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HTCs Help Preserve New York Village Landmark Named in Honor of Aviation Pioneer

CHANNING HAMILTON, STAFF WRITER, NOVOGRADAC

Developers are working to preserve a historic schoolhouse on the site of American aviation pioneer Glenn Curtiss' former home in Hammondsport, New York. Named in honor of the founder of the United States aircraft industry, the Glenn H. Curtiss Memorial School will be converted into a mixed-use development with 24 market-rate apartments.



Image courtesy of MM Development Advisors
The historic Glenn H. Curtiss Memorial School in Hammondsport, New York, will be converted into Curtiss Hill, a mixed-use development with 24 apartments and commercial space by MM Development Advisors.

"This development not only preserves an important piece of Hammondsport's history, but also addresses a desperately needed housing stock in this area of New York," said Monica McCullough, founder and president of MM Development Advisors (MMDA).

MMDA is the developer behind the Curtiss Hill redevelopment. Since its inception in 2015, MMDA has primarily worked on affordable and supportive housing across the state of New York, participating in the construction or preservation of 4,586 affordable rental homes and 149 emergency shelter beds in addition to 37,417 square feet of commercial space. The Curtiss Hill redevelopment represents the company's first foray into market-rate housing.

"Although the community we are serving is rural–the village of Hammondsport has a population of only about 500 residents–the local housing market is distorted by an abundance of seasonal and recreational uses both in the village and along the lakefront," McCullough said. "There are very limited local options for year-round rental housing."

MMDA acquired control of the building in 2023. Construction on the Curtiss Hill redevelopment is now in full swing after the developer received federal and state historic tax credit (HTC) equity in July. MMDA expects to complete the redevelopment in May 2027.

The Father of the Aviation Industry

The Glenn H. Curtiss Memorial School was built in 1935 on the former grounds of the Glenn Curtiss home and the birthplace of the Curtiss Aeroplane and Motor Company.

Curtiss was born in Hammondsport in 1878. He began his career in bicycles–he was a bicycle messenger for Western Union, a bicycle racer and a bicycle shop owner. In 1901, his interest shifted to motorcycles and aviation, as the internal combustion engine became more commonplace. The very next year, Curtiss began manufacturing motorcycles with

his own single-cylinder engines, the first of which had a carburetor adapted from a tomato can.

In 1903, Curtiss set a motorcycle land speed record at approximately 64 miles per hour for 1 mile. He would go on to set an unofficial world record, traveling at 136.4 miles per hour on a 40-horsepower, V-8 motorcycle of his own design in 1907.

"He was a speed demon, with a fearless passion for innovation," said McCullough.

Curtiss began developing engines for airships as early as 1904, when he became a supplier for aeronaut Thomas Baldwin. The first successful dirigible in the nation, Baldwin's California Arrow, was powered by a Curtiss 9 HP V-twin motorcycle engine.

Curtiss was the first person to fly an airplane publicly in 1908, when he flew the June Bug, an aircraft he helped develop as part of Alexander Graham Bell's Aerial Experiment Association. In 1910, he flew across the state of New York, marking the first long-distance flight in the United States.

The year prior, Curtiss had launched his own aircraft manufacturer, the Curtiss Aeroplane Company, in Hammondsport. The company would later become the Curtiss Aeroplane and Motor Company. During World War I, the Curtiss Aeroplane and Motor Company produced aircraft for the U.S. Army. The company soon became the world's largest aircraft producer–Curtiss's JN-4 "Jenny" trainer was the most widely used U.S. aircraft during World War I.

After the war ended, in July 1930, Curtiss died in Buffalo, New York, of complications after an appendectomy. Curtiss' funeral was held in his hometown of Hammondsport, and he was buried in his family's plot at Pleasant Valley Cemetery.

Eyes on the Sky

Five years after Curtiss' death, the Glenn H. Curtiss Memorial School opened on the site of his former home. The building was designed by Robert Graham, a prominent architect who designed many schools throughout New York, primarily in the Hudson Valley. The property operated as a public elementary school until its closure in 2010.

McCullough said that the former school was in excellent condition when it was vacated–except for the roof, which was failing and in need of replacement.

"This created great urgency to proceed with redevelopment of the site before water created irreversible loss of historic integrity to the building and made rehabilitation economically infeasible," said McCullough. "Each winter season that passed before we were able to obtain full financing to start the construction project became a race to prevent additional damage."

MMDA was able to complete preliminary work to repair the roof in late 2025. The developer was able to close on its full financing in July, after Monarch Private Capital provided $1.4 million in federal HTC equity and $1.2 million in state HTC equity.

"[MMDA] was motivated to start construction so that the project would be completed in time to avoid weather-related damages and take full advantage of the spring leasing market in Hammondsport next year," said Blair Williams, director of HTCs at Monarch Private Capital. "We were able to close in less than 60 days, which speaks to [MMDA's] commitment and the experienced team of tax credit professionals involved in the transaction."

Williams stated that the investment was part of a concentrated effort from Monarch to build out its market in upstate New York. In addition to Curtiss Hill, the company recently invested in 130 Pearl Street and Silo City, two adaptive reuse projects in Buffalo.

"National Park Service statistics show that New York has been an extremely active state for HTC projects," Williams said. "We've seen a lot of success with developments similar to Curtiss Hill–moderately sized housing projects with a retail component–in areas such as Buffalo and Rochester. So, it made sense for us to spend more time in upstate New York."

Additional funding sources for Curtiss Hill included a total of $1.8 million in New York State economic development subsidy, as well as roughly $3.9 million in loan funds from NBT Bank and $530,000 in loan funds from the Regional

Economic Development and Energy Corporation of the Southern Tier Central Region, New York.

Taking Things to New Heights

MMDA plans to maintain as many of the historic features of the building as possible, with a focus on preserving the schoolhouse's 1930s Art Deco civic architecture.

The building shell and its decorative masonry, including a cast stone relief above the main entrance and relief work depicting grapes and vines to either side of the entry doors, will be preserved. The terrazzo hallways and decorative lobby features such as glazed mosaic tiles and a terracotta drinking fountain inside the school will also be retained.

"The redevelopment is a pretty typical adaptive reuse of a historic school," said McCullough. "Essentially, each of the original classrooms will become an apartment."

MMDA will preserve and repurpose the original classroom doors as apartment entry doors. The redeveloped rooms will also retain their original windows and ceilings. Once completed, Curtiss Hill will offer 24 apartments, with a mix of studio, one- and two-bedroom floor plans. Monthly rents are expected to range from $1,200 to $2,375.

The original "cafetorium" space, which comprises roughly 5,000 square feet, will also remain as originally designed, with a stage and a gymnasium. MMDA plans to rent the space out to a commercial tenant, which the company is currently searching for.

"This project preserves an important piece of Hammondsport's history while addressing a real need for quality housing and flexible commercial space," McCullough said in a press release regarding Monarch's HTC investment. "We look forward to seeing the building once again serve as a vibrant gathering place and economic asset for the community." ❖

CURTISS HILL

FINANCING

- $3.9 million in loan funds from NBT Bank
- $1.8 million in economic development subsidy from the state of New York
- $1.4 million in federal historic tax credit (HTC) equity from Monarch Private Capital
- $1.2 million in state HTC equity from Monarch Private Capital
- $530,000 in loan funds from the Regional Economic Development and Energy Corporation of the Southern Tier Central Region, New York

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