The Mill City.

Lowell’s nickname only tells part of the story. Yes, the physical structures—the majestic, imposing brick giants built by Appleton, Boott, Jackson and crew—and preserving them—are a key piece of the city’s story, but not all of it.

There is what lured investors to build America’s first planned industrial city—the 36-foot drop of the Pawtucket Falls on the Merrimack River and its energy-producing potential. The canals built to drive the factories around which the city was born. There is the wildlife—the herons and bald eagles, deer and beaver that inhabit the urban scene.

And, most importantly, the people. From the Yankee farm girls and Irish immigrants who worked in the mills, dug the canals, and formed a community in the mid-1800’s to those who have followed them to Lowell through its ups and downs: immigrants from French Canada, all parts of Europe, Central and South America, Southeast Asia, Africa, India and elsewhere who may not have any family connection to those who worked in the mills and built the city, but have added their patch of fabric to its ever-growing quilt.

Since its inception in 2000, The Lowell Heritage Partnership (LHP), a coalition of representatives from nearly two dozen organizations, has held true to its vision: to preserve and enhance Lowell’s natural, built, and cultural heritage through community partnership. It serves as a facilitator of community conversations, one bridge between Lowell National Historical Park (LNHP) and the community, and a keeper of the past with one eye on the future.

True to the values of community organizations that preceded it, the LHP carries the torch lit by visionaries like Paul Tsongas, Patrick J. Mogan, Lydia Howard, Brendan Fleming, Lillian Lamoureux, and Peter Stamas who believed in Lowell’s potential when it was at its lowest point and fought to preserve its story while building its future, even when people thought they were crazy.

“LOWELL WAS AN ETHNIC CITY AND AN INDUSTRIAL CITY, AND THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM SAYS YOU SHOULD SHED BOTH OF THEM. I WAS LOOKING FOR A WAY TO GIVE RESPECTABILITY AND DIGNITY TO WHAT WE ARE AND WERE.”

— DR. PATRICK J. MOGAN
One of the city’s most important mill complexes, the Appleton Mills, vacant and neglected for years, was headed for a date with a wrecking ball. Joan Fabrics, then operating in the building that is now the Loft 27 residences, was interested in expanding onto the Appleton Mills site and building a dye house.

Proponents argued the mills were a fire hazard and threatened Joan Fabrics’ business. The City Council was asked to redraw the boundaries of the Downtown Historic District, removing the Appleton Mills from Lowell Historic Board oversight, allowing for demolition and redevelopment without additional review.

Preservationists like Fred Faust, former Executive Director of the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission (LHPC) and Stephen Stowell, administrator of the Historic Board, did not want to see the Appleton Mills go the way of the Dutton Street boarding houses, razed in the early 1960s. They began to organize.

Community leaders convened at the 1760 Spalding House, originally the Moses Davis Inn, to craft a public response. Stowell recalls going into the meeting with the mindset of establishing a preservation-focused non-profit along the lines of Historic Seattle or Historic Boston, an advocacy group that could provide revolving loan funds. However, as the night progressed, it became clear that the coalition that was forming had an opportunity to be not only about historic preservation, but also about protecting and promoting natural resources and culture.

At the time there was, as long-time board member Paul Marion puts it, “a gap in the community infrastructure.” The legislative authority of the federally funded and staffed Lowell Historic Preservation Commission had expired five years prior, taking away what had become a critical public forum for discussion on preservation and park matters. “The LHPC had funding, staff and legal preservation mandates. When it was dissolved there was disarray in the preservation area,” recalls LHPC board member Marie Sweeney. “There were individuals, organizations, and institutions like the National Park Service, the Lowell Historical Society, Human Services Corporation, Lowell: the Flowering City, Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust, and the like that had concerns and a vested interest in the concept of preservation of all kinds but there was no ‘neutral ground’—as Dr. Patrick Mogan used to call it—to get together for discussion, planning and action.”

The mission of the LHPC had been “To tell the human story of the Industrial Revolution in a nineteenth-century setting by encouraging cultural expression.” It was about buildings and the people in the buildings. For 17 years, it was the organization that insured the “Lowell” in LHP stayed true to the community. It was the local complement to the federal authorities that held decision-making powers over the future of the city’s past.

