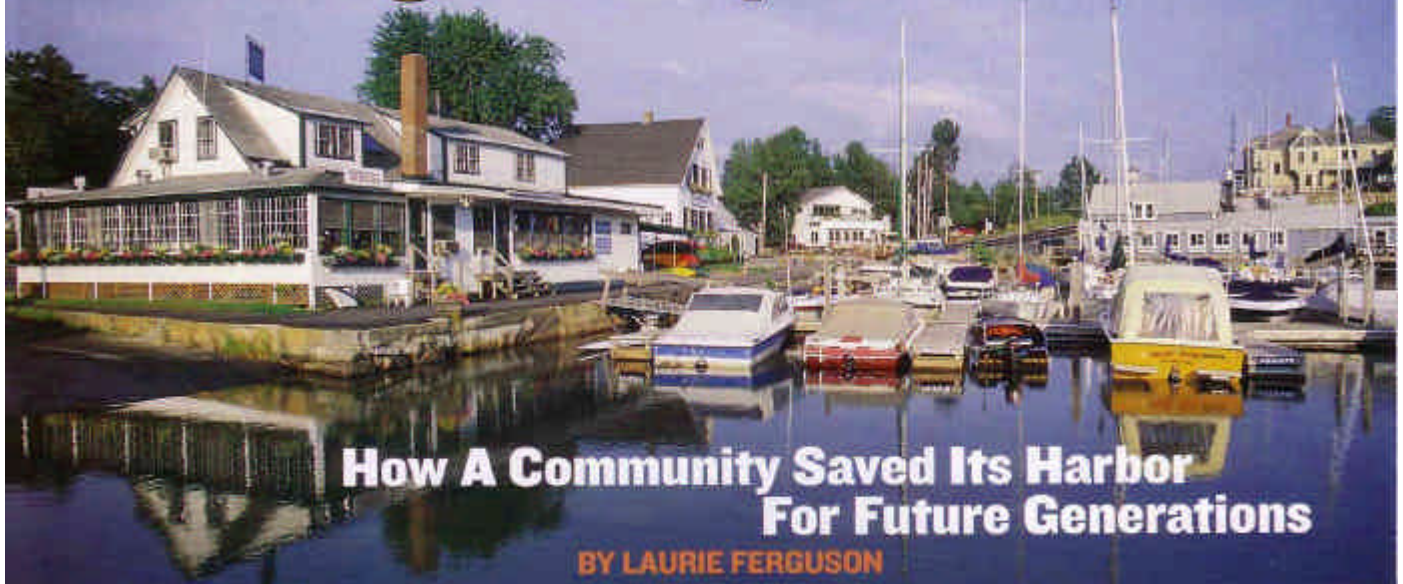


# Saving Sunapee Harbor



## How A Community Saved Its Harbor For Future Generations

BY LAURIE FERGUSON

### It's August in the village of Sunapee Harbor

and the end of a glorious golden summer day. Vacationers enjoying a delicious meal on a restaurant's cheerful outdoor terrace wave to other diners aboard the M.V. Sunapee II "tour boat" as it pulls out of its slip for the sunset cruise on Lake Sunapee, one of New Hampshire's largest, cleanest and most beautiful lakes. Out on the town docks, a young couple loads their picnic basket into a small pleasure boat as they prepare to join friends for an impromptu supper cruise. As they slowly chug out of the harbor towards the larger lake, they pass an elegant sailboat just as it turns into the wind to head to its mooring, sails flapping and fluttering in the breeze. Back at the harbor, children with ice cream cones in hand lean over the railing of the newly constructed pavilion bridge to get a closer look at a family of ducks bobbing on the water.

Visitors observing these scenes from the town's park benches probably think this is the way it has always been in Sunapee Harbor, but many of the town's long-time residents know this is not the case. Sunapee Harbor is one of New Hampshire's most charming lakeside villages, but it is also a living testimony to what can be accomplished when a community works together to save its town from economic devastation.

A hundred years ago, Sunapee Harbor certainly was a thriving old-fashioned summer resort. Wealthy vacationing families from Boston and New York arrived by train in nearby Newbury, New Hampshire, and were then ferried by steamship to Sunapee Harbor. Several grand hotels provided elegant accommodations, fine dining and recreational diversions, while the nearby mountains and lake offered plenty of hiking and fishing opportunities. Manufacturing mills also hummed steadily on the Sugar River that flowed out of the lake at the harbor, its fast-flowing water pouring through a network of 34 dams that provided cheap and abundant power.

