



# Once Decrepit Old Chocolate Factory Now Sweet Rental Lofts

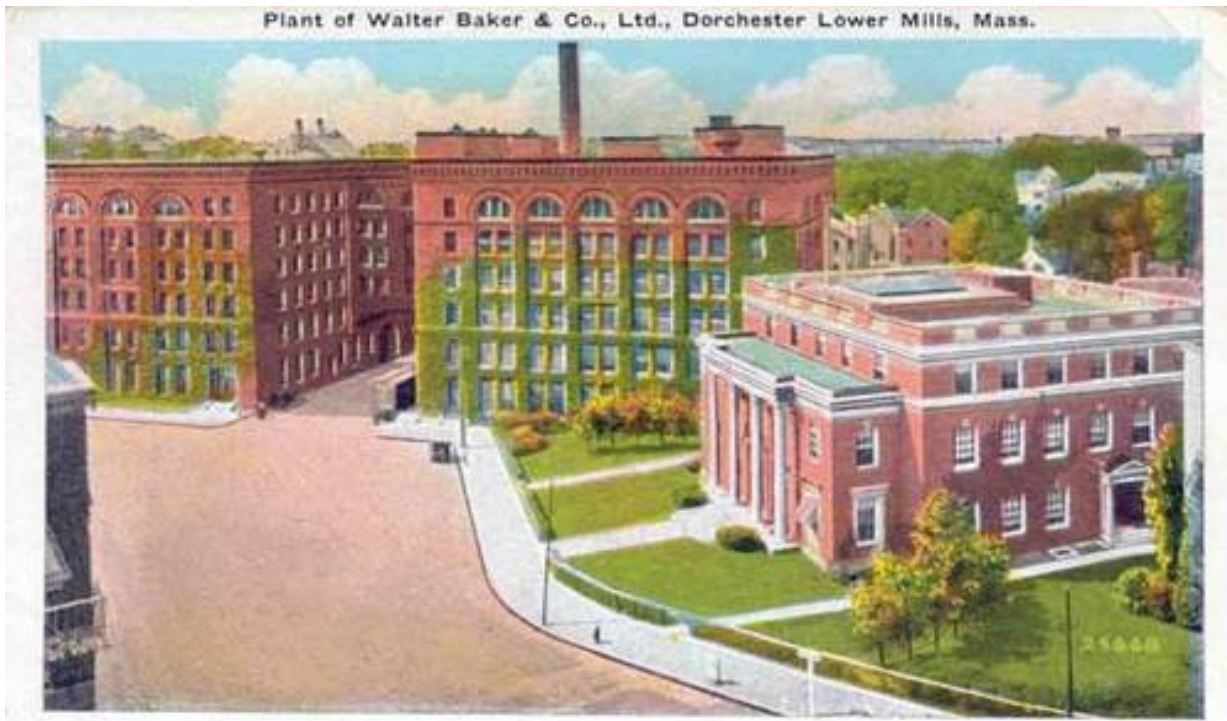
Monday, August 26, 2013, by Chris Berger

Here now, Past Lives, in which Curbed contributor Chris Berger explores what some of the country's most interesting residential buildings used to be before they became livable homes. Care to suggest a building with a fascinating past life? Do drop us a line.



