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# HISTORYNEWS

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY

**American Founders Online**

**THE CHALLENGES OF  
COMMEMORATION**

**TECHNICAL LEAFLET:  
Designing Education Programs that  
Connect Students to Collections**





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#### ON THE COVER Tower of Faces

This three-story tower displays photographs from the Yaffa Eliach Shtetl Collection. Taken between 1890 and 1941 in Eishishok, a small town in what is now Lithuania, they describe a vibrant Jewish community

that existed for 900 years. In 1941, an SS mobile killing squad entered the village and within two days massacred the Jewish population.

*Photo: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*

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# The Beardmore Block<sup>1</sup>

**T**ravelers on the 2,500-mile U.S. Route 2—the northernmost east-west highway in the United States—might be excused if they fail to notice

Priest River, Idaho. It is easy to miss the sign touting the town's population of 1,754. And while the community's only traffic light might slow them a bit, there is little memorable about the businesses motorists pass—Tri-Pro Cedar Products, Les Schwab Tires, White Cross Pharmacy—places geared more toward enhancing a town's livability than impressing tourists.

Not many people veer off Highway 2 on to Priest River's Main Street. Those who take the time are treated to an elegant assemblage of early twentieth-century brick buildings. The Priest River Commercial Core Historic District includes ten properties on the National Register of Historic Places. Unfortunately, few are filled.

But that could change, given the inspiration provided by architect Brian Runberg, who won an AASLH Award of Merit for his exquisite restoration of the community's crown jewel, the Beardmore Block. One of Runberg's goals is to spark revitalization of Priest River's historic downtown. "Rethink. Reuse. Rebirth." headlines his interactive website promoting the building ([www.beardmoreblock.com](http://www.beardmoreblock.com)). The other goal, to preserve this landmark for future generations, has been a more personal journey.

Idaho timber magnate Charles Beardmore constructed the 32,000-square-foot building in 1922. It housed his professional offices as well as apartments, retail shops, a ballroom, and a 225-seat theater where actress and filmmaker Nell Shipman of nearby Priest Lake premiered her silent movie *The Grubstake* in 1923.

Runberg, Beardmore's great-grandson, purchased the dilapidated building in 2006. "Years of vacancy and weather-related deterioration [had] caused serious damage to the interior," according to a document in the Idaho State Historic Preservation Office. Undeterred,

Runberg envisioned a restoration harkening to the day in 1923 when four hundred guests attended the grand opening, which doubled as the eighteenth birthday party for Beardmore's daughter, Vivienne.

During the renovation, Runberg's local labor force uncovered skylights, refurbished floors, re-used doors, but what stands the Beardmore above most other preservation ventures is the effort beyond cleaning and restoring. Runberg reused more than 95 percent of the original structural materials and 50 percent of non-structural stock. Workers not only preserved original plumbing fixtures, but also reconstructed them to reduce water use by 50 percent. They retooled eighty-five-year-old structural joists into staircase tread. Vintage light shades now top efficient fluorescent lamps. The revitalized structure harvests solar energy through photovoltaic panels, and the rebuilt roof drains to a cistern in the basement, the converted boiler room, to provide tenants' non-potable water needs. "One might describe it as driving a beautifully restored, classic Cadillac that has the efficiency and technology of a Prius," notes Runberg.



Marie-Dominique Verdier



▲ Charles Beardmore

▶ Historic image of the Beardmore Block



This small-town paragon is one of only a handful of structures nationwide to be listed in the National Register of Historic Places while also achieving Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Gold certification. Many have recognized the remarkable accomplishment. The Pacific Coast Builders Conference presented the Beardmore project its Grand Award for Adaptive Reuse. Idaho Smart Growth honored it with its Grow Smart Award, noting that the Beardmore "incorporates historic preservation, downtown revitalization, and sustainable building practices to illustrate



that communities can preserve their historic treasures while providing sustainable economic revitalization.” Preservation Idaho gave Runberg its Orchid Award for historic preservation.