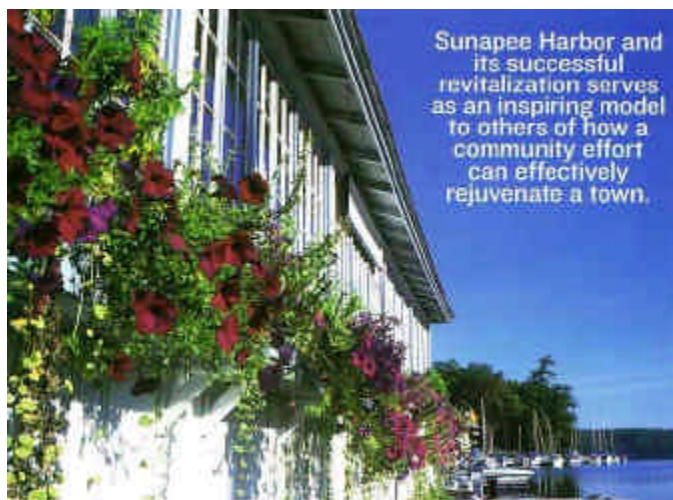
But times change, and with the advent of modern technology and the automobile, the mills that once produced wooden clothes pins and harness gear for horses eventually closed, and the Interstates that brought motorists to New Hampshire by-passed Sunapee Harbor altogether. The mills shut down and one by one the grand hotels closed and local businesses failed. Sunapee Harbor's once proud buildings fell into disrepair and the town docks, no longer home to steamships and classic wooden boats, began to decay. The recession in the 1970s hit Sunapee Harbor hard and by the 1980s, it seemed like the harbor's village was sinking.

The usual approach for revitalizing communities like Sunapee Harbor, unfortunately, was to have out-of-state developers build condominium complexes with no regard to historic preservation, environmental concerns, or maintaining a sense of community. That "solution" almost happened to Sunapee Harbor when a developer purchased four of the harbor's major properties for just such a plan, but was forced into foreclosure. Sunapee residents, Dick Webb and Jolyon Johnson, later joined by Paul Grevstad and John Rauh, realized something had to be done to save the harbor. After many cups of coffee, morning walks, and long strolls along the lakeside, these four visionaries developed a bold and unorthodox plan.

In 1991, they founded Sunapee Harbor Riverway, Inc. whose mission was "to protect and enhance our lakeside village." It was created to be a community based business venture that would restore the vitality of the village to the level that residents remembered in addition to being friendly to visitors to the area. This was a courageous undertaking for a small group of individuals whose aim was to raise enough money to purchase the harbor properties from Sugar River Bank for \$1,100,000, and then lease the buildings to

businesses who were sincerely interested in protecting and enhancing the lakeside village atmosphere of Sunapee Harbor.

These "Founding Four" individuals, along with a dedicated Board of Directors composed of year-round and seasonal Lake Sunapee residents and local business owners, volunteered countless hours of time and enthusiasm to raise the capital they needed by selling shares to the public. They held telethons, hosted coffee klatches, talked to newspaper editors, visited homes, and held public meetings. For those who had a personal interest and concern for the community's future, stocks were offered at \$250 a share with no one shareholder being able to own more than \$10,000 worth. "We wanted to use local capital to solve a local problem and keep the control of the corporation out of the hands of any one individual or corporate entity," says Dick Webb, who served as President of Sunapee Harbor Riverway, Inc. from 1991 - 1996. "By having the community act on its own behalf, the process of revitalizing the harbor would always be guided by our original mission of keeping the harbor in a protected state as a cloistered and beautiful environment."



By December of 1991, more than 700 shares were sold and \$1.1 million raised. With the help of an additional \$530,000 loan from the bank, Sunapee Harbor Riverway began purchasing the foreclosed properties and soon found tenants willing to work as partners in upgrading the buildings. Repairing, replacing, remodeling and rebuilding became the operative words over the next several years as the buildings' foundations and roofs were repaired, stairs and windows replaced, shop interiors remodeled, and water and sewer systems rebuilt. Money began to be generated for the corporation from the rental of boat slips and the leasing of building spaces, all of which went right back into operations and building improvements.

"Town residents and summer visitors alike could see the harbor was coming to life again," says Webb. "You could literally see the ripple effect taking place as businesses and residences all along the main street leading up from Sunapee center to the harbor began making their own improvements." Flowerbeds and trees were being planted, walkways repaired, and storefronts spruced up with fresh paint and new signs. The Knowlton House, one of the town's largest buildings overlooking the entire harbor, was totally refurbished by Sandy Rowse and once again lived up to its title as "the jewel

of the harbor." An outdoor pavilion was built by the Sunapee Harbor Riverway near the waterfront for local musical groups to perform on summer evenings, creating a festive and welcoming atmosphere for summer visitors.

