

A black and white photograph of a historic diner counter. The counter is long and dark, with a row of metal-framed stools with black seats in the foreground. Behind the counter, there are various kitchen items, including a coffee machine, a juicer, and several menu boards. The menu boards display items like 'ROAST Turkey Dinner 60¢', 'MACARONI DINNER 40¢', 'TUNA FISH SANDWICH 25¢', 'PINEAPPLE ICE CREAM SODA 15¢', and 'CHICKEN SALAD CLUB SANDWICH 50¢'. The background shows the interior of the diner with more counter space and hanging lights.

# HISTORIC NEW ENGLAND

**RESTARTING THE  
HEARTBEAT OF HAVERHILL**

**FALL 2015**

**HISTORIC<sup>®</sup>  
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*Defining the past. Shaping the future.*



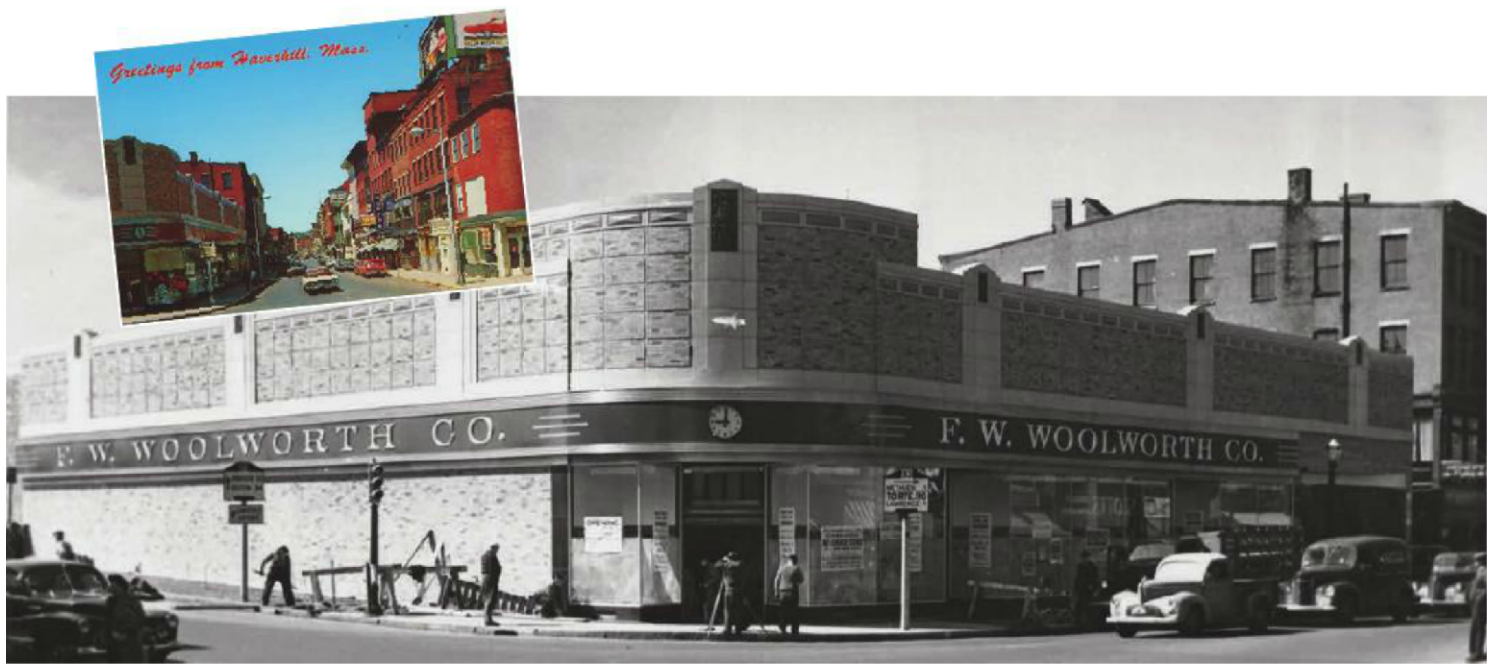


# Restarting the Heartbeat of Haverhill

The Woolworth's lunch counter in May 2014 shortly before the building was demolished. FACING PAGE Woolworth's construction in 1949. INSET This 1968 postcard view of the corner of Merrimack Street and Route 125 was taken only one year before the Woolworth's closed, leaving the building vacant for forty-five years.

Courtesy of Mollie van der Vlist, Foto Factory





Courtesy of the Trustees of the Haverhill Public Library, Special Collections Department.

