

Story and photos
by Maria Buteux Reade



VERMONT HERITAGE

The Brooks House

Restoring the legacy of one of Brattleboro's historic cornerstones adds an exciting new chapter to Vermont's economic development.

BRATTLEBORO IS A TOWN OF STROLLERS, BOTH heifer and human. The town's condensed business district makes it ideal to wander the streets, stopping in at an eclectic mélange of shops, cafes, restaurants, and galleries. *Smithsonian Magazine* and *National Geographic* have ranked Brattleboro among the best places to live in America. And presiding over the corner of Main and High streets, the newly restored Brooks House anchors the busy junction at the heart of Brattleboro's National Historic District.

Built in 1871, the Brooks House became one of New England's

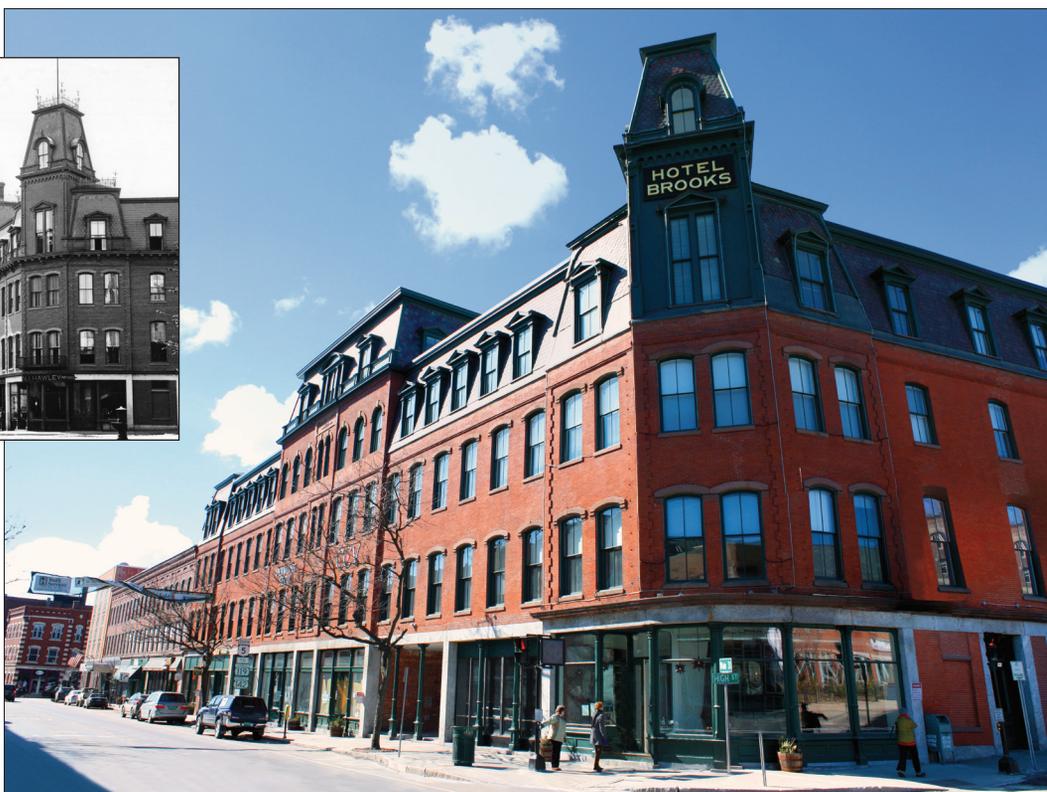
premier hotels, and possibly the largest Second Empire building outside of New York City. The five-story brick edifice with its slate mansard roof and unique square tower stretches across a quarter of the town's Main Street.

The hotel maintained its grandeur through the first half of the 20th century. Rudyard Kipling, who kept an estate in nearby Dummerston, played poker and enjoyed a few lagers in the tavern in the early 1900s. In the 1970s, the hotel was reconfigured as a mixed-use facility with 57 apartments and 10 businesses.

But all that changed on April 17, 2011 when a five-alarm fire



Restored to become the cornerstone of new Brattleboro commerce, the Brooks House retains for the most part the outward appearance it had as a grand hotel (inset above) in the late 1800s.





The aftermath of the 2011 fire, which was battled by fire departments from as far away as Greenfield, Massachusetts.

broke out at night and quickly consumed the fourth and fifth floors. Firefighters from three states responded to the call. Water damage devastated the remainder of the building, which was deemed uninhabitable. Demolition began within days as construction workers spent months removing charred debris and gutting the structure to its framework.

Despite some concerted efforts to revive the massive building, Brooks House devolved into an eyesore, blanketed with scaffolding, engulfed by chain-link fence, windows boarded up. For more than a year, the building sat empty, a troubling bellwether. Would Brattleboro passively accept a burned-out former icon?