Simultaneously meeting both the Secretary of the Interior Standards for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings and LEED Gold certification presented challenges. For example, the ground floor of Charles Beardmore’s elegant building featured leaded glass transoms. The beautiful purple glass tiles

on construction costs by adhering to the Secretary of Interior Standards, as well as a \$1.25-per-square-foot rebate from the local utility company for LEED certification. “The Idaho SHPO now uses the Beardmore project as a textbook example of combining the preservation tax credit program with sensitive environmental/sustainable design,” said Donald Watts, the Tax Act Coordinator with the office.

According to one of the handsome exhibits in the Beardmore’s foyer, when Charles Beardmore followed the timber industry west in 1900, his father advised him to “put on good woolen underclothes, keep out of danger as much as possible, and if you buy property, keep it insured. And be sure to get a clear title to it.” Beardmore did buy a lot of property, including a Priest River hotel. By 1904, he was transporting hotel guests

on excursions to one of Idaho’s most spectacular settings, Priest Lake.

A young Brian Runberg spent his summers at his grandparents’ home on the lake, listening to stories of his grandmother Vivienne, the one who celebrated her eighteenth birthday at the Beardmore Block grand opening. He remembered those stories about his great-grandfather, Bonner County’s largest employer, who could look out over Priest River from his spacious second-floor office and envision a flourishing community.

And Priest River did flourish. But the Great Depression wiped out jobs and most of Beardmore’s fortune. He died in 1935. The family retained ownership of the Beardmore Block until 1972. But the building deteriorated and seemed destined for demolition until Runberg rescued it, returning ownership to the family once again.

Like his great-grandfather, Runberg has confidence in Priest River. “Charles Beardmore built his commercial block because he believed in northern Idaho and its future,” he says. “Eighty-seven years later, I’m preserving and restoring it for those same reasons.”

The renovated Beardmore opened in 2009—the same year the closure of a Priest River mill displaced 200 employees. Where Charles Beardmore envisioned a future grounded on natural resource extraction, Brian Runberg recognizes that changing times create challenges and opportunities. In the 1920s, the Beardmore housed a family-owned mercantile catering to the needs of Beardmore’s timber workers; today it hosts a spa and wine bar. The first major event in the restored Beardmore featured a fundraiser for the newly formed Priest River Community Foundation, which aims to build upon Runberg’s inspiration to encourage other investments in the community’s historic downtown.

Today, Runberg’s daughter, Vivienne, named for her great-grandmother, spends her summers at the family house on Priest Lake and romps through the building her great-great-grandfather constructed. She is growing up not only with a sense of her family’s, and the community’s, past, but also with optimism for the future, a trait spanning generations that ties Charles Beardmore to Brian Runberg, the great-grandson Charles never knew, but surely would have applauded. ●

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<sup>1</sup> A note on sources: The Idaho State Historic Preservation Office, Boise, contains the “Priest River Commercial Core Historic District” National Register of Historic Places inventory forms, as well as additional clippings, photographs, and other materials relating to the Beardmore Block. The research library at the Bonner County Historical Society, Sandpoint, has research files on Charles Beardmore, records of the Beardmore Lumber Company, and a wealth of research materials relating to Priest River and its historic buildings. The Priest River Museum also has research materials relating to the Beardmore Block and the downtown core. Brian Runberg’s website ([www.beardmoreblock.com](http://www.beardmoreblock.com)) is an engaging, interactive site with rich history and photographs about the family and business, and a fun floor-by-floor guide to all the “green design” details in the structure. Cate Huisman, “They Built the Beardmore,” *Idaho Magazine*, 9:4, 28-30, provides a good summary of the building and the renovation project. Interviews with Brian Runberg and with Don Watts in the Idaho SHPO provided the authors with additional information.



▲ Brian Runberg

◀ The Beardmore Block today



reflected shimmering light, but provided virtually no insulation. Runberg originally proposed sandwiching the leaded glass inside insulated glazing. But the Idaho SHPO advised that the National Park Service would not likely approve such a treatment for historic tax credit requirements. Runberg and the SHPO developed a solution that allowed interior glazing to achieve the performance necessary to reach energy targets while also retaining historic exterior characteristics. The NPS accepted the treatment. Navigating these tricky waters enabled Runberg to utilize a 20 percent tax credit