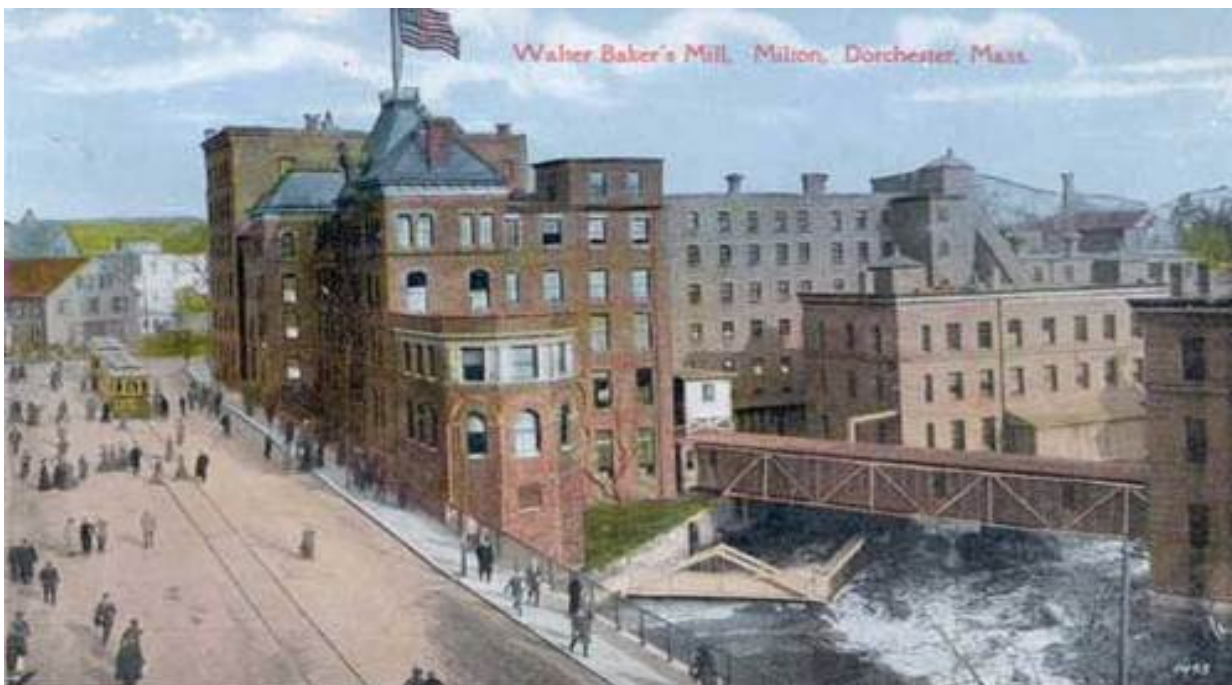
*Photo: Andy Ryan/The Architectural Team*

The factory workers moved out 50 years ago, yet the faint aroma of chocolate occasionally wafts through the air at the former Baker Chocolate Factory in Boston. The factory's mills produced sweet treats for consumers across the globe before production moved in the 1960s. The closure decimated the neighborhood, but the area is once again vivacious after a number of the Baker buildings were reworked into residences.



*Photo: Dorchester Atheneum*

The Baker Chocolate Company's roots stretch back to 1765, when James Baker helped finance John Hannon's cacao bean grinding endeavor. At the time, chocolate was consumed as a powder that was mixed into a drink. Only the wealthy could afford it, because it was such a pain to grind cacao beans by hand. Once industrial mills were utilized to grind the beans, chocolate prices dipped and its mainstream popularity soared. Hannon mysteriously disappeared in 1779, so Baker went into business himself the next year when he debuted his namesake unsweetened chocolate powder. Baker died in 1804, but a series of heirs assumed leadership of the company, which still exists today. By the time Baker's Chocolate incorporated in 1895, the company employed 400 people and its logo, La Belle Chocolatiere, was known throughout the world.



*Photo: Dorchester Atheneum*



he Baker Chocolate Company eventually settled on 14 acres along the Neponset River in the Lower Mills area of Milton and Dorchester, Massachusetts. The structures, which date from 1872 to 1919, vary in style and size, but architectural firm Bradlee, Winslow, and Wetherell designed each new piece to harmonize with its predecessors. General Foods eventually bought Baker's, and in 1965 chocolate production moved to Delaware, taking about 800 jobs with it. The departure of Baker's, so long a source of community pride and a major employer, wrecked the local economy. The hulking mill buildings mostly sat silent over the next couple decades. In the late 1970s, government entities proposed converting the complex into a heritage park with a museum, housing, and small businesses. That plan broke down, but the proposal did spotlight the former Baker Chocolate buildings' potential as residences.



*Photo: Andy Ryan/The Architectural Team*



*Photos: The Architectural Team (before);  
Andy Ryan/The Architectural Team (after)*

Winn Development initiated the Baker Chocolate Factory's transition to housing. In 1983, they opened Adams Street Mill after it was converted into 53 apartments. The Pierce and Preston mills debuted two years later with 80 units between them. The rehabilitation of the three buildings, now known as the Baker Chocolate Factory Apartments, was widely praised, and project architect The Architectural Team was awarded the National Historic Preservation Award by President Ronald Reagan. The next phase came in the mid-1990s, when the Forbes and Park mills were reborn as the 98-unit Baker Square Condominiums. Following that, the Greek Revival style administration building was rehabilitated into 13 artist lofts. It opened in 2002, complete with in-house gallery space and a three-story atrium.

