

Bowdoin Mill Island:

Historic Preservation and Contextual New Buildings

by Randall Arendt

Location: Main Street, Topsham, Maine

Development Period: 1998-2007 (?)

Developer: Fore River Company, Portland, Maine

Redevelopment of the “Lower Village” in Topsham, Maine (population 8,800) had been on the minds of local officials and residents for many years before this project, located on two small islands in the Androscoggin River, was initiated by the Fore River Company in Portland in 1998.

As early as 1987, a group of interested citizens formed the Pejepscot Mill Restoration Associates to preserve the historic mill buildings on what was variously known as Mill Island or Great Mill Island. Nine years later, in 1996, the town published *The Main Street Vision: A Plan for Reclaiming Topsham Village*. Among its recommended design standards were the then-new ideas of maximum front setbacks and minimum building heights, concepts that were illustrated in drawings reproduced in the plan from the first edition of *Rural by Design* (1994). Fortunately, the developer’s plans generally fit in well with the goals of this study.

By 1999, the most significant of those buildings, dating from 1868 – the oldest surviving pulp paper mill in the state -- had been sensitively restored and updated for modern uses such as offices and restaurants. Several other new buildings, designed to complement the historic architecture and enhance the streetscape, have been constructed, but the process took eight additional years to complete. Although a long wooden mill building, dating from the early 20th century, burned down during the redevelopment process, its disappearance opened up views of the lovely older brick mill from the roadway and Androscoggin River bridge, and also created space for essential parking. Throughout the application, permitting, and post-approval process the Topsham’s development authority (TDI, or Topsham Development, Inc.) provided support and assistance. It had also helped set the stage for it, by participating in the early planning studies preceding the project application. TDI’s leadership was critically important to the project’s success. Together with the town, it funded a \$50,000 feasibility study for the mill, including a structural report, market research, and permitting requirements, which became the backbone for the developer’s due diligence.

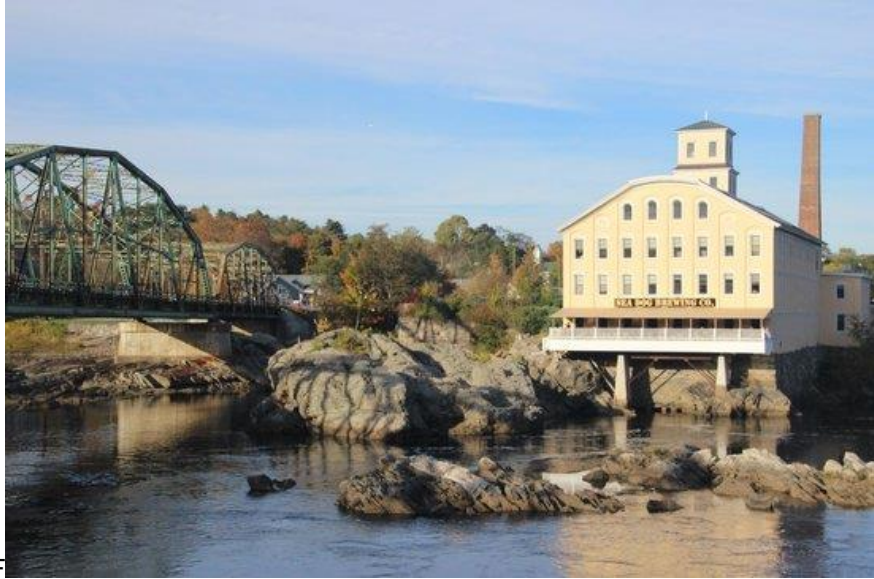
A village-like cluster of six buildings completes the scheme. Of these structures, two are wooden clapboard buildings dating from the 19th and early 20th century (Figure 3), since restored and repurposed as professional offices. Three others are new clapboard structures designed to complement the historic architecture. Located on three lots subdivided by the developer, they were built by local business owners intending to provide for a variety of commercial uses, perhaps with residential above. Although fully occupied, the intended variety never materialized: all the units have become dentists’ offices. Their proximity to Main Street reinforces the village atmosphere that the original planning committee wanted to create. Although the buildings are entered from their sides, and their Main Street elevations have been well-landscaped, a design opportunity was missed in not providing a more formal appearance with doorways facing the street. However, their siting successfully created a traditional village form because no parking is located along Main Street, instead being provided (and mostly hidden) on the opposite sides of these buildings.

The centerpiece of this cluster is the handsome “Red Mill” (Figure 4), an energy-efficient Class A office block built in 2007 and designed contextually to harmonize with both the nearby Pejepscot Mill and the

1891 Cabot Mill on the opposite riverbank in Brunswick. Containing 30,000 SF of leasable floorspace on four levels, with spectacular river views, and constructed in 2007, it was designed by Smith Reuter Lull Architects and is notable for its commanding central tower entrance. Another special architectural feature is its white third story designed achieve three objectives: to minimize perceived building height as seen from the street, to recall the glazed “monitors” atop many historic mill buildings, and to admit maximum daylight to the interior. B



Figure 1: Clockwise from the upper right are the “Red Mill” (2007), the Administration Building (1902), the Cleveland House and barn (1835) and, on the left, three pad sites sold by the developer to local businesspeople who located their buildings close to Main Street in accordance with Topsham’s requirements for modest front setbacks and rear parking.



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Figure2: The original brick pulp paper mill, built of brick in 1868 atop a granite foundation, features decorative segmental arched windows and a square tower rising from its gambrel roof. It provides outstanding river views from its southern and eastern windows, and the south-facing outdoor deck is very popular among patrons of the Sea Dog Brewery restaurant.



Figure 3: Two wood-framed historic buildings have also been restored and now support office uses. On the left is Cleveland House and barn dating from 1835, containing 3,100 SF of office space in a residential building. On the right is the original administration house dating from 1902, now occupied by a law firm. (Photos courtesy of the Fore River Company)



Figure 4: The Red Mill, built in 2007 and containing 30,000 SF of office space, both dominates and anchors the village cluster on the northern end of the project site. (Photo courtesy of the Fore River Company)