Soon after the fire, Bob Stevens of Stevens & Associates engineering and Craig Miscovich of the law firm Downs Rachlin Martin met with the owner of Brooks House to assess the situation. The owner found the challenges too daunting and decided to put the structure on the market. However, Bob and Craig understood the landmark's significance and potential. "I couldn't live in this community and continue to walk past a hulking, rotting building in the heart of downtown," Craig said.

In the spring 2012, a year after the fire, Craig and Bob negotiated the purchase of the building from the previous owner and pulled together a development team consisting of brothers Drew and Peter Richards and their cousin Ben Taggard. These civic-minded local businessmen were willing to take the long view and do the right thing for the Brattleboro community, with no financial gain or possible incentive beyond goodwill.

Everyone agreed on the vision and each contributed his unique set of skills to the project. Craig served as the attorney and handled the financial intricacies along with Bob who brought 25 years of historical renovation experience to the design and engineering side of the project. Drew, Pete, and Ben work in The Richards Group, which specializes in insurance, employee benefits, and retirement and wealth management. Drew, a former banker, stepped up as the treasurer while Pete and Ben focused on marketing and communications.

The Richards family has a long history of community philanthropy in Brattleboro, supporting a range of nonprofit organizations and redeveloping commercial spaces throughout the town. "We grew up here and care about the health of this town and what it looks like. Our kids are now the fourth generation of Richards to go to school here," said Drew.

Bob added, "We may be the principal owners of the property but it took a grassroots effort to make this project a success,



Scaffolding on an immense scale allowed workers to access even the highest parts of the building's Mansard roof during reconstruction.



By mid-2014, with major work completed, work commenced on street-level facades and entranceways.



Vermont Governor Peter Shumlin (right, center) and Speaker of the House Shap Smith (left, center) presided over grand opening ceremonies in October 2014.



The newly opened office of the Oak Meadow Independent Learning Center within Brooks House.

starting with community investors and local businesses up to Governor Shumlin, Speaker of the House Shap Smith, and Martha O'Connor, Chancellor of the Vermont State Colleges Board."

The Brooks House development team had a cadre of behind-the-scenes backers including Mark Richards, patriarch of the Richards family, Larry Cassidy, Stephen Morse, and Jack Davidson. "We are fortunate to have this group of smart and dedicated people offering practical advice and creative solutions for fundraising, operations, public relations, and community investing. So many people have demonstrated faith and commitment to the project. This renovation reaffirms the community's belief in Brattleboro," Bob emphasized.

It took more than a year to settle all the complicated financing but the team closed the deal on July 8, 2013; 150 workers in hardhats spent the next 12 months scrambling throughout the 86,000-square-foot structure. Breadloaf Construction of Middlebury managed the project. Suddenly the corner of Main and High vibrated with energy. "People were just thrilled with the renewal, even if it meant some noise and disruption. Moving the project forward was a sign of health, commitment, vitality," Craig recalled.

"After the fire and subsequent demolition," Drew said, "the building had been reduced to a shell, just brick and studs. In retrospect, that allowed us to renovate a historical building to 21st-century, high-efficiency standards."

The project faced a tight timeline since two of their primary tenants needed to be in place by late August 2014. "We essentially had 12 months to complete a 16-month renovation. That's an astronomical pace," explained Bob. "We managed to get all five floors ready at one time so the teams of electricians, painters, and sheet-rockers could go through all at once."

The plan called for dining and retail establishments to occupy



The entrance of the Community College of Vermont adjoins the Harmony Marketplace parking area to the building's west side.

the street level; commercial, educational, and office space on the second floor; and the top three floors dedicated to residential apartments.

While the construction workers created an entirely new structure from within, the development team set about their own task: securing funding and finding tenants for all those spaces.

Drew explained the challenge: “Since we didn’t have a building to borrow against, our lending group required us to guarantee 70-percent occupancy before we could get financial support. We didn’t even own the building yet! It wasn’t even pre-renovation—it was a water-damaged shell. But we had a dream, and amazing people believed in that vision and stepped up financially or committed to rent apartments and commercial space. They knew if they took this risk, they would be supporting something bigger and help get the town back.”

People have often called Brattleboro a “college town without a college.” However, Martha O’Connor, Chancellor of the Vermont State Colleges Board, and Governor Shumlin, both of whom grew up in Putney, saw the Brooks House as a perfect opportunity to establish a significant college presence in the heart of downtown. The Community College of Vermont and Vermont Tech, which had satellite campuses outside of Brattleboro, happily signed on as anchor tenants, occupying a quarter of the building. “I’ve had such positive feedback from faculty and students who love the central location and easy accessibility,” remarked Martha. The development team acknowledges that having the colleges in place was instrumental to securing the project. However, that also meant a significant portion of the building needed to be ready by August 2014 so they could move in.

“Economic activity in Vermont’s downtowns is driven by its residents,” Craig said. “We could build the prettiest building, but the public needs to buy in.”