**H**averhill, Massachusetts, is a quintessential American community in many ways. Once a

bustling industrial city on the Merrimack River, many of its landmarks are known around the world through Haverhill native Bob Montana's long-running *Archie* comics. In a story played out across New England and the country, the mid-twentieth century saw the rise of the suburb and the decline of downtown. Unsuccessful urban renewal efforts led to the demolition of many iconic buildings during a time when economic progress was seen to be at odds with historic preservation.

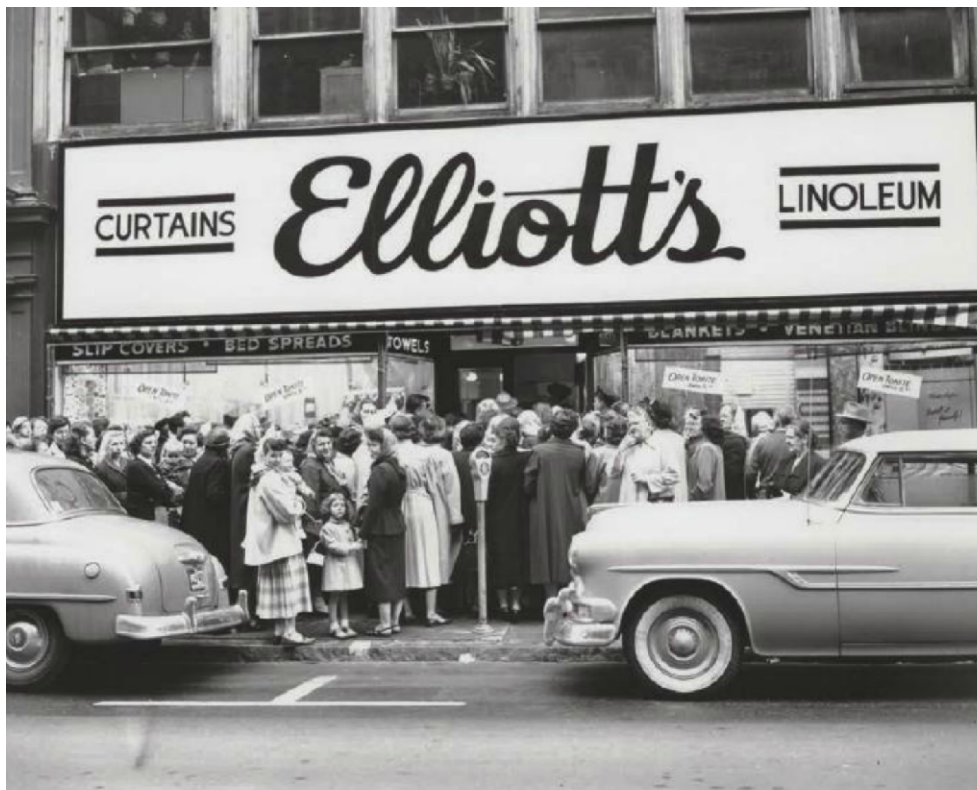
Historic New England recognizes the tough decisions communities face in trying to honor their past while stimulating economic growth. Our *Everyone's History* initiative is an innovative approach to preserving twentieth-century history across the region through memory and imagery, helping communities use their pasts as beacons to make informed decisions about the future. In Haverhill, the partnership took the form of a documentary film, *Woolworth's: Remembering Haverhill's Shopping District*, produced in

conjunction with community leaders, developers, Haverhill residents, and cultural partners including the Buttonwoods Museum, Haverhill Community Television, and Haverhill Public Library's Special Collections.

The long vacant 1949 Art Deco Woolworth's building, once the gateway to Haverhill's downtown shopping district, served as a poignant reminder of an era long gone when Merrimack Street was, as former resident Hugh Johnson describes it, "the heartbeat of Haverhill." The building was razed in March 2015 after sitting vacant for forty-five years to make way for a large-scale redevelopment project called Harbor Place that will include a multistory structure with office, retail, and restaurant space in addition to a satellite campus for the University of Massachusetts Lowell.

Though the building is gone, memories of Woolworth's and downtown remain. Mary Ellen Chatigny, longtime Haverhill public-school teacher, says, "Woolworth's was the biggest dime store people had ever seen. It was huge...the lunch counter ran almost the whole length of the store. They had sodas, ice creams...sandwiches at the lunch counter, just like you see in old-time movies."

