

# Friends help preserve Nankin Mills history

By Sue Mason  
Staff Writer

Say Nankin Mills and everyone knows that you're talking about the big white building at the juncture of Ann Arbor Trail and Hines Drive in Westland. The three-story structure dominates the landscape and serves as the headquarters of the Wayne County Parks System.

But there was a time that the grand dame of Hines Drive was in disrepair and about to be used for a practice burn.

That didn't happen, thanks to the late Westland residents Thomas Brown and Joseph Benyo, who sweet-talked a few friends into saving the building. The Friends of Nankin Mills is their legacy and the group now works tirelessly to support the preservation of the mill and the interpretive center housed in it.

"When I came on, Joe said don't listen to anybody, but the more I listened to him the more it was a gotcha," said Friends member Barb Polich of Westland. "Tom Brown said we need to find away to save the building; I thought it was signing up to help paint it."

"I pretty much got involved through Joe," added Jim Franklin, also of Westland. "I'd bring the kids here; they enjoyed it."

The Friends formed in 1988 and received a \$40,000 grant, thanks to Northville resident Nancy Darga, who, at the time, was chief of design for Wayne County Parks. But that wasn't near enough money for what needed to be done.

"They were planning a parade for the Michigan sesquicentennial and it was going to come down Hines Drive and end here," said Friends president Denise Braun-Johnson of Livonia. "We talked about the condition of the building. The cedar shakes on the roof were falling off. It was in pretty bad shape and the county wasn't able to put money into the building."

## Village Industry

The county had acquired the mill in 1948 from Clara Ford for \$1. It had been purchased by Henry Ford in 1918 and was one of his 20 Village Industries in Michigan and anchored one end of a string of seven mills that lined the Rouge River from Westland to Milford.

The Village Industry project aimed to preserve rural values and farming by providing workers with a stable source of income. It was in operation at Nankin Mills until 1948, when it was closed.

"It was a social experiment," naturalist Carol Clements said. "The men

could farm and then come in and work in the slow season to make extra money. He was upset that the men were leaving the farms to go work in the factory in Highland Park."

The mill has had many lives. Its history dates back to 1835, when construction began on a grist mill on the site. It wasn't completed until 1842 and it wasn't long after that it was destroyed by fire due to its use as part of the Underground Railroad, according to Clements.

"It's said that Marcus Swift used it as a safe house," Clements said. "The mill burned down around the same time his house burned down in 1843, because of his involvement in the anti-slavery movement."

The mill was operated by a water wheel and the mill race came from Nankin Lake at Farmington Road and Ann Arbor Trail. The water wheel was replaced by a more efficient turbine in 1887. When Ford acquired the mill, he installed a hydro-electric generator with the help of Thomas Edison. The generator produced more electricity than need to power the plant and the town of Pike's Peak was the beneficiary.

"Henry Ford hooked up the houses across the street from the mill; it was like the first public utility," Clements said.

