

## Survivor from another era

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### History buffs zero in on Marshfield's Hatch Mill as a link to the town's past

By Johanna Seltz, Globe Correspondent | May 2, 2010

MARSHFIELD — The building is held together by wire cables, its windows boarded up, its upstairs floor off level by almost 2 feet. But local history buffs looking at the Colonial-era Hatch Mill see beyond its decrepitude, envisioning a place where students of all ages can come to learn about the area's past.

"You can read about things in books, but when you go into a place like this, you actually see and feel and smell the presence of people" in history, said Roy Kirby, who heads the Hatch Mill Restoration and Preservation Group. "This is the real McCoy."

The National Park Service has recognized the Hatch Mill's significance by placing it and Marshfield's surrounding Two Mile district on the National Register of Historic Places.

When the preservation group got word of that designation last October, said Kirby, "We went to the superintendent of schools and the School Committee, because we feel our main goal is education. We gave them all polished nails from the mill."

Kirby's group postponed a more widespread announcement of the National Register designation until this spring to coincide with a new fund-raising drive.

Since it bought the property in 2004, the Hatch Mill preservation group has been working to restore the long-closed mill and eventually open it to the public. A contractor specializing in historic preservation has stabilized the structure, and students from Marshfield High School are rebuilding a nearby carriage shed, using traditional timber frame techniques.

Last month, Kirby asked the Conservation Commission for permission to build a parking lot large enough to accommodate visiting school buses, and to rebuild the dam that provided water power for the mill. To help finance the ambitious plans, the new fund-raising campaign will run through Sept. 1, with Scituate Federal Savings Bank matching donations.

Hundreds of willow and alder saplings that would be ripped out as part of the Hatch Mill improvements would be used as roof thatching material at the reproduction Colonial settlement at Plimoth Plantation, Kirby said.

"I think it's great," neighbor Ronald Messer said of the project.

Messer lives in the original Hatch homestead, the Red House, up a dirt road from the mill.

"Way back 40 years ago," he said, "I almost bought the mill, when [Robert] Reed bought it for \$5,000 from Decker Hatch. I wanted to be sure it was in good hands.

"It's the only existing mill left on the North River. All the other mills — and there were many — are gone. There are certain things you like to preserve for future generations to appreciate," Messer said.

The Two Mile district was a tract of land — 1 mile wide and 2 miles long — deeded to colonists along the North River in 1640. Walter Hatch, son of a wealthy English wool merchant, settled on 260 acres of Two Mile in 1647, carving his initials into the trees to mark his turf.

He was struck by lightning and died in 1699, but not before establishing the farm that would become home to nine generations of Hatches. By all accounts, they were a cantankerous lot.

"Isolated and unpoliced by either Plymouth or Boston, [the Two Mile settlers] were fiercely autonomous river people

who continually split their churches, argued over baptism rites and land boundaries, built houses, and set about defending them against natives, other immigrants, and natural and supernatural disasters,” wrote Messer’s daughter Sarah in her memoir-history, “Red House, Being a Mostly Accurate Account of New England’s Oldest Continuously Lived-in House.”

The area became known as Hatchville for the large numbers of intermarrying Hatches living there along the North River and Two Mile Brook. The family built four mills on the brook — all powered by water from man-made ponds.

The structures included the still-standing Hatch Mill, which opened as a grist mill in 1752 and was converted to a sawmill in 1812. (Messer said the original grist stone was fished out of the mill pond years ago and now decorates his patio.)

The mill, which was expanded in 1859, provided timber for the thriving shipbuilding industry along the North River. More than 1,000 vessels launched on the river; the most famous was the Columbia, the first ship to circumnavigate the globe under an American flag.

During the Civil War, the mill produced boxes for shipping shoes to Union soldiers in the South. And the mill continued to cut lumber until 1965 when Decker Hatch, who also raised rhubarb in underground pit houses, retired at age 85.

Jack Braithwaite credits the Hatch Mill with reviving the Marshfield Historical Society, which formed in 1913 but was dormant for a number of years until a “Save the Mill” campaign stirred interest. The society bought the property in 1968 and managed to keep the mill from total disrepair, but was unable to raise enough money to do major work, Braithwaite said.

More than 30 years later, Kirby, a carpenter and woodworker, learned about the mill and pledged to save it as a working museum. He formed the Hatch Mill Restoration and Preservation Group, which bought the mill for \$1 and persuaded the town to spend \$120,250 in community preservation money on the project. The Massachusetts Historical Commission provided \$50,000 more.

Earlier this year, Kirby was at the Bridgeway tavern trying to encourage a friend to contribute to the cause when another diner overheard the conversation. David Stinebeck, a historian and former college administrator, was new to town and fascinated with the history of the mill. He’s heading the latest fund drive.

“The goal is to get it up and operating for educational purposes,” Stinebeck said. “I imagine all ages coming here and studying. I think it’s going to be a fabulous place.

“This is a historical site in the same spot it always was. It operated for hundreds of years, unlike Plimoth Plantation, which is a reproduction, or Sturbridge Village, which is old buildings moved from other places. This is really authentic. I think it’s a really important site,” he said.

*Stinebeck can be reached at [dstinebeck@concordantcon-sulting.org](mailto:dstinebeck@concordantcon-sulting.org). More information about the Hatch Mill restoration project is available at [www.hatchmill.org](http://www.hatchmill.org). Johanna Seltz can be reached [seelenfam@verizon.net](mailto:seelenfam@verizon.net). ■*