

The Van Dorn Mill

In the early 1980's, the prestigious New York engineering firm Haines Lundberg & Waehler (aka "HLW") purchased an old stone mill building in Basking Ridge known as The Van Dorn Mill. It's across the street from the well-known "Old Mill Inn" hotel and restaurant. Frank Waehler lived in the area and they renovated the mill to turn it into their New Jersey offices. We did the Plumbing and HVAC for the renovation.

The mill is a unique building, and made for some interesting office space. We believe it was built in the 1700's. The walls are made of stone and very thick. There are heavy timbers throughout the space; the floors are heavy, industrial type woods. There's a stream that runs adjacent to the building, with a diversion into the building's basement where the water flow turned the mill wheel. The old wheel was still there and Mr. Waehler had it restored. It extended up through the floor and provided an unusual touch for the lobby.

The HVAC system also had a unique feature. As a progressive engineering firm, HLW designed the system with water-source heat pumps, using water from the millstream as condenser water. At the time, there was a lot of talk about the energy efficiencies of things like groundwater cooling, and having the millstream available was a good opportunity to try out a different idea.

We installed the system and it actually worked very well. There was just one problem though.

The millstream is actually the Passaic River. In this location, it looks pristine. It ran through the woods and was very picturesque, kind of like a Poland Spring commercial. In actuality however, the water was very dirty (not polluted, just naturally dirty). It contained a whole bunch of things like: leaves, tree branches ranging in size from twigs to logs, fish, rocks and dirt. The heat pumps water-cooled condensers, strainers and pumps did not take kindly to this potpourri of material, and were continuously getting clogged up. This would shut down the compressors, and there would be no heating or cooling. Mr. Lee Kirk (remember this name when we come out with the next story!) was Mr. Waehler's second in command, and went crazy with these continuing service problems.

Eventually we had Folander Sheet Metal make up a cone shaped, removable, stainless steel screen in a sluice-like track at the stream's entrance to the basement of the mill. This kept all the debris out of the condenser system. The only problem was this needed to be cleaned on an almost daily basis. HLW solved this problem in an old-fashioned, but effective, way. They assigned the daily task of cleaning the screen to whoever the newest junior member of the firm was! This worked very well for the 10 years or so that HLW occupied the building. When they moved out, The Fedders Corporation moved in. They had no patience for the daily maintenance, and replaced the system using air cooled condensers.

If you find this story interesting, and think we can help you with your unusual project, please give us a call!

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