

HISTORIC NEW ENGLAND

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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ON JUNE 27, HISTORIC NEW ENGLAND COMPLETES FIRST STAGE OF ITS TRANSFORMATIVE VISION FOR HAVERHILL WITH OPENING OF NEW HISTORIC NEW ENGLAND CENTER

The new center – whose inaugural exhibition, Shoe Stories: Past, Present, Future, celebrates Haverhill's history as a former shoemaking capital in the US – will help catalyze culture-led revitalization across the city and region.



The site of the future Historic New England Center. Photo courtesy of Historic New England.

Haverhill, MA – On June 27, Historic New England – the oldest, largest, most comprehensive independent historic preservation organization in the US – will open the first publicly accessible space in its new Historic New England Center in Haverhill, Massachusetts – the first major public gateway to the organization's extraordinary collections and a significant new cultural destination for the Greater Boston area.

Located within a historic former shoe manufacturing complex adjacent to Haverhill's Amtrak and commuter rail stations, the Center will introduce visitors to the largest collection of New England artifacts in the world, and serve as an entry point to Historic New England's 38 exceptional museums across the region. The opening marks the first public phase of the organization's broader vision for the Historic New England Center for Preservation and Collections – a vibrant, transit-oriented cultural district that will bring together preservation, exhibitions, partnerships, and community activity to support the ongoing revitalization of downtown Haverhill.

"Opening the Historic New England Center allows us to bring the remarkable stories preserved in our collections into conversation with the public in new and dynamic ways," said Vin Cipolla, president and CEO of Historic New England. "This project expands access to New England's history while creating a welcoming place for people to gather, learn, and explore the region's past and future."

"We have an audacious vision for Haverhill," Cipolla continued. "With 38 museums across the region, majestic farms and landscapes, and award-winning programs for all ages, we believe it's time to open our collections headquarters to a wide audience. The Center exemplifies the spirit of historic preservation, collection care, and community revitalization that Historic New England stands for, and bridges past and future while stimulating local economic growth."

Strategic planning is now underway for this expanding cultural venue and living archive, which is anticipated to draw tens of thousands of visitors each year.

A New Visitor Experience

Designed by Boston-based designLAB Architects, the Historic New England Center will be a dynamic, state-of-the-art space inviting innovation and engaging visitors with Historic New England's collections, exhibitions, and public programming in new ways.

Occupying the entire ground floor of the historic Burgess Building, one of two historic factory buildings forming the core Historic New England campus, the Center will feature major rotating exhibitions drawn in part from Historic New England's holdings of more than 125,000 decorative arts objects and 1.5 million archival documents, including photographs, manuscripts, architectural drawings, and ephemera.

This new space will feature enhanced technology, flexible public programming and convening space, and the Center's inaugural exhibition: *Shoe Stories: Past, Present, Future*.

A Historic Industrial Site Reimagined

The Center is located within twin early-20th-century reinforced concrete factory buildings that once formed one of the largest shoe manufacturing complexes in the world. These buildings – part of the Hamel Leather National Register Historic District – reflect Haverhill's history as a global center of shoe production.

Historic New England has maintained a presence in Haverhill since the late 1980s, when it began renting storage space for its collections – drawn by the city’s proximity to Boston, its concentration of nearby Historic New England properties, and the availability of relatively affordable, underutilized real estate.



Design provocation renderings by, from left, TenBerke, Brandon Haw Architecture, and Höweler + Yoon.

In 2006, the organization purchased the historic Lang Building, along with an adjacent vacant lot. For decades, the building functioned solely as a storage facility, with no public-facing presence. That changed in 2023, when Historic New England acquired the neighboring Burgess Building, which created an opportunity to reimagine the site as a cohesive cultural venue. That year, the organization engaged three internationally prominent architectural practices – TenBerke, Brandon Haw Architecture, and Höweler + Yoon – to begin envisioning the site’s future as a cultural campus woven into the urban core. The inspirational concepts from this architectural provocation helped put the overall development initiative into high gear.

The opening of the Historic New England Center marks the first step in reactivating both the Lang and Burgess Buildings and advancing a broader vision for culture-led urban revitalization in downtown Haverhill.

