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Shaping Up

Renovated Flat Iron Building home to coffee, ice cream and healthy-living shops

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Editor's Note: Part of an occasional series focusing on the re-use of old mills and buildings in the Tri-Community area.

SOUTHBRIDGE — The Flat Iron building on the corner of Hamilton and Crane streets gets its name from the way it is shaped, as if the two streets are pressing against its triangular frame.

Even 120 years ago, when the building was still new, it was a unique structure. Then, in the late 1800s, it held a watchmaker and jeweler, an optician and a café. Pictures from the turn of the century show hitching posts for horses in front of the curb.

Today, the building is home to a coffee shop, ice cream parlor, healthy-living store as well as three apartments. There are parking spots for cars instead of horses.

In 2004, the Flat Iron was refurbished by husband and wife team Margaret Morrissey and Gabriel McCarthy.

"Margaret and I got involved because we didn't want to see it demolished," McCarthy said. "It had fallen into decay and decline."



Courtesy photo The Flat Iron Building, seen here in 1889, looks today much like it did then. "If you look at a photo of Southbridge in the mid-1800s," says Flat Iron Building co-owner Gabriel McCarthy, "many of the



Shawn Kelley photo
The historic Flat Iron Building, seen here, was built in the 1800s. It was refurbished in 2004 by husband and wife team Margaret Morrissey and Gabriel McCarthy and now is home to three businesses and three residential apartments. (*click for larger version*)

buildings have survived, which makes it a very, very unique place." (*click for larger version*)

Over five to six years, they worked to bring back the building's former glory, finally painting the outside a vibrant yellow.

Both Morrissey and McCarthy said they feel renovating historic buildings — as opposed to tearing down the old to build modern buildings — serves a purpose to the town.

"If you look at a photo of Southbridge of the mid-1800s, and you look at it today, many of the buildings have survived which makes it a very, very unique place," McCarthy said.

Morrissey said the historic buildings lend character to the town that many other towns lack.

"We firmly believe Southbridge is the place to invest in," she said. "[All of the buildings] have some elegance and are compelling and persuasive in some way."

The Flat Iron building was originally built by real estate developer Francis L. Chapin sometime before 1888, and then sold it to J.J. Delahanty, according to public library documents.

Another reason for restoring the building, Morrissey said, was to preserve it for future residents. A friend had told her, she said, "You're like a steward of the building. You have to pass it along to the next generation."

FLAT IRON INHABITANTS

John Polakowski, owner of the SCR café, moved his business into the Flat Iron building in December of 2004. He said the physical quality of the building was attractive to him.

"I think it's a nice looking building from the outside and the inside," he said. "I just like the look of it, and the uniqueness of it."

Polakowski, a Southbridge native, said he remembered when there was a barber shop, a spa, and another café and restaurant inside the Flat Iron space. Before his café opened, there was a tea shop.

New business owners Lorna and Rick Wilson, also a husband and wife team, are happy they made the move into the building last summer.

Their business, the Blue Thistle, offers a wide array of health-related services, from massages to reflexology treatments, vitamins and mineral supplements to healthy lunches and food items.

Rick, whose homemade roasted eggplant, dill, basil and goat cheese sandwiches have begun to have a reputation, talked about the new business as he stood behind his food counter Friday afternoon.

"We're excited to be part of the Flat Iron district," Wilson said. "It represents change, but it represents tradition as well."

Rick said the business owners inside the building worked well together by promoting each other's businesses to customers.

"We're only going to be successful if we're all successful," he said.

The Wilson's both have medical backgrounds: Lorna as a nurse and Rick as a clinical psychologist. They said they hope to share their medical and health knowledge with a friendly, customer-focused approach.

"It's beyond just being a health food store," Lorna said. "It's a resource to the community. It's really unique, and that's what we bring to the table."

Rick said, to him, a successful business means connecting with customers. To that end, he has surveyed several residents to find out what they are interested in.

"A lot of people are interested in turnover. We're interested in becoming a friend," he said.

Lorna also said she hoped the store would become a fixture in the building and of the community.

"We love the idea of being in Southbridge and being a part of this new development," she said by phone on Friday. "It's a wonderful opportunity and privilege."