

## Edenton: New Life for the Edenton Cotton Mill

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In September 1995, Edenton was devastated when Unifi, a manufacturer based in Greensboro, announced that it was closing the Edenton Cotton Mill, the town's largest employer since 1898. The loss of 100 steady manufacturing jobs was enormous for this community, whose total population was only 5,000. The employees at the Cotton Mill were tremendously productive and many were long-time employees; but their skill levels were low, as is the case with most textile jobs, and the town was presented with the daunting task of helping the displaced employees find new jobs. In addition to the increased unemployment, the closure represented a huge loss in property tax revenue: Unifi was one of the top five taxpayers in Edenton. The closing announcement also included a plan to either demolish or sell the mill houses in the Mill Village. Retirees who had lived in the Mill Village all their lives were faced with the very real prospect of being evicted from their homes. The thought of having to help relocate 25 families made many of the town leaders realize how severe the "ripple" effect of the plant closing would be.

As soon as the closing deadline was narrowed down to Christmastime of that year, officials began brainstorming their response to this calamity. Town leaders feared that the mill closing would quickly lead to a blighted neighborhood, but they had even more concerns about the demolition of the Cotton Mill and mill houses. Fortunately, a town councilman was also on the Board of Directors for Preservation North Carolina (PNC). Councilman Sam Dixon swiftly initiated contact with PNC, a state-wide non-profit, and town and county officials met with state elected representatives to solicit support for their request that Unifi donate the property to PNC. Public/private partnerships were quickly forged,

and by December 1995 local leaders had convinced the owners to donate the Cotton Mill and its 44 acres to the non-profit PNC—saving the mill and Mill Village from demolition, and preserving Edenton's strong sense of place.

Following the donation, the Town worked in conjunction with PNC to rezone the property from "Industrial Warehouse" to "Residential and Neighborhood Commercial," retaining the mixed-use nature of the neighborhood but allowing for rehabilitation and reuse. Edenton's Historic Preservation Commission and Planning Board worked with PNC to nominate the property to the National Register of Historic Places, so that potential buyers would be eligible for tax credits for renovation. The Town Council unanimously favored these changes, and as evidenced by the number of people attending the public hearings, there was overwhelming community support for both initiatives.

The Town and PNC worked tirelessly to entice and partner with private investors to rehabilitate the mills and Mill Village houses. In order to bring the public into decisions about the type of development that would occur in the mills, the two parties held public information sessions, entertainment events, and public hearings inviting citizen input. Proposed occupants for the Cotton Mill and Peanut Mill buildings included the Chowan Arts Council, the public library, offices, a brewery, condominiums, a café, or all of these. The Town initially thought the best use for the Cotton Mill would be a public arts facility, but this plan was not financially feasible. Shortly thereafter, PNC began marketing the mill to private developers; several developers attempted but failed to identify viable uses for the building.

In 2001, a North Carolina doctor named Thomas Wilson proposed turning the Cotton Mill into residential condominiums. Dr. Wilson had first been introduced to the situation while working in Chowan Hospital's emergency room. When he conceived of developing the mill as residential property, he sought the advice of



**Edenton Mill Village.** Phillips Street, before (left) and after (right) the preservation project.



**The Edenton Peanut Mill.** The 1909 structure is shown before (left) and after (right) its 2006 renovation.



PNC President Myrick Howard and ultimately took the idea to the Town. Public input was sought regarding Edenton's contribution to such a project, including the design and location of a boardwalk that the Town would install along Queen Anne's Creek adjacent to the Cotton Mill and Mill Village. Edenton's Preservation Commission and Planning Board worked with Dr. Wilson to rezone the mill and approve the proposed renovations, and the Town Council again unanimously supported the plans. Consequent to the successes with the Cotton Mill and Mill Village, a local developer submitted plans to rehabilitate the Peanut Mill for reuse as a brewery, but ultimately the building was better suited to office and commercial space.

The Town of Edenton has a long history of valuing public input and participation, and the Edenton Peanut & Cotton Mills Adaptive Reuse Project provided yet another opportunity for the town's citizens to be involved in determining the fate of their built heritage. The aim of the Reuse Project was to put the two vacant mill buildings and the Mill Village back to viable use as commercial and residential contributors to the town's economy. Instead of tearing down these structures and making way for new subdivisions or commercial development, the Town and its partners decided that reinvesting in the old industrial buildings and tenant houses would further strengthen the community and maintain its sense of place. In a partnership with the non-profit community and the private sector, the Town invoked smart growth principles by emphasizing the dense, fine-grained development of earlier decades. The Town Council decided that creating a mix of commercial and residential uses where industrial and residential uses had co-existed in the past was vital to maintaining Edenton's town character, and the Council achieved this through re-zonings and conditional use permits.

Since the end of 1995, when the first decision was made to renovate and reuse the Cotton Mill, the community has felt the positive impact of this effort. The once-empty Peanut Mill has been purchased for rehabilitation; the Mill Village houses have realized a tenfold increase in value as 55 out of 57 original houses have been sold and six infill lots have been developed as well; and the Cotton Mill in its rehabilitated state represents a \$13 million addition to the tax base. The community's leap of faith into historic preservation, based on the principles of smart growth, has translated into expectations that new developments will achieve the same standards for walkability, compact design, and useable open space.

Through the reuse and rehabilitation of the mills and Mill Village, this project resulted in the preservation or creation of 23.5 acres of open space—over half of the properties' 44 acres. Wetland areas were preserved along Queen Anne Creek behind the Cotton Mill, and the public received its first opportunity to access these areas through the construction of public boardwalks. Behind the Peanut Mill, a creek bed that had been filled and covered with an old metal warehouse was restored, and there are plans to build a wetlands enhancement area in that location. Along the rear of the Mill Village houses, easements were created to preserve 30-foot-wide open areas the length of each block; these were originally spaces for Cotton Mill workers' tenant gardens. These easements, along with the preservation of the mill workers' ball field, not only protect open green areas, but also preserve communal space for social interaction. In addition, the protection of the Mill Village street-grid pattern and the creation of sidewalks connecting the renovated mills and the town center help promote regular exercise as well as an

appreciation of Edenton's historic identity.

The key components of this project's successful implementation were:

- (1) forging a partnership between local government, the non-profit community, and the private sector;
- (2) focusing on preservation, rehabilitation, and reuse; and
- (3) involving the local community and the community at large.

At the time, rehabilitating and reusing abandoned mills was a new concept in North Carolina, and a startlingly new idea in the northeastern part of the state. Particularly innovative at that time in this region was the idea that local governments could and should partner with non-profits and the private sector on major projects.

Viewing the abandonment of the Edenton Cotton Mill as an opportunity for economic development, town leaders were visionary in seeking partners to rehabilitate and reuse the mill and Mill Village rather than pursuing demolition of the sites. From the start, the Town and its partners felt it was important to have the community decide what type of project should be established on the mill properties, and they held information sessions and public hearings to that end. Once a strategy and idea was formed for how to reuse the properties, the

partners worked to inform the larger community about the project, generating interest and fueling property sales. The success with the Cotton Mill spun off within the community as the Town, PNC, and private investors launched another initiative to rehabilitate the Peanut Mill. Outside the town limits, the Cotton Mill's success set an example for two other mill restorations: Glencoe Mills, of Burlington (another PNC project), and Rocky Mount Mills in Rocky Mount.