One by one, the spaces began to fill. After the two state colleges signed on, Drew reached out to Stephanie Bonin, a former classmate from Brattleboro High School. Stephanie knew the building well since her parents had owned the Book Cellar on Main Street for 22 years. In 1997, Stephanie moved out to Denver where she and her husband, Keith, eventually owned three restaurants. They were intrigued by the prospect of opening a sister branch of their popular Duo restaurant and fell in love with the exposed brick, pressed-tin ceilings, and large windows looking out onto the streets. “Coming back home to Brattleboro allows us to raise our two daughters in the comfort and familiarity of a small town. People seem to take genuine pride that a hometown girl moved back and has opened this restaurant that serves seasonal and local foods.”

Brilliance, a gift store stocked with imported goods and jewelry, had been a tenant in the original building for 20 years and was eager to return. Oak Meadow Independent Learning, which provides curriculum development for home schooling and distance learning across the globe, set up quarters on the second floor. Wow Frozen Yogurt and Turquoise Grill opened up on the street level. Tavern space remains available on the ground floor where Mole’s Eye Cafe had been. The 23 residential apartments in a range of sizes and prices, including several penthouse suites, began to fill up.

A spacious and light-filled atrium was created at the juncture of all the entrances. This space, open to the public, hosts parties, open houses, and events associated with the popular Fri-



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BROOKS
H O U S E



SPACE AVAILABLE

THE HEART OF DOWNTOWN BRATTLEBORO

APARTMENTS

- Penthouse – 3 bedroom/3 bath, 1,800 square feet, private rooftop deck. Includes parking space.
- Bright, South Facing – 2 bedroom/2 bath, 900 square feet. Amenities include granite countertops, stainless steel appliances, washer/dryer, hardwood floors, residents-only deck.

RETAIL

- Main Street – 1,750 square feet
- High Street – 2,241 square feet

LOWER LEVEL TAVERN

- High Street – 3,566 square feet. Restored historic features including woodwork, paneling and bar.

STORAGE UNITS

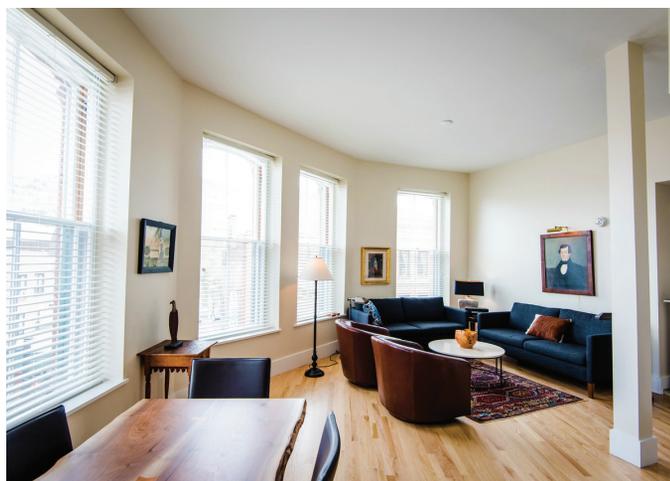
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Keith and Stephanie Bonin fell in love with the building's exposed brick and tin ceilings, and opened a restaurant, Duo, on the main floor of Brooks House.



The kitchen in one of the building's 23 residential apartments.



A Brooks House penthouse suite offers sweeping views of the downtown area and river valley beyond.

day night Gallery Walks. Opera singers from Brattleboro Music Center have performed in the atrium, their ethereal arias floating from the second-story open windows reminiscent of Italian loggias. The food vendors have doors opening onto the atrium so people can enjoy their meals inside if desired. A local gallery may lease wall space as another venue to display artworks.

The development team plans to convert part of the back lot known as Harmony Marketplace into a pedestrian-friendly green space with amenities, a smaller scale of Burlington's Church Street Marketplace. This quiet enclave will provide an oasis from street traffic and noise, with retail and restaurants on one edge of the park and the colleges' main entrance on the other. A pedestrian entrance will replace the current vehicular tunnel. The team hopes to break ground in spring 2016 and finish by the fall. The group is currently lining up support and raising money for the project.

"Any reasonable person looking to develop this property would have balked at the insurmountable hurdles," Bob said. "It took financial gymnastics to raise the necessary funds. At least a dozen times during the process, it looked like we weren't going to make it. But every time, we found ways to make it financially feasible. There's been near-unanimous support for this project. People have been accommodating whenever we ran into a jam."

Craig added, "The renovation of Brooks House turned into a \$24-million project appraised at \$8 million. Fortunately there's a high emotional return on investment. It's still somewhat of a miracle." The development team, and the legion of supporters, can now stroll past the corner of Main and High, feeling proud of their community's effort to restore the legacy of this stately landmark. **F**

Maria Buteux Reade has a home along the Battenkill River in Arlington, VT. After 27 years teaching English, she now balances freelance writing with work at Someday Farm in East Dorset.