## A new use

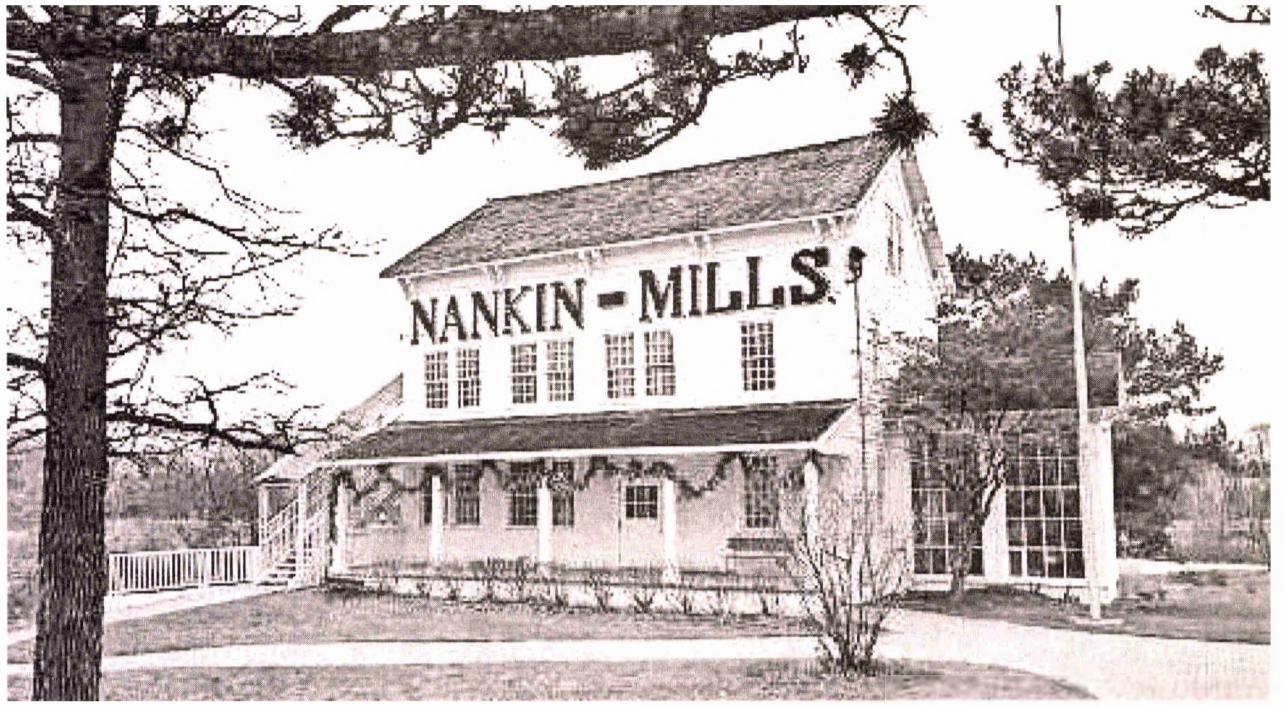
Nankin Mills was remodeled by Wayne County and reopened in 1958 as a nature center. Naturalist Mary Ellsworth oversaw the center that featured exhibits on history and live wild animals. It was in operation until 1980, when it was closed.

"It was sad," Clements said. "She had to get rid of everything, even the donated exhibits. Mary was a rehabilitationist. Some of the animals here couldn't be released into the wild."

The founding of the Friends of Nankin Mills, the group's partnership with Wayne County Parks, and the parks millage helped breathe new life in the mill, transforming it into an interpretive center that looks at the area's Native American history, the Underground Railroad and its use as a Village Industry.

The Friends have done numerous fundraisers like "An Evening with Henry Ford and Thomas Edison" to raise money and interpretive programs like Saturday's "First Families of Nankin Township." The group decorates the mill at Christmas and hosts the annual mill lighting in early December.

"The first time we decorated, we had to talk to the fire inspector,"



BILL BRESLER | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The Friends of Nankin Mills has helped preserve the historic landmark that was once slated to be torn down.



FILE PHOTO

Carol Clements (from left), a naturalist at Nankin Mills, Jim Franklin, Don Nicholson, Daryl Bailey and Eric Rasmussen were all smiles when they took delivery of the Model T that will eventually be in the Interpretive Center.

Polich said. "We wanted to know what to do. We didn't want to find out that we had burned the place down."

The Friends' wish list for the mill includes restoring a Model T for an interactive exhibit and researching and restoring the generator. The group has a check mark by the Model T. It purchased one in 2012 and is in the process of restoring it. The plan is to put the car in a blocked-off area on the second floor of the mill, where youngsters will be able to climb in, get behind the wheel and experience driving in its early form.

But the group's biggest wish is to find new friends. There are currently nine members and more are needed. People interested in joining can visit the Friends of Nan-

kin Mills website, attend one of the events or send an email to Friends@nankinmills.org.

