

Henry Ford's Most Unique Factory

Henry Ford constructed a lot of factories in his lifetime, but only one as unique as what we know today as the Village Arts Factory. This is actually the place where Henry Ford located his last, most unique and least publicized village industry. He did not employ local farmers, as he did in his other 18 village industries across Southeast Michigan; rather he provided housing and employment opportunities for disabled WWII veterans. Henry's 19th and final village industry had two buildings: a dormitory and factory.

Built in the early 1900s, the dormitory was originally a creamery in the Village of Cherry Hill. Henry Ford purchased the Wilson Dairy building in 1943 and had it moved to its current location, just to the south of the factory he was constructing. Ford then transformed the creamery into a residence hall for several workers at his Cherry Hill Plant. The dormitory housed from 18-22 disabled veterans, as well as the staff which consisted of the cook and his assistant.

The Ford Cherry Hill Factory began operations in July 1944 and served at least two purposes: to provide training and rehabilitation for returning war veterans, and to supply parts for the Willow Run Bomber Plant. The two-story, concrete-block building, covered with stucco, originally had 3,100 square feet of workspace on the first floor and 2,000 square feet on the lower level. The veterans manufactured automobile parts, including radiator parts, ignition locks and keys until the factory ceased production in 1945. After Henry Ford's death, Ford Motor Company sold this property.

The concept of a village industry and the employment of disabled veterans would merge at the Cherry Hill Plant. This combination did not occur at any of Ford's other village industry locations, since Cherry Hill was the last of these village plants. Ford then left instructions: no publicity, no reporters—ever! He employed these veterans to help them, not to help his image. He wanted the veterans to have the opportunity to rehabilitate in peace.

The Henry Ford Dormitory and Factory were placed on the National Register of Historic Places on April 21, 2003 as part of the National Register Cherry Hill Historic District.

Opportunity and Planning:

On the night of the grand opening of The Village Theater in 2004, Tom Yack (20 year-township supervisor) told the Leisure Services Director that they now needed to acquire the abandoned national historic parcel just down the street. His vision was to develop an arts district with The Village Theater and the Village Arts Factory being the anchors of Cherry Hill Village.

The Village Arts Factory property is located just one block west of The Village Theater at Cherry Hill in the heart of Canton's National Historic Cherry Hill Village District. "The Village" is also home to one of the mid-west's largest neo-traditional housing communities. The redevelopment of Ford's Factory, Veterans Dormitory and Warehouse that all sat vacant for over 10 years, has saved two structures on the National Register of Historic Places, as well as turned an obsolete manufacturing warehouse into a vibrant community arts center where the community comes to celebrate our diversity, culture, history and collective experience. The Village Arts Factory has become a place that supports our local artists and incubates small businesses, in a welcoming and inclusive environment.

The Vision:

The Village Arts Factory (VAF) fills a public demand for visual arts, creating a regional hub where individuals of all ages and cultures come to learn, experiment and grow through art-inspired education and entertainment. VAF promotes a welcoming atmosphere for professional artists, aspiring artists, the general public and eager students. The 14 artists who call the VAF home offer an assortment of

classes (candlemaking, dance, pottery, watercolor/acrylic/oil painting, pilates, creative movement and soap making) and art for sale, including: clay, paintings, jewelry, fibers, soap, candles, photography and more.

Our art gallery, located inside the Warehouse building, gives local artists the opportunity to showcase their work to the community and a place for the community to experience the arts for no charge, seven days a week.

The Partnership is also committed to honoring the historic roots of Ford's vision, making the VAF a safe haven for veterans in need. The Partnership has teamed up with the Fallen and Wounded Soldiers Fund (www.fwsf.org) to offer transitional housing for veterans who have suffered injuries while serving our country in the armed forces. Through grants, we are also able to offer free soap making, painting and pottery classes for all veterans in Southeast Michigan at the VAF. By establishing unique healing programs for local veterans, bringing Henry Ford's vision full circle.

With 14 acres on our campus, The Village Arts Factory will support personal health & wellness for the community with bicycle paths and pedestrian trails through our wooded property behind the Warehouse building. This exciting aspect of the Village Arts Factory will give the community access to the healing powers of nature, fresh air and exercise, just as much as we do the healing benefits of the arts.

The VAF is designed to give everyone something to experience and enjoy. We believe in the transformative powers of art. The arts in all forms help us to express our thoughts and feelings and to relate to each other on a deep and enlightening level that can be difficult to reach otherwise.