
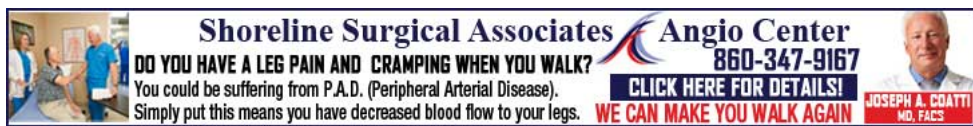


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News

66 High Street: development rich in history; Ivory button maker, lollipop factory, WWII anti aircraft parts

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(Arnold Gold-New Haven Register) Kenny Horton, owner of Residences at 66 High Street, is photographed on 6/5/2015 in front of a factory built in 1884 being converted into luxury condominiums in Guilford.



GUILFORD >> Nestled in a hidden corner, where South Fair Street meets High Street in downtown Guilford, sits a building and a parcel of land rich in local and national history.

"I knew it was a great piece of property," says 66 High Street LLC President Kenny Horton. "Even if we cleaned it up over time and held onto the piece, the value was here."

While the property at 66 High St. is tucked away discreetly and many local residents, other than the immediate neighbors, may not know it exists, the newest owners are taking great care in preserving the natural beauty of the adjoining marshland and historical richness of the 130-year-old dome shaped brick building. Many of the units offer sweeping marshviews.

Even with plans to create 57 luxury residential units, selling upwards of \$2 million, the developers are uniquely aware of the historical significance of preserving the main brick building.

"What we plan on doing is keeping the historical mill as is," says Horton.

In addition, along the rear of the Mill Building "is one of Connecticut shoreline's largest Quonset hut structures," according to <http://www.66highst.com>.

"It's got character," says Robert Grzywacz, project manager and designer for DeCarlo & Doll (architecture studio). "It's got these big wood trusses, big arched wood trusses, in there and it's going to be a series of loft buildings."

Character and historical significance dominate this prime piece of real estate, which is aptly named 66 High Street.

Claire Oppel White, 67, fondly remembers the site as a lollipop factory, Toy Pop.

"I was very young, but I remember standing on the corner looking longingly over at the factory," says White, who grew up a few houses down on South Fair Street.

"The watchman would see us children and come across the street and give us all a lollipop," she recalls "We always felt so special and privileged. How such a nice gesture made such an impression on us. They were simpler times."

The lollipop factory was just one incarnation of the industrial site, with a history dating back to the 1800.

"The present brick building at 66 High Street was constructed as a replacement factory (1884) by the Enterprise Company, which was a manufacturer of ivory buttons," according to Joel Helander's "A Treasure of Guilford Places."

"Charles E. Hull relocated his father's factory to this building in 1893, manufacturing wagon hulls and wagon wheels. In 1908, the business was purchased by one of the largest manufacturers of wheels in the United States, the Archibald Wheel Company of Lawrence, Massachusetts."

Fast forward to early to mid-1900, when the site served an important role in World War II.

Carl Balestracci, former first selectman, police commissioner, principal, teacher and coach, grew up in the shadow of 66 High St.

Balestracci's family homestead, backing up to 66 High St., was built on a ¼ acre of land gifted to them by Richard H. Whitehead, the owner of the New Haven Clock Company, which occupied the site in 1937.

"He (Whitehead) put an ad in the paper for a ditch digger for Saturday and he said he would pay \$7 for the Saturday day's work," recalls Balestracci.

Taking on that job led to full time employment for Balestracci's father, plus a plot of land on which to raise his family. "Mr. Whitehead never let him go."

One of his father's jobs was to rehabilitate an old Bigelow boiler, which remains on the site to this day.

"In the old part of the building, the old front part, there's still this long pulley system," says Balestracci. "And then when the men came in to work in the morning they would hook up their great big belts...and that would run their machines."

The pulley system remains, intact, inside the building and will be incorporated into any future living space.

At that time, however, The New Haven Clock Company was a bit of a misnomer.

"Instead of making watches and clocks, they made time fuses for anti aircraft shells," explained Balestracci.

"These anti aircraft shells were manufactured here, but shipped to England," says Balestracci of 1938-39 before the United States was even involved in the war.

"We weren't in the war yet, so this was part of what was loaned to England to fight the war."

As changes occurred at home and abroad with America's entry into World War II, 66 High St. changed with the times.

What was going inside the fenced in piece of property was essential government business.

During WWII, New Departure took over the building to package ball bearings, made in Meriden, to be shipped overseas.

Balestracci explains that "everything that was in the war, wheels, airplane propellers, even the top secret Norden Bombsite, which was like a simple computer today" used these ball bearings.

"These ball bearings went into everything that turned," he adds.

Since most of the local men were away at war at this time, "the workforce was over 200 women, mostly from Guilford and the surrounding areas," says Balestracci.

Due to the extremely sensitive nature of the work the large, open back room of 66 High St. was the central location of their assembly line.

"This room was the first air-conditioned room in Guilford. It was the first dust free room in Guilford," notes Balestracci.

This environment was essential to the sensitive nature of the work.

"They did quality control and packaging so that these ball bearings could be shipped," he says. "They couldn't have any foreign articles or anything on them, they had to be totally dust free.

"When they (the employees) came in, they had to go through a narrow corridor with blowers that would blow dust off their shoes and stockings and undergarments and skirts and everything else," Balestracci explains.

"Then they had to put on these smocks, covering their hair, covering their bodies, covering their shoes and then they had these dust free gloves."

Looking back, Balestracci says this prime piece of real estate was a main player in WWII.

"This had over 200 women, alone, working there, but they had men as well and there was big wire fence around it and barbed wire and they had guards, they had armed guards to protect it."

David Greenberg, president of Clinipad Corporation, which occupied 66 High St. for 30 years, is credited with preserving the historic and charm of the building.

"It was like an antique to him," remembers Balestracci. "He had rehabilitated the whole thing.

"He's the one who sandblasted all the WWII white paint off, to highlight the brick.

"He just fixed the whole place up and it was beautiful."

And now, a new chapter for 66 High St. begins.

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