Within six years, Sunapee Harbor Riverway had sold enough stock to repay all its loans and to own all its properties outright. "The buildings in Sunapee Harbor are certainly worth more now than when we purchased them, but no one bought into this corporation to `get rich quick,'" says Webb. "The motive for all the shareholders was to restore and preserve the harbor for the benefit of future generations so they will never again have to `rescue the harbor from developers or worry about preserving the quality of life this harbor provides."

Currently, the tenants of Sunapee Harbor Riverway's properties, which have created more than 60 summer jobs and generate more than \$1 million in sales each summer, include Sunapee Cruises which operates two tour boats, the M.V. Sunapee II and the M.V. Kearsarge; Sunapee Watersports which sells marine accessories and rents canoes, kayaks and hydrobikes; Lakeside Treasures, Harborside Trading Company and The Wild Goose Country Store gift shops; The Harborview diner; the Quack Shack ice cream store; and The Anchorage dockside restaurant that provides full-service family dining accessible by boat, foot or car and, in the evening, some of the hottest live musical entertainment in the Sunapee area. Opening this summer is a newly constructed building that will house The Gallery featuring fine art by local artisans and, by next summer, a new year-round restaurant.

"The opening of a high-quality year-round restaurant in Sunapee Harbor is instrumental in achieving Sunapee Harbor Riverway's vision of turning the village into a year-round destination for both its residents and seasonal visitors," says Allen Henry, Sunapee Harbor Riverway, Inc.'s current president. "Mount Sunapee Resort is just three miles from the harbor and in recent years it has become a thriving ski area. These skiers are looking for lodging, restaurants, and apres-ski activities for the entire family. We want to help make it economically viable for more businesses to stay open year-round so the ripple effect that occurred so successfully in the summer can happen in the winter as well." Several year-round lodging properties have already recently opened after refurbishing oncevacant buildings, including Sunapee Harbor Cottages and The Harbor House. With the Inn at Sunapee and the Burkehaven Motel already established in the area, the addition of these properties has created a significant increase in the harbor's lodging availability.

Members of the Sunapee Harbor Riverway are very aware that every action they take must always affirm the corporation's original mission statement and purpose - to protect and enhance the village atmosphere. "People like our original president, Dick Webb, make sure we always operate with sensitivity to what the harbor means to the people and its residents," says Henry. "Sunapee Harbor is more than a collection of buildings; it's a sense of place where people come to relax and feel at home, where folks who have come to love this place swap stories of past experiences and make plans for the future."

This wonderful linking of past and future lies at the heart of the Sunapee Harbor Riverway's recent brick walkway project that was carefully installed last summer along the harbor's waterfront. People were able to "buy a memory" for

an average of \$40 and have a brick engraved with their name, a quotation, a date, or a remembrance for future posterity. The 1,000 bricks needed for the project were sold out before construction even began. Some bricks are inscribed with a name, or just a date. Others commemorate a significant summer event like a first summertime kiss, or a summer job as a dishwasher more than forty years ago. Today, this walkway is a visual testimony to what this harbor has meant to so many people over so many years.

Sunapee Harbor and its successful revitalization serves as an inspiring model to others of how a community effort can effectively rejuvenate a town. Standing on top of a grassy knoll next to a beautiful white gazebo, one can watch boats being slipped into the sparkling water at the harbor's boat ramp; visitors strolling into the Sunapee Historical Society

Museum; shoppers carrying packages as they leave the Harbor Gallery, the Deck Dock Home and Garden, Harbor Light Realty and the Sunapee Harbor Sweet Shoppe; and families strolling over the recently constructed footbridge that is part of the Sunapee Riverwalk, a meandering scenic trail built along the historic Sugar River. The people of Sunapee Harbor, led by the visionaries of Sunapee Harbor Riverway, Inc., know they have turned the corner from an uncertain and gloomy yesterday to a certain and bright tomorrow. All of this is a heartwarming result of Sunapee Harbor Riverway's initial investment in time, energy, and money that re-awakened a community's civic pride and guided with quiet determination the preservation and enhancement of this charming lakeside village of Sunapee Harbor for generations to come.

To learn more about Sunapee Harbor Riverway, Inc., contact their administrator, Maureen Brandon at 603-763-9988 or at [sunapeeharborriverway@tds.net](mailto:sunapeeharborriverway@tds.net), visit them at [sunapeeharborriverway.com](http://sunapeeharborriverway.com), or stop by their office at 68 Main Street, PO Box 850, Sunapee, NH, 03782. Office hours are Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 10:00 AM to 3:00 PM.

LAURIE FERGUSON owns Ferguson Communications, a public relations and marketing firm in Andover, New Hampshire.

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