

A new era Historic Cheney Mills Dye House revamped into beautiful apartment complex

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MANCHESTER — In a brief history of the Cheney silk mills published in 1937, founding partner Ward Cheney said that the company from time to time found it necessary to build cottages or homes to house new workers on a rental basis.

He said they were often sold “on reasonable terms” when the employee had become established at the mill.

“Labor troubles for many years were absolutely non-existent and throughout the whole history of the firm have been at a minimum,” he was quoted as saying before his death in 1876, describing the “happy mill and homogenous community.”

At the Cheney Mills Dye House at 190 Pine St., a classic brick and timber mill built in 1914, workers dipped silk into large vats of chemicals for coloring. Following the sale of the company in the 1950s, the 89,000-square-foot building sat dilapidated. It was rampant with pigeons, its roof was caving in, brush was growing wild, and debris was everywhere.

On Friday, the factory opened its doors after more than three years of planning and \$20.6 million in construction to renovate the vacant building into apartments for a new generation of families and workers. It features 57 units with one, two, or three bedrooms, ranging in size from 1,000 to 1,500 square feet.

The Dye House is the last of the Cheney Mills to be converted into apartments, now taking its place as housing alongside the Clocktower, Velvet, Ribbon, Yarn, and Weavers mills. The total number of units is around 1,000, 380 of which project developer Konover Residential, a subsidiary of Simon Konover Co., owns and manages.

The \$20.6 million project received \$10 million in federal stimulus funding and \$5.2 million in historic tax credits mandating that the developers retain the building’s original characters.

In one first-floor unit, where the 22-foot ceilings once featured silk as it dried, a large white loading dock door was refurbished and now will be a unique mainstay in a renter’s living room. Twenty of the original hand-hewn fir beams were salvaged.

On the second floor, the former home of a carpenter’s shop, the 14-foot high rooms feature industrial-era “mushroom” columns. Exposed brick walls once plastered with lead-filled paint were restored. Large, expansive, energy-efficient windows were updated and painted in the traditional “Cheney green” tone.

Jim Wakim, president of the Simon Konover Co., said the revitalized structure at Cooper Hill and Pine streets will usher in a new era while also honoring “the legacy of the Cheney Mill

and all that it represented.”

“If only these walls could tell stories,” he said, calling the project a “success of a public-private partnership.”

The company has received more than 190 applications, which it has started to review. Tenants will move in next month.

Every apartment includes full size washer and dryers, a dishwasher, a stove, refrigerator, central air, microwave, a garbage disposal, and gas heat.

Gov. Dannel P. Malloy praised the preservation of the mills, saying that Connecticut has not built enough affordable housing and that a “problem for the next generation” has been created for workers young and old. He has committed in his budget \$100 million for the construction of new housing and the renovation of existing housing.

Rents will range from \$250 to \$1,000, with the amount determined by income levels. One-quarter, or 15 units, will be set aside for people at or below 25 percent of the region’s median income, and another 15 percent, or nine units will be leased to people at or below 50 percent of the median income.

The remainder will go to those earning up to 60 percent of the median household income, which now stands at \$49,426.

“When Connecticut gets moving again, housing like this is going to be key to our success,” Malloy said. “We need to be able to guarantee access to a great workforce in the state of Connecticut.”

He said that with construction costs less than they were five years ago, the state needs to take the lead in developing affordable housing.

Malloy said he came to the opening ceremonies so that “communities understand that we are prepared to be a better partner than perhaps we have in the past and that we are going to put additional resources” into affordable housing.

He called the project “another feather in the cap for Manchester” and was presented with a plaque made from one of the beams taken from the mill.

Dara Kovel, chief housing officer of the state’s Housing Finance Authority, said the project has “all the bells and whistles” that housing officials “really want to see more and more of across the state.” She commented on the reuse of the building, the successful environmental cleanup, and the pedestrian friendly location.

She said the project created 240 jobs, 140 during construction, while an additional 100 will be created once tenants have moved in. Kovel said the apartment complex would generate \$2.6 million in revenue for the state and brings \$31 million in “economic development activity.”

Jim Carter, a development consultant for Simon Konover Co., told town historian Vivian Ferguson, once an executive secretary at the mills and a historical consultant on renovation: “I hope you will see this project as one of your crown-jewel accomplishments.”

When she entered the building moments later, Ferguson said: “This is the most exciting one

for me," she said out loud. "This building sat here for so long that I kind of lost hope over the years."

Deputy Mayor Leo Diana called the project a successful partnership in which local, state, and federal governments worked together to bring an old building "back to life in all its glory."

"The town and the Cheney Brothers National Landmark District has greatly benefited from turning our deteriorating structure into homes for working families that are safe and sound, close to parks, schools, and transit," Diana said.