photo courtesy of Chris Milford.*



The 1868 Antrim Opening Shop on the left is one of nine granite buildings built between 1852 and 1907. It is threatened with total demolition as part of the new development. *Photo courtesy of Chris Milford.*



The small but impressive Old Colony Train Station (H. H. Richardson, 1884) sits across the street from the Long Shop at the Ames Shovel Works and is now home to the Easton Historical Society. *Photo courtesy of Chris Milford.*

in Massachusetts. "What we have in North Easton is a shining example of a company village that has survived intact for 150 years," said Frank Meninno of the Easton Historical Society to the *Boston Globe*.

Indeed, the Ames Shovel Works was so successful that by 1870 it supplied 60 percent of the shovels used worldwide. Meninno notes, "Those shovels were used in the Australian, California and

Alaska Gold Rushes. The factory used production lines 50 years before Henry Ford did."

The Ames family created one of the first great industrial fortunes in America, and their influence spread to politics (Congressman Oaks Ames) and to railroads (Union Pacific Railroad president Oliver Ames, Jr.), which in turn led to the creation of the transcontinental railroad

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Detail of the Long Shop. Photo courtesy of Chris Milford.

in the late 1860s. Much of the manual work was done with Ames shovels.

Developing Dilemma

The Ames Company left Easton in 1952 and since then sections of the complex have been leased out to various businesses for office space. Two years ago, local builders George and Robert Turner bought the complex and proposed the new development under Chapter 40, the state's affordable housing law. Filing under Chapter 40 allows developers to ignore many local zoning laws and landmark designations if at least 25 percent of the housing units are considered affordable.

"The law is well intentioned, obviously. But in this case it's an invitation to disaster," wrote Robert Campbell, *Boston Globe* architecture critic. "This would be the first time that anyone has used the law to demolish a building that, like the shovel works, is listed on the state registry of historic structures."

Developer Robert Turner emphasizes that these old factory buildings were always undergoing alterations and many of the interiors have been gutted. "There are mill buildings all around the state that have been converted to other uses," Turner told the *Boston Globe*. "You need to do something with the buildings."

Part of the proposed changes call for removing the central section of the Long

Shop, the oldest and most prominent building, to allow emergency vehicles to circulate more easily. One half of the Long Shop will then be incorporated into a new building, so it will not be visible in any meaningful way.

Turner insists that "all the stone will absolutely stay and become an integral part of the project," but he is missing the importance of retaining the exteriors, foot print and historic character of the site.

Benefits of Historic Preservation

In response to the proposal, the Friends organization (which includes descendants of the original shop owners) hired the architectural firm Utile to come up with a counter proposal to help spark discussion and negotiations. Their historically sensitive alternative plan calls for reducing the number of apartments from 182 to 155, but substantial tax savings could be available to make sure the project is profitable.

Jay Wickersham, a consulting lawyer and architect to the Friends, explains that the Turners would need to work closely with the National Park Service and the Massachusetts Historical Commission to take full advantage of these historic preservation tax benefits.

The new design would turn the closed compound into an open complex and retain the historic facades, making them visible from other buildings, including the Library and Town Hall across the street. Existing buildings could accommodate 199 apartments and a new structure could add 36 more units. The Turners have not yet commented on this alternative proposal.

Even with the advantage of Chapter 40, the project still needs to get over several hurdles before it is approved. The project has recently been reviewed by the local Zoning Board, focusing on water and traffic issues. Permits for waste-water treatment will involve the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and trigger review by the Massachusetts Historical Commission under the Massachusetts Historic Preservation Act. That leaves some time and opportunity for the local community and others to partake in the process and make their voices heard.

The Friends organization and their supporters hope to continue communicating with the developers and open up a

more meaningful dialogue that will help steer this project in the proper direction. Ames shovels helped build America and bind the nation together after the Civil War; their place in history deserves to be respected and preserved.

If you would like to express your support of the Friends of the Historic Ames Shovel Works at North Easton or get more information and updates on this project please contact: Jay Wickersham, e-mail jw@noblewickersham.com, phone 617-491-9815; or Chris Milford, e-mail cmilford@mfa350.com, phone 781-431-2400.

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