

*A Lowell Success Story:  
From Boardinghouse to Brewery*

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*As a teenager in the mid-80s, I remember standing with other Lowellians as a massive mill fire burned for days. Through the eyes of a youngster, it seemed as if the whole city, my city, was disappearing. My father and I watched, along with hundreds of others who stood silent, respectful, amidst the inferno of bricks. Those buildings which made Lowell famous crumbled and eventually squatted in ruin . . .*

Never did I believe that years later a revitalization project created through the pooling of resources by businessmen and entrepreneurs would help bring Lowell from a dilapidated graveyard of abandoned mills into a shining example of why Lowell is finally becoming a world-class city.

There are many ways to capture the changes that have taken place in Lowell. One important way – the way I have chosen – is to gather information about one business and one team of business partners that saw opportunities in Lowell’s old mills and created the Brewery Exchange as a way to combine the city’s history with business opportunities. David Elias and his partner Frank Hurley had seen the ups and downs of a great community. Businesses came and went. A pall was cast over the city. Lowell needed a jump-start to put it back on the map and to become more than a synonym for failure.

Elias and Hurley had a vision to turn a giant, dusty warehouse, a site that seemed to echo with the memories of mill girls that once resided there, into a vibrant meeting place for locals to gather and socialize.



*Courtesy of Lowell National Historical Park.*

With little more than a dream and some pooled cash, Elias and Hurley devised a plan to bring about active community involvement in a tired, industrial city. In 1993, they opened the Lowell Brewery Exchange. Housed in the Suffolk Mills,

on Cabot Street in Lowell, Massachusetts, the Brewery Exchange reflects the beginnings of a revitalization project that sustains itself even today.

## *Lowell - A City in Ashes*

**B**reathing life into any of the mills was and continues to be a risky venture. Lowell's economy had already begun a steady decline in the early 1900s as the textile output of the south began to surpass that of New England. This period of economic stagnation lasted through 2/3 of the century until the 1970s when Lowell undertook a massive revitalization effort directed at finding a new economic direction to replace textile mills and the industry on which the city's economy had previously been based.

Other factors in the 1970s contributed to Lowell's rebirth. The University of Lowell emerged from the union of Lowell Tech Institute and Lowell State College. In addition, between 1977 and 1987, nearly \$1 billion dollars in federal, state, and private funds were invested in restoring Lowell's historic mills, canals and row houses.

During this time, Lowellians began to feel a renewed sense of hope that their small city 26 miles north of Boston would rise from the ashes. The city needed a sustainability of programs that would effectively bring new business and life to a dying area.

In the mid 1970s Wang Laboratories, then a leader in computers, brought to the city an industry that many hoped would lead to a bright technological future.

In 1979, the Lowell Plan was developed as a private, nonprofit economic development corporation with the goal of diversifying the areas manufacturing base, attracting institutions and enhancing the quality of life.

Partnerships were formed, effectively bringing about the Lowell National Historical and State Parks ultimately producing a full rehabilitation of the entire mill and canal system to include exhibits and attractions. In 1984, the Suffolk Mills came to be a part of the Wannalancit Technology Park that started as a retail park; Banners Restaurant occupied the portion of the boarding house which is known today as *The Lowell Brewery Exchange*.

## *Recovery and Renewal Of A Once Forgotten Asset*

**B**y the late 1980s, however, the boom had already started to wane. Many high technology companies began closing their doors or started to relocate elsewhere. Banners Restaurant eventually failed and was closed down in

the fall of 1990.

This is when Elias and Hurley purchased the parcel of land from the FDIC and in November 1993 opened the doors of the *Lowell Brewery Exchange* to the public. To hear Elias tell it, all odds were against him and his partner from the very beginning. Many people who had seen the rise and fall of Lowell were skeptical that another business venture could sustain itself when just three years earlier the eating establishment Banners had folded.

Elias and Hurley didn't see it that way. They saw not only an opportunity for a new, fresh business, but also saw a way to help their beloved city carry on for generations to come. The area beyond Fox Hall (a part of the University of Massachusetts at Lowell), was an area at the time that was perceived as unsafe and derelict by both tourists and residents alike. What Elias and Hurley saw was an opportunity - ultimately a new leadership of sorts for those willing to bring about change.

### ***Best Practices and Giving Back to the Community***

The goal of their project was to convert the Historic Boarding House so that it could become the Lowell Brewing Company, a microbrewery dedicated to the European tradition of quality and consistency in brewing. Looking back, Elias says he quieted the naysayers with his response that they should "wait and see." The neighborhood, however, continued to look like a vast wasteland. Prostitution, drug trafficking and homelessness were commonplace. Broken bottles littered the area. The owners needed not only to build a thriving business, but also to ensure the safety of their clients.

