

# BANGOR DAILY NEWS

## Hope replaces history in Howland: Company starts razing tannery building



Nick Sambides Jr. | BDN

Tom Pelkey of Eddington, an equipment operator with J.E. Butler LLC of Holden, spent most of the day watching for and helping gather recyclable debris at the former Howland tannery building on Thursday, July 26, 2012. *Buy Photo*

By Nick Sambides Jr., BDN Staff

Posted July 26, 2012, at 8:14 p.m.

HOWLAND, Maine — A wrecking ball attached to a large truck tire by a thick chain was hammering the thick concrete north wall of the old Howland tannery building as George Willett's dog Shadow jumped around in his lap on Thursday.

"I am just watching my mill leave me," Willett said quietly as he sat in his pickup truck. "I worked there for quite a few years. Lots of memories here."

The 80-year-old recalled his mother, Jennie, working there in the 1940s. Back then it was the home of Advanced Bag & Paper Co., and hundreds of others worked with her, he said.

But Willett wasn't all that sentimental about the place.

"I am glad to see it go. It was an eyesore," he said. "We ought to have some work around here."

Demolition and salvage workers from J.E. Butler LLC of Holden began demolishing the building on Tuesday for about \$259,000. They should have the massive building completely razed and the site cleared in two and a half to three months, company manager Joel Butler said.

"The fact that the building was pretty well deteriorated makes it come apart better," Butler said.

The tannery site is actually three buildings. As of Thursday afternoon, the front building was about a third gone from its north corner southward. Butler also had taken down a smaller building in the southern corner of the town-owned property.

The workers used two large cranes equipped with claws to pull down large sections of the building, depositing most of the remains in large trucks or Dumpsters for disposal or recycling. The concrete claw was enough to pull down the thick roof beams and roofing, but crane operators also used it to swing the chunky wrecking ball. The cranes' Caterpillar tracks moved easily enough over the masses of brick, concrete and wood, but the work, Butler said, is constantly hazardous.

"You got to watch out for falling objects," he said. "In this business it's very dangerous, because you are taking down structures that are 50 feet high and you can only reach 30. So when you have something that you are pulling on, you could have projectiles headed toward you at any minute."

Town leaders have been working for several years to get rid of the building, which Willett said closed as a tannery in 1972. For decades the tannery has been a blighted hulk at the center of town, symbolic of the town's economic doldrums. It eventually will make way for a fish bypass on the nearby Penobscot River and town leaders hope to redevelop the site as a commercial or manufacturing jobs producer.

"I think everyone in the town is very happy to see this coming down," Butler said. "I have been on other projects where the people from the historical society were unhappy about a certain building coming down, but here I think everyone is looking forward to having this gone. The selectmen from the town stop by almost daily and they are very happy about it, and we have seen quite an audience watching out back."

"None of them have been booing," he added.

Adele Martin felt the building's history most keenly. Among the dozen or so spectators gathered Thursday in a nearby lot, the 75-year-old, who notes proudly that she has lived in the same Howland house all her life, said she couldn't get over how different Howland was when the building was first built.

"The people who put that up probably worked in horse and buggy," Martin said.

Willett said the building was primarily home to three businesses over the last 100 years or so: first Advanced Bag, then Atlas Plywood. It was converted to a tannery in 1957, he said.

Martin blamed town leaders of decades past for not maintaining the building properly when the town first took ownership of it, but Willett said the structure wasn't fit to be much more than a tannery. Its ceilings were too low, he said, and it was rotten with chemicals. Town-hired workers hauled truckloads of contaminated soil from in and around the building a few years ago.

Now, Willett said, he wants to see what's next for the site.

"Let's see some jobs come back," he said.

<http://bangordailynews.com/2012/07/26/news/penobscot/hope-replaces-history-in-howland-company-starts-razing-tannery-building/> printed on July 27, 2012