At the same time, the Flowering City charrette organized in the late 1990’s by the Human Services Corporation had put a focus on preserving and beautifying the city’s natural environment. The meeting at the Spalding House, prompted by the threat to the Appleton Mills and attended by many leaders who had been involved with the LHPC and the HSC, led to the birth of a new organization built to incorporate the missions of those that came before it—the Lowell Heritage Partnership.

“At the LHPC’s motto is ‘Caring for Architecture, Nature, and Culture—that sums it up,” Marion says.

And what became of those Appleton Mills? The City Council took no action on removing them from the Historic District. However, eventually, two of the distressed buildings were demolished. The rest of the complex was taken by eminent domain by the City as part of the $800 million Hamilton Canal District redevelopment project and sold to master developer Trinity Financial, which invested $62 million in creating 135 artist live/work units at Appleton. The work in the area continues.
NEIGHBORHOOD HISTORIC DISTRICTS

By 2005, the city had managed to preserve and redevelop a good deal of the historic mills and other structures in the downtown, but historic homes in the neighborhoods beyond the downtown remained without protection. That was made very clear when a wrecking ball tore through the 107-year-old Alexis Sargeant House in the city’s Belvidere neighborhood. The developer who had purchased the 2.2-acre YWCA/Rogers Hall complex had planned to clear the parcel in the Rogers Fort Hill District for a 10-lot townhouse development.

Resident Michael Ready, with assistance from Marion and then-LHP staffer Mehmed Ali, led the charge to expand the Historic Board’s powers to include control over demolition of historic homes (those 50-years-old or older) and design review powers over new construction within the city’s eight neighborhood historic districts. The districts, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, include: Andover Street, Belvidere Hill, Rogers Fort Hill Park; South Common, Tyler Park; Wannalancit Street, Washington Square; and Wilder Street.

On the night of July 12, 2005, members of the LHP joined other supporters of historic preservation in packing the Council Chamber at City Hall. In the days leading up to the meeting the feeling in the city was the council was not keen on supporting the expansion of the Historic Board’s powers.

Twenty speakers addressed the City Council, some persuading them with passionate speeches about preserving the history and culture of the city’s neighborhoods and others with blunt common sense. “If you don’t do something to approve this modest approach, you’re screwing us,” artist John Greenwald, a former Lowell Sun editor told the council. “Make a small change that will make a big difference.”

“After the parade of speakers, the councilors one by one spoke in favor and then voted unanimously,” Marion recalls of that July night. “It was a triumph of community organizing.”

“I think that vote was important not only by preventing 24-hour demolition for these interesting properties but also for declaring to the entire city that the neighborhoods are just as historically important to Lowell’s story as the downtown is,” Ali says.

Look around the city to see the impact expanding the Historic Board’s oversight has had in the last decade, Stowell says. “You wouldn’t have the quality of construction and design that is seen today in areas like Fort Hill.”

In 2003, with funding from the Theodore Edson Parker Foundation, Greater Lowell Community Foundation, and Lowell National Historical Park, the LHP published Lowell’s Special Places: Exploring the Neighborhoods.
THE LOWELL BELL

In the 19th century there were no Google calendar alerts, alarm clocks or radio bulletins to mark the top of the hour. There were bells. Residents of 1800’s Lowell relied on the clanging of the metal to mark when the work day started, when it was time to break for lunch, when it was time to head home or go to church. Bells were used to spring fire and police crews into action.

But, over the years as technology advanced, the old bells were retired from service. One found its way to the city’s Centralville neighborhood where it spent eight decades as a planter. The gigantic bell, flipped over and partially sunk into the earth in front of the Draper family’s Jewett Street home, where it had sat since 1923, was unearthed by a crane and donated to the LHP in 2004.

Five years and $25,000 later, the restored bell, mounted on a stone base, was unveiled at the renovated 500-square foot V-shaped lot at the corner of Central and Prescott Streets donated by Eastern Bank as a memorial to the mill workers of Lowell.

Historians believe the bell, created by the Naylor Vickers Company of Sheffield, England, in 1860, was used at the Old Market House at 40 Market Street and served as a fire alarm before the Palmer Street firehouse (now Fuse Bistro) was built. The Old Market House was a market and then the city’s police station.