“These buildings – the largest concrete shoe factories in the world at the time – were key components of Haverhill’s identity as the ‘Queen Slipper City,’” said Carissa Demore, Vice President and Chief Policy Director of Historic New England. “Preserving and publicly reactivating these incredible spaces will help ensure that the stories that shaped Haverhill’s history will continue to be central to its future.”

A Gateway to New England’s Past – and Its Future

The Center is designed not only as a destination, but as a gateway to Historic New England’s broader work across the region and as a model for how preservation can contribute to community life.

The Center sits within Haverhill’s growing and vibrant downtown – one of the liveliest districts within Essex County, which has seen 15% population growth over the past 20 years.

Essex County is home to a \$1.1 billion per year tourism industry, and some 2.7 million people visit its historic towns – including Salem, Gloucester, Rockport, and Newburyport – every year. Eleven Historic New England properties (its largest concentration) are located within Essex County, which creates nodes of tourism centered in Haverhill.

Through exhibitions, programs, and partnerships, the Center connects visitors with the people, places, and stories that have shaped New England's past, while also supporting new creative activity and public engagement.

The project has already garnered significant public support, including more than \$1 million through three successive earmarks and two Destination Development capital grants. This investment, along with the support of Haverhill's legislative delegation, reflects growing recognition of the Historic New England Center's potential to strengthen the state's economy, expand regional tourism, and catalyze long-term cultural and economic activity in Haverhill.

The project contributes to the ongoing revitalization of downtown Haverhill by:

- Bringing new cultural activity and visitors to the city;
- Supporting local businesses and regional tourism;
- Creating jobs through construction and ongoing operations;
- Advancing climate goals through the adaptive reuse of historic buildings;
- Expanding access and inclusion by broadening the stories represented in Historic New England's collections;
- Expanding educational opportunities through public programming, school partnerships, and community engagement initiatives.

Noted Cipolla, "As a cultural leader, we have a rare opportunity to generate social capital, strengthen community cohesion, and use culture as a catalyst for a more sustainable, livable, and resilient city. We look forward to being an active partner in the continued revitalization of downtown Haverhill."

Comparable initiatives around the world have demonstrated the power of culture-led redevelopment, including the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, MASS MoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts, and Powerhouse Arts in Brooklyn, New York, among many others nationally and internationally.

"In this way, Haverhill serves as a proxy for many post-industrial cities across the Northeast – places where historic assets and cultural investment can help catalyze a new chapter of economic and civic life," explains Cipolla.

Inaugural Exhibition: *Shoe Stories: Past, Present, Future*

The Center's inaugural exhibition, *Shoe Stories: Past, Present, Future*, will bring many objects into public view for the very first time. The exhibition explores the history and future of shoemaking and design in the US, with a particular focus on New England and the pivotal role Haverhill once played in the global shoe industry.

Co-curated by Michelle Finamore, Lorna Condon, and Nora Ellen Carleson, the exhibition spans more than two centuries of footwear design, from 18th-century shoes made by Boston cordwainer Winthrop Gray to contemporary sneakers produced by JEMS, the first Black-owned sneaker factory in the country. One highlight is the work of internationally acclaimed designer Stuart Weitzman, who began his career in Haverhill at Historic New England's Lang Building, where he worked on his father's shoe line, Mr. Seymour Shoes.

The exhibition highlights the work of makers of color and Indigenous designers, explores the sustainable future of shoe design, and examines the cultural impact of sneakers – an American innovation with deep ties to New England's manufacturing history.

About Historic New England

Historic New England – founded as the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities in 1910 – is the oldest, largest, and most comprehensive independent preservation organization in the United States. Historic New England welcomes the public to 38 exceptional museums and landscapes, including several coastal farms. The organization operates a major collections and archives center in Haverhill, Massachusetts, and has the world's largest collection of New England artifacts, comprising more than 125,000 decorative arts and objects and 1.5 million archival documents including photographs, architectural drawings, manuscripts, and ephemera. Engaging education programs for youth, adults, and preservation professionals, and award-winning exhibitions and publications are offered in person and virtually. The Historic New England Preservation Easement program is a national leader and protects more than 129 privately owned historic properties throughout the region.

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