"Pretty much everything started in 1988," Johnson said. "Now we want to get known so people know what's going on at Nankin Mills."

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The water, diverted from the dammed pond, spins the turbine to produce electricity, then returns to the Rouge River.

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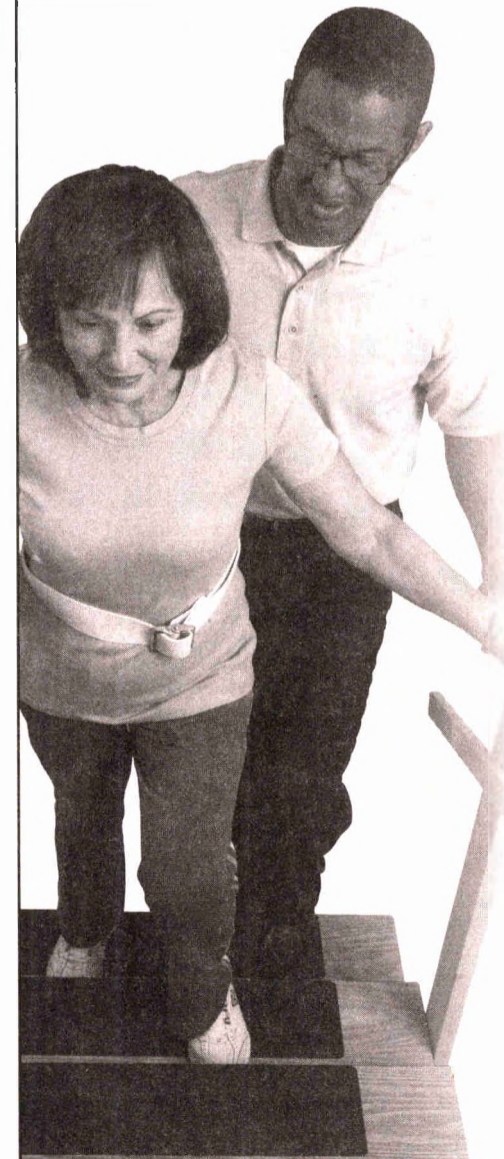
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**NOTICE TO BIDDERS**

The Board of Education of the Plymouth Canton Community Schools invites all interested and qualified companies to submit a proposal for Chromebook Cases.

Specifications of the Request for Proposals (RFP) are available online at <http://links.pccsk12.com/techrfp>. Technical questions should be directed to Elson Liu, Director of Integrated Technology Systems at [techrfp@pccsk12.com](mailto:techrfp@pccsk12.com). Sealed proposals are due to the PCCS E.J. McClendon Educational Center located on 454 S. Harvey, Plymouth, MI on or before 1 PM, Monday, June 29, 2015. The Board of Education reserves the right to accept and/or reject all bids, as they judge to be in the best interest of the school district.

Board of Education  
PlymouthCanton Community Schools  
Kate Borninski, Secretary

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**PLYMOUTH-CANTON COMMUNITY SCHOOLS**

**NOTICE OF A PUBLIC HEARING ON PROPOSED 2015-2016 BUDGET**

**PLEASE TAKE NOTICE** that on June 23, 2015, at 7 o'clock p.m., at the E.J. McClendon Educational Center, 454 S. Harvey, Plymouth, Michigan, the Board of Education of Plymouth-Canton Community Schools will hold a public hearing to consider the District's proposed 2015-2016 budget.

The Board may not adopt its proposed 2015-2016 budget until after a public hearing. A copy of the proposed 2015-2016 budget, including the proposed property tax millage rate, is available for public inspection during normal business hours at the E.J. McClendon Educational Center, 454 S. Harvey, Plymouth, Michigan.

**The property tax millage rate proposed to be levied to support the proposed budget will be a subject of this hearing.**

This notice is given by order of the Board of Education.

Katherine Borninski  
Secretary, Board of Education  
Plymouth-Canton Community Schools

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