PUBLIC MATTERS

In 2009, the Lowell Plan, a local economic development group, in collaboration with Lowell National Historical Park, launched an intensive six-month civic engagement and leadership course for those who live and/or work in Lowell, grooming the next generation of leaders. The program boasts more than 125 alumni, a diverse mix of fifth-generation Lowellians and newcomers, from bankers and politicians to social workers, artists, educators and park rangers.

It has become a place to delve into how Lowell’s past molded its present. And a place for a diverse group of people with ties to and a passion for the city to form alliances to continue moving Lowell forward.

The Lowell Heritage Partnership provides funding for one scholarship per year for the program, a gesture, though modest, which may prove to be the LHP’s most important long-term contribution.

RESTORATION OF THE LINCOLN MEMORIAL

In March 1908, Lowell school children began collecting pennies.

Their goal was to raise enough money to erect a monument to Abraham Lincoln to be unveiled on what would have been his 100th birthday on February 12, 1909. They collected $1,000 of the $2,500 needed, with the assistance of the Lowell Board of Trade, the remainder was collected from individuals and organizations.

Due to an accident that damaged the monument’s base, the unveiling at the corner of Chelmsford and Lincoln Streets was delayed until Memorial Day, 1909, in a ceremony attended by many of the city’s Civil War veterans. Mayor George H. Brown said at the ceremony: “I am glad that I have the opportunity as mayor to accept this monument from the school children rather than from some millionaire. They have taken this godly man as their example, and may the memory of Lincoln, may the memory of you Civil War veterans and your comrades who have passed away, ever inspire them.”

One hundred years later, battered by time, the unforgiving New England weather, and the exhaust of decades of passing vehicles, the 8-foot-tall granite and bronze monument to the Great Emancipator was in bad shape. The Lowell Heritage Partnership stepped up to partner with the City of Lowell, donating $2,500 of the $4,000 needed for Skylight Studios Inc., of Woburn, to restore the monument to its past glory.

On June 10, 2010, students from the nearby Lincoln School joined city officials, state legislators and LHP members in rededicating the monument to the great orator and leader, who as a Congressman visited Lowell to stump for presidential candidate Zachary Taylor and who as President during his nation’s most turbulent time preserved the union.
The buildings are the bones of the Lowell story. The high-ceilinged brick mills that powered America’s Industrial Revolution, the Italianate-style former gaslight building reborn as a museum and now a law firm, the Federal/Greek-revival style home turned museum where one of America’s most treasured artists was born. Downtown Lowell is an architecture lover’s playground.

In 2002, Doors Open Lowell, a collaboration between the Lowell National Historical Park, the Lowell Historic Board, the Cultural Organization of Lowell and the Greater Merrimack Valley Convention and Visitors Bureau, was launched, providing one weekend each May for people to snoop around in more than two dozen historic buildings, many of which are not usually open to the public.

WHEN THE LOWELL HISTORIC BOARD WAS CHALLENGED BY SOME WHO QUESTIONED SOME OF THE POLICIES, THE BOARD AND LHP TEAMED UP TO TURN THIS THINKING AROUND THROUGH ADS IN THE LOCAL PRESS AND SOCIAL MEDIA AND PUBLIC DISCUSSIONS. AFTER SEVERAL “LISTENING SESSIONS” WHERE THE PUBLIC, BUSINESS OWNERS, AND BANKERS WERE INVITED TO AIR THEIR VIEWS AND LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW THE BOARD FUNCTIONS, A COOPERATIVE AND CONSTRUCTIVE SPIRIT WAS RESTORED. WE ALWAYS VALUE PUBLIC INPUT.

—RICHARD E. LOCKHART, CHAIR, LOWELL HISTORIC BOARD

DOORS OPEN LOWELL

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The LHP serves as Doors Open Lowell’s fiscal agent.

Doors Open started about the same time the LHP was becoming visible in the community,” Stowell says. “Doors Open became like a coming out party for the LHP, legitimizing and solidifying it as an organization.”

The Nelson Mandela Overlook

“As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I’d still be in prison.”

—NELSON MANDELA

“BEING A PART OF THE LHP HAS GIVEN ME THE OPPORTUNITY TO SIT DOWN WITH INDIVIDUALS WITH DEEP KNOWLEDGE OF HISTORY. ONCE THINGS ARE CARED FOR, THEY STAND A BETTER CHANCE TO LAST FOR A LONG TIME. I CAN SEE POTENTIAL GROWTH, SINCE THE ORGANIZATION IS TAKING THE HISTORY TO THE COMMUNITIES AND SCHOOLS AND ALSO FORMING NEW PARTNERSHIPS. THE MORE WE TALK ABOUT THE PRESERVED HERITAGE, THE MORE WE STAND A CHANCE TO BUILD A HEALTHY CITY.