Suzanne Johnson, whose husband's family owned Mitchell's, one of Haverhill's largest and longest operating department stores, recalls buying her first lipstick at



**LEFT** Crowds wait to enter Elliott's home store for a special event in 1954. **CENTER** Hundreds of people lined Merrimack Street



during Haverhill's 1940 Tercentenary parade. **RIGHT** Old City Hall, shown here during demolition in 1973, was one of many iconic

Woolworth's. "I remember the day very clearly. In seventh grade, my best girlfriend and I walked downtown and both bought lipstick but we hid it and didn't tell our mothers!"

For Anita Purcell, former vice president of lending at Haverhill Bank, downtown was a one-stop shopping destination. "You could shop for food, you could shop for men's clothes, women's clothes," she says. "We all got our lipstick or makeup down there. Everything was down there...we had furniture stores, drug stores... Everything downtown."

Downtown was the hub not only for commercial life in many New England towns but also for social life. It was a gathering place for the young and old alike. Jane Murphy recalls her high school days in the 1930s: "You'd meet everybody downtown. We'd go to the beach in the summer and we'd try and see who had the best tan. We'd go down Saturday night...on Merrimack Street and show it off!"

Murphy, who attended prom with cartoonist Bob Montana, remembers after-school Cokes and French fries at places like Crown Confections, the Chocolate Shop (recast as The Chok'lit Shoppe in the *Archie* series), and Tuscarora's. Kathleen Dacey, whose Haverhill home has been in the family since 1840, remembers her preferred hangout, the Tic-Tock, being "so busy at some times, they'd be shoving people out, they'd make sure as soon as you took your last bite you were out the door."

"My Haverhill involved a lot of the downtown because that was where everything took place," Purcell says. "[It was] where we gathered in Washington Square at the end of World War II, where all parades were, that's where, whenever we had a few dollars, [we'd] rush down and buy something."

The golden age of downtown began to fade in the late 1950s, in Haverhill as in many small cities and towns. The reason for the disappearance of New England's downtowns is complex, but Dr. Robert Farrant, professor of history at UMass Lowell, "blame[s] the car." The introduction of the interstate highway system allowed people to live farther away from their jobs downtown. And the GI Bill helped many veterans purchase their own homes in new suburban developments. "Over time, developers began to realize you could start to build retail away from downtown and near to suburbs," says Farrant. You can meld these big changes together—cars, transportation, and home ownership juxtaposed with the growth of shopping malls."

As people's lives became more oriented toward the suburbs, downtowns were abandoned and left vulnerable to the bulldozers of urban renewal efforts. Urban renewal was a way for cities to clear the increasingly empty retail spaces left by the rise of indoor shopping malls and strip malls in suburban areas in the hopes of attracting investors to build





Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the Haverhill Public Library, Special Collections Department.

**downtown buildings lost to Haverhill's controversial twentieth-century urban renewal efforts.**

anew. “Sadly that [investment] did not happen in a lot of these communities,” Forrant says.

But a renewed focus on downtown is emerging in Haverhill and in similar communities. The change is being driven, in part, by generational trends. Forrant cites research showing that millennials in their twenties and early thirties are often choosing to live in small urban areas rather than suburbs. “Increasingly they’re looking for places like Haverhill...with easy transportation links to jobs in Boston.”

Haverhill resident Jean Gaiero echoes the hopes of many of her neighbors in that she is “very excited about the [Harbor Place] project....There’s a revived energy” along with a renewed interest in preserving and sharing Haverhill’s past—something that many felt was missing from earlier urban renewal plans. Ronald Trombley, managing director of the Greater Haverhill Foundation, says he applauds the Harbor Place development team’s desire to weave the history of downtown Haverhill into the fabric of the new multiuse complex.

Historic New England is proud to be leading the region in saving and sharing our recent past through recording the first-hand memories of those who lived it.

—Sarah Sycz Jaworski  
Community Engagement Assistant

**EVERYONE'S HISTORY DOCUMENTARY SERIES**

*Woolworth's: Remembering Haverhill's Shopping District* premiered in September at the Buttonwoods Museum in conjunction with its exhibition *Going Downtown: Haverhill at Mid-century*. View it online, along with other stories of life in New England from the twentieth century and beyond, at [YouTube.com/HistoricNewEngland](https://www.youtube.com/HistoricNewEngland).

View more short films about life in New England in our *Everyone's History Documentary Series*.



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and *The Haymarket Project* (2013–14)



*Back to School: Lessons from  
Norwich's One-Room Schoolhouses*  
(2015)



*Connecting the Threads: Overalls to Art at  
the H. W. Carter and Sons Factory* (2013)



*At the River's Edge: An Oral  
History of Berlin, New Hampshire*  
(2010)