What the owners did next was innovative. With patience and determination, they began leasing out an empty lot next to the Brewery. They felt this was a way to give back to the community while drawing people into the heart of the mill city. They repaved the land and added in a security station as well as lighting to ensure safety in the area. Currently the lot is being used by UMass - Lowell during the week. Since the installation of the Tsongas Arena and LeLacheur Park patrons can now enjoy a Riverhawks/Lockmonsters game and then come over to the Brewery for dinner or a drink.

Patrons of the Brewery also become more interested in the city's history and since the Brewery is a converted mill it peaked its curiosity. Natives and tourists alike now take canal tours and visit the Lowell National Historic Park to find out more about Lowell's past.

Despite negative grumblings throughout the city, as well as obstacles with the neighborhood –Elias and Hurley refused to deviate from their vision and therefore developed the following problem solving tactics. Their problem solving included other steps:

- ❖ Establishing an identity and image for the entire complex that included the Lowell Historical Background
- ❖ Overcoming any negative misconceptions about the Lowell location.
- ❖ Giving back to the community as well as creating a sense of community among city residents.
- ❖ Making the area around the Brewery Exchange clean of crime and mishap.

As the area around the Suffolk Mills have slowly become revitalized, the area around Fox Hall and the Suffolk Mills no longer evoke a sense of foreboding. People have begun to forget about the wasteland of a different time. People old and young alike are now venturing out into this part of the city. With the area safer and cleaner, the campus of University of Massachusetts at Lowell has been able to expand far beyond what anyone could have imagined years earlier.

The Brewery Restaurant and Pub started as a unique, multi-faceted, casual theme restaurant, sports pub and entertainment center. Having grown to see Lowell change and metamorphose, I not only see an area where friends gather, but rather a testament to the will of the people who years earlier were told that the enormity of the project was something that just could not be done.

The owners of the Brewery also give back to the community by donating to local areas of need including the House of Hope, Camp Paul, the Boys and Girls Club, D.A.R.E and the Lowell Transitional Living Center, among others, thus providing themselves as good neighbors by contributing to children, adults and those in need.

### *Realization of the Vision: Rising From the Ashes*

The concept behind the starting of the Brewery Exchange was to create a one-stop entertainment complex that would serve the leisure requirements of a wide range of individuals. The owners needed to create a project that appealed to people on a number of levels; however, they mostly targeted the University and middle age groups.

The owners marketing plan included the following goals:

- ❖ To ensure the consumer remembered where they were;
- ❖ For the consumer to understand what is available onsite;

- ❖ To draw the consumer back prior to their departure from Lowell or to draw them back with a full schedule of events.

With these goals in mind they designed their business. The major tenant, the *Lowell Brewing Company*, occupies the first floor Dye House and creates the main attraction. This design allows the intriguing features of this manufacturing structure to be visible as a vantage point for tenants of all buildings. Brew houses were a natural phenomenon during the early 1990s, which the owners planned to capitalize on, and Lowell was the perfect city to do this. Not only a revitalization, but a plus for the economy as the owners created 90 new jobs. In collaboration with the park service, the Brewery is now a stop on the historic tour of Lowell.

### *Community and University Partnership Opportunities*

Since the Brewery's inception various partnerships have evolved, primarily, the partnership between the citizens of Lowell and the University due to the revitalization of the surrounding neighborhood.



This is a classic example of how community psychology is used. Elias and Hurley found a productive way to give back to the community while making their business an integral part of the city. The Brewery is not only a gathering point; it is also truly a part of history. The Pub actively participates in Lowell and neighboring community events, including, The Lowell Folk Festival, Oktoberfest and Winterfest, among others. The Brewery also works with a number of non-profit agencies, thus proving to be good corporate citizens and striving to be a business that the city can be proud of.

### *Sustainability and Evolution of the Vision: Bringing Back the Venice of America...*

People stop by the Brewery before taking in a play at Lowell's Merrimack Repertory Theatre, a baseball game at LeLacheur Park or after seeing a hockey game played at the Tsongas Arena, named in honor of another Lowell visionary, Paul Tsongas.

The population of Lowell is also strong in its identity and population. Known now as a "melting pot" city, many cultures have merged today with a strong

presence of people from Cambodia, Laos, Latin American and other parts of the world. Old mills now have working exhibits. Downtown is thriving. The cobblestones streets are alive with artists and ethnic shops all vying to become part of a growing, vibrant city and Elias and his partner can feel a sense of pride that they were instrumental in bringing about change.



*The Lowell Brewery Exchange today*

Lowell has once again become a place that is visited by planners from other cities and even those from other countries who use Lowell as an indicator of how best to re-birth cities and towns. They want to follow Lowell's example of using public-private partnerships to bring new life to their communities.

*The memory of that fire long ago no longer haunts my past. Lowell is once again a city filled with hope and promise.*

## Resources

1. Interview with David Elias- Co-owner of the Lowell Brewery Exchange
1. <http://www.nps.gov/lowe/loweweb/slides4.htm>
2. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/robinson-lowell.html>
3. <http://www.thelowellbreweryexchange.com>