—GORDON HALM, LOWELL AFRICAN FESTIVAL FOUNDER AND MEMBER OF THE AFRICA AMERICA ALLIANCE

The Power of Preservation
The LHP has been the recipient of three major grants from the Theodore Edson Parker Foundation in its 15 years. The most recent, a $35,500 grant, was awarded in the fall of 2012 for the purpose of supporting a community planning process to better connect all residents of the city to Lowell National Historical Park’s tours, programming and events.

Over a 10-month period the LHP and Park facilitated community planning meetings, as well as more focused discussions between Park officials and specific groups including members of the Southeast Asian, Latino, African and “Young Professional” communities—designed to assist Park staff in creating new programming as well as providing better outreach in promoting existing offerings. Park Rangers also got out into the community in new ways, taking to the Bellegarde Boathouse on the Merrimack River on summer evenings, offering free boat rides and park information. This program, despite some weather-related obstacles, reached 1,500 people, many of whom had never engaged with the Park. A program on Lowell’s Cloth Traditions brought 11 cultural groups together at the Boott Cotton Mills Museum to share the textile traditions of their homelands.

The LHP’s “Roots, Realities and Dreams” video contest called on people of all age groups, ethnicities and backgrounds to tell their “Lowell story” in a four-minute video, proving “history” doesn’t have to mean something that happened in 1840.

“Remembering Peter Stamas: A Celebration of Community and Service,” brought together members of the community who were involved since the 1960’s and 70’s in Lowell’s renaissance with Lowell’s emerging leaders at the Whistler House in November 2012. A life-long educator and activist, Stamas founded the Human Services Corporation with Dr. Patrick Mogan in the 1970’s and was instrumental in the creation of the LNHP. He died in 2002.

Lowell’s history of innovation was made relevant to today’s flourishing entrepreneurial environment through the LHP’s “The Entrepreneurial City” panel discussion at the Wannalancit Mills. Panelists drilled into Lowell’s rise to the top of industrialized America, revisited the computer boom of the 1980s, and explored today’s cultural and start-up rich scene.


—PAULINE GOLEC, LOWELL FESTIVAL FOUNDATION

PARKER FOUNDATION GRANTS

Jennifer Myers

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I’m pleased to be part of an organization that’s thinking about the built environment as it relates to both the cultural experience in Lowell and its abundant natural resources. It’s rare that all three would be thought of together. I like the path that LHP is on now. Discrete, successful projects with a clear link to our mission that bring people together in a thoughtful way.”

— Jane Calvin, Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust, Executive Director

The Lowell Heritage Partnership’s success hinges on its holistic approach to preservation.

Instead of the typical preservation society made up of architects, planners and historians dedicated to protecting physical structures, the LHP brought environmental crusaders and the cultural community into the fold.

“It’s more like what life is: people in the buildings on the land. It all goes together,” Marion says.

Its impact can be seen in concrete ways: the restored Lincoln Monument on Lincoln Street, the old bell downtown, the restored mayors portraits at City Hall. But, it is also there in more subtle ways, providing a support group for Lowell National Historical Park, providing a forum for activists to work together, and acting as an advocate for programs like Doors Open Lowell, Public Matters, and neighborhood initiatives.

“Its real value is as a group of community leaders who can advocate for historic preservation, urban design, community character, landscapes and culture,” says Aucella. “No one else is playing those roles as well as LHP.”

Board members Marie Sweeney and Stephen Stowell both said while grants and partnerships have allowed for part-time staff and have funded some projects, the LHP’s biggest struggle has been securing consistent funding.

“The times when there has been a part-time staff person we have actually been able to solidify the mission and get out into the community more,” Stowell says.

“I’m hopeful that a sponsor or partner will commit to annual financial support to stabilize the future,” Sweeney says. “I’m hopeful that others will join in committed stewardship for the preservation of the natural and built environments and of our cultural heritage.”

Visit our website to make your donation to the LHP.

www.lowellheritagepartnership.org