The latest redevelopment phase, the Lofts at Lower Mills, was completed in 2010 and resulted in the reuse of the Baker Mill and Powerhouse. The Architectural Team was handed a challenge with the two. The Baker Mill, erected above the Neponset River, had lost up to 30 feet of its floor because of erosion. Still, the cast iron structural columns sunk into the water had held strong. Tons of refrigeration equipment, installed as early as 1907 so chocolate could be produced in warmer weather, was ripped out. Architectural details such as the copper cornices and lion heads on the belt courses were touched up. Further, the four-story tall, copper-sheathed bridge that links the Baker Mill to the Forbes Mill was restored, and residences were plugged inside. The Baker Lofts have 58 homes.

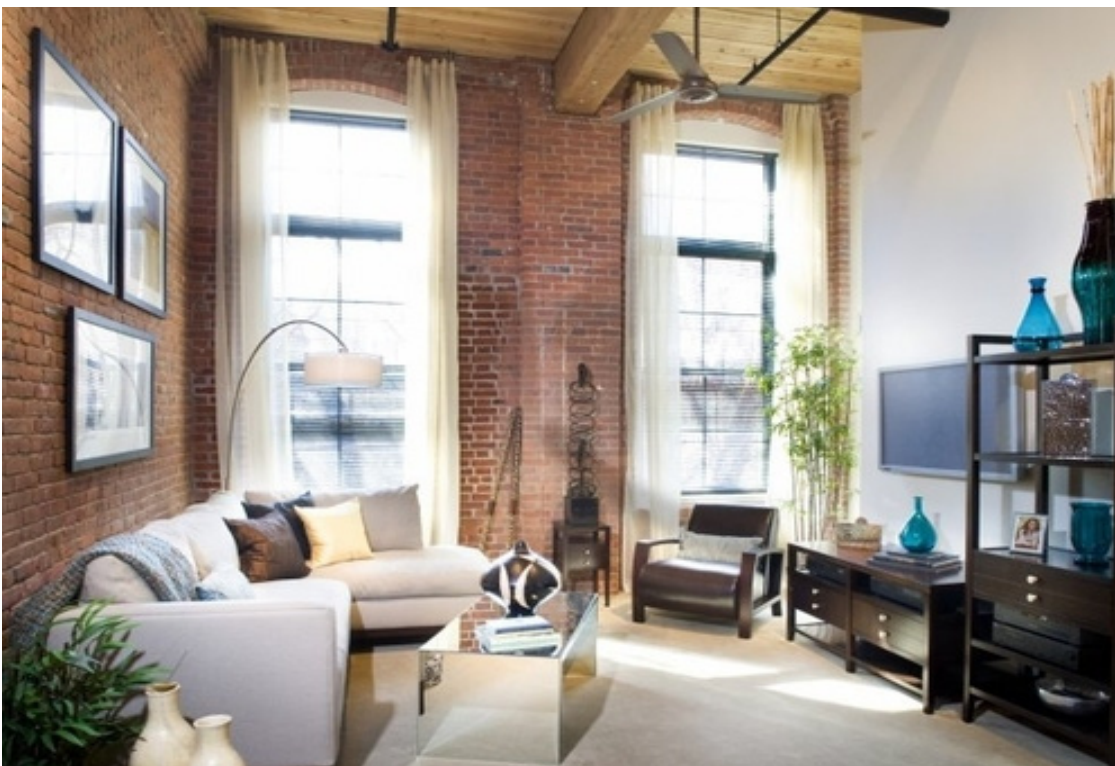




The Powerhouse also had suffered from decades of neglect. The caved in floors had to be rebuilt, but the exterior looks much as it did when the building supplied the factory's energy needs. The busted arched windows, some measuring 12-by-35 feet, were replicated, and the 200-foot tall smokestack still appears primed to pump out carcinogens. Rebranded as the Watermill Lofts, the building holds 17 residences. A variety of one- and two-bedroom rentals are available in the Lofts at Lower Mills. The least expensive one bedroom unit rents for \$1,700 per month, and the priciest two bedroom rentals go for \$3,400.

Much has changed in the Lower Mills area of Dorchester since work began on the Baker village. The locale was once regarded as a death trap. But today, 30 years after the first residents moved in to the former industrial spaces, the Lower Mills is a densely populated residential area desired for its local shops and restaurants as well as its proximity to downtown Boston. It also smells good.

*Photos: The Architectural Team*



*Photo: WinnResidential*