By Angie Orenstein

Brimming with artifacts, maps, drawings, and interactive exhibits about the history of the Middlesex Canal and the Billerica and Bedford railroad, The Middlesex Canal Museum and Visitor Center in North Billerica may soon have a new home but first that new home needs to be gutted and given a new roof.

The Middlesex Canal Association (MCA) is looking to move their museum and visitor center out of the Faulkner Mills, where they pay monthly rent, and into an unused 40’ by 60’ building across the street which is owned by the association and will give them 50 percent more space than they have now. The building was used during the late 1800s and 1900s by the Talbot Mill as a finished cloth warehouse and it’s located alongside the Billerica Falls at the dam in Summit Mill Pond, right next to the spot where the first shovel full of dirt was dug in 1794 to start building the canal.

It is believed the warehouse roof, which brandishes a giant gaping hole, may have been damaged when a flywheel shattered inside the Talbot Mill in 1944, spraying debris in all directions. Initial repair costs are estimated at about $100,000 and would include hiring an architect to develop a plan, constructing a bridge to access the building, and rebuilding the roof. With community support, the MCA hopes to be able to start work this summer. Future plans also include the creation of a Middlesex Canal Heritage Park on a section of land across the street from the warehouse.

“The Middlesex Canal had such a great influence on the country,” said Middlesex Canal Association President Jeremiah Breen, a retired engineer who joined the association about six years ago. “In those days water transportation was very efficient versus horse and wagon.”

Breen explained that with the development of the 27-mile long canal, which was built between 1793 and 1803 and ran between Boston Harbor and Lowell connecting the Charles River and Merrimack River, 9 foot wide boats were able to haul up to 20 tons of cargo between the manufacturing mills and the city. It took about eight hours for the boats to travel from Lowell to Boston and about 12 hours from Boston to Lowell, as opposed to many days and several trips to haul shipments by land. The canal served as a commercial network for Lowell, Chelmsford, Billerica, Wilmington, Woburn, Winchester, Medford, Somerville, and Charlestown and was largely responsible for the development of many major cities and towns during the Industrial Revolution.

The dam at Summit Mill Pond was the high point of the canal, supplying water to operate the locks of the canal, of which there were 20 total. The locks controlled the water levels to allow boats to pass through the canal at different elevation points.

In 1967 the canal was designated a national historic engineering landmark by the American Society of Civil Engineers and it remained operational until 1853 when the development of the railroad slowly took over transportation.

In Billerica, there are nine acres of land owned by the Middlesex Canal Association, much of it accessible to the public. In several areas throughout town, people can walk the towpaths - the path running alongside the canal that allowed workers and horses to tow boats by pulling them with ropes. Many of these areas are marked with signage and are rich with historical significance. For instance, even though it is now on dry land, the large stone structures of the Shawsheen Aqueduct, built in 1801, can be viewed from just off Rte. 129 near the Wilmington line, and the towpath that Henry David Thoreau and his brother travelled with a rowboat in 1839 can be walked by nature enthusiasts who don’t mind a trek through the woods on a rugged path.

“I do think history is interesting. It’s vitally important to know your roots. Billerica has a lot of history. It’s really nice to know the early roots of America started here,” said Marlies Henderson, a member of the Middlesex Canal Association who is originally from the Netherlands and has lived in Billerica with her family for 17 years. “There are a lot of trails.”

Last weekend, Henderson, her husband, and Breen all worked together to clear brush away from the warehouse that will be the future home of the museum and Henderson is currently in the process of hand delivering letters and making phone calls to local businesses seeking donations to help pay for the renovation of the building. There are no state or federal museum construction grants available but there are some town grants they can apply for in the fall and the fundraising committee is also working on other ideas such as a banner on the new building, informational postcards to hand out, and possibly a kids’ history contest to help raise awareness.

Once the renovations are completed Breen hopes to have two large watercolor murals painted on the sides of the new building, one of which depicts a boat being pulled by a horse and man who are walking along the floating towpath that stretched across the canal in that very location.

Breen quoted a report by the US Secretary of the Treasury to Congress in 1808 that said, "The Middlesex canal, uniting the waters of [the Merrimack River] with the harbor of Boston, is however the greatest work of the kind that has been completed in the United States."

Breen proudly added, “The greatest work had its groundbreaking in Billerica.”

The Middlesex Canal Museum, which has been opened for 13 years and is completely volunteer-run, is located at 71 Faulkner Street and is opened Saturday and Sunday noon to 4:00 p.m. Admission is free. Group tours are given by appointment and meeting rooms are available to rent. The Middlesex Canal Association hosts guided walking and bike tours of the canal and other events throughout the year. Visit [www.middlesexcanal.org](http://www.middlesexcanal.org) or call 978-670-2740 for more information or to make a donation to help pay for renovations of the new location.

Donation checks made out to The Middlesex Canal Association/New Museum may be mailed to: Howard B. Winkler, Treasurer MCA, 1010 Waltham St., Apt. 205, Lexington, MA 02421.