



Municipal District of St. Stephen's Cotton Mill Monument in Milltown

In 2004, Bill Eagan, a native of Milltown launched a book entitled “An Oral History of the Milltown (St Croix) Cotton Mill”. The mill operated from 1881 to 1957. Communities on both sides of the international border in the St Croix Valley depended economically for many years on the wood and lumber industries. It was clear though, by the 1870s that the lumber supply had been largely depleted and a cross-border group was formed to develop a new industrial base for the region. The Canadian government of the day had adopted a policy to promote industrial development with low tariffs for imported raw products but high tariffs for finished goods. The policy led to a wave of cotton mill construction nationwide, with several built in New Brunswick alone. The Milltown mill was clearly one of the largest in the country. Like all mills of that era, it experienced its ups and downs throughout its life, but the post-war years saw periods of exceptional growth and employment. In the early 1950s the mill employed over 1,000 workers performing skilled jobs at high wages. Unfortunately, the 1950s also ushered in a period of loosening trade restrictions which led to a slow but certain decline of the cotton industry in North America. The mill closed permanently in 1957. Eagan’s book sparked a renewed interest in the history of the mill and its impact on the economy, social life and diversity of population in the wider community. Suggestions were then commonly heard that a permanent structure should be erected to honour those many generations who laboured in the mill. As the idea gelled, Eagan decided to take on the project and in 2005 formed a committee with Marion Bain, Ann Breault, Sandra McCrossin, Hugh McKnight and Paul Sweeney. It was decided early on that the work would be a Worker’s Monument with statues of male and female workers placed in a proper setting and built in a location with a commanding view of the former mill site.

Michael Eagan, a former “Milltownner” and highly successful theatre set and costume designer created the monument blueprint with its circular brickwork and tower with a roof replicating that of the former Post Office in Milltown. Housed within the tower is the original mill bell which rang out the rhythms of life, tolling at shift change, noon hour and even town curfew. After a competition Peter Bustin, a renowned artist of Halifax NS was chosen to design the statues. The committee then set about the difficult work of fundraising, with the budget growing to nearly \$250,000. It received excellent logistical support from the Town of St Stephen, the provincial and federal governments, businesses, unions but proudly the biggest share of funds was donated by private citizens. Considering the size of the workforce, nearly everyone in the community was impacted in one way or another by the mill. This explains how the monument project resonated so well with locals and accounts for their loyalty and inspiring generosity. Construction began on the brickwork in early summer 2007, managed by Bruce Bradford and his crew who did magnificent and creative work. The statues were cast in Ontario with their mounting taking place in late September. The monument was unveiled in a public ceremony by former mill workers Marion McKay and Don Thompson, with special guest Lieutenant Governor Chaisson. In a book entitled “Labour

Landmarks in New Brunswick, authors David Frank and Nicole Lang, professors at UNB and Université de Moncton respectively described the monument, saying “This large bronze statue is one of the most impressive works of public art in the province and one of the few to pay tribute explicitly to the men and women who worked in the mills and factories of the province”; wonderful praise for the beautiful memorial in our town.