

Wilmington's original town hall renovated by Methodist church

By Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, February 15, 2002

WILMINGTON — Don Morrison has put a lot of work into coordinating the renovation of Wilmington's original town hall, adjacent to and now owned by the Whiteface Community Methodist Church on Route 86 in Wilmington — but the credit, he said, goes to the community itself.

"I'm just the gopher here," Morrison said last Saturday morning. "I went out and got the other people to do the work."

Reuben Sanford, a leader of the early Wilmington settlement, built the modest, 1½-story white frame structure in 1835. Sanford also built the Wilmington Methodist church, in 1834, and the Jay Methodist church, situated on the hamlet green.

Sometime in the early part of the last century, the township moved its offices from the original town hall into the steepled building that stands today behind the Little Supermarket on Route 86. That building, which now houses the Northern Lights School, had earlier been the headquarters of Wilmington's notorious Ku Klux Klan chapter.

With the original town hall vacated, the Wilmington American Legion took over the building, renaming it the Major Reuben Sanford Post. It has been quite a while, however, since the Legion held a meeting in the small, uninsulated structure. Today, the group gathers in Wilmington's new Community Center on Springfield Road, which also houses Wilmington's town government offices.

Last February, the Legion post transferred its deed for the old town hall to the Methodist Church in exchange for a \$1 bill and the church's promise that Sanford's name would always be associated with the building.

According to Rev. Linda McIntyre, pastor at the Whiteface Methodist Church, the Sanford Building was essentially sound when the church accepted the deed, but quite a bit of work still had to be done to make the building safe, warm and fully usable: New doors and windows were installed, drywall was hung, a new floor was nailed down, new fluorescent light fixtures were placed in the resurfaced ceiling, all-new wiring was put in, and the whole main floor was insulated to make the best use of the building's new gas-powered space heater.

Some structural work had to be done underneath the building, too, McIntyre said: Several rotten supporting beams had to be replaced, and the entire building had to be jacked up so that the crumbling stonework foundation could be repaired.

It could be said, Morrison observed, that the Wilmington community has erected a new building inside the old town hall while preserving the appearance of the historic structure's exterior shell.

Outside, McIntyre herself has begun the job of scraping off the ancient, peeling white paint in preparation for a painting party planned for the spring — but for now, the building's interior is ready for occupation.

The Sanford Building houses three function areas: the church pastor's study, the main room with a combination library and meeting space, and the community food pantry. The pantry's old shelves in the church basement were emptied last Friday night and Saturday morning by volunteers and moved over to the new area, where they're all ready for use.

The renovation of the Sanford Building is part of a coordinated effort by the Methodist Church, the Wilmington library, the local visitors bureau and the town government to develop the adjacent acreage into a hamlet heritage center on the banks of the Au Sable River. A number of developments over the last couple of years have lent credibility to the heritage-center idea:

- The old hardware-store building formerly situated next to the church and fronting on Route 86 was demolished last year, opening up a central park area and creating a more open river vista.
- The Whiteface Mountain Regional Visitors Bureau recently leased a nearby building that had housed the Whiteface Liquor Store, renovating it for use as the community's visitors center.
- The bureau has been given grants to develop plans for a mini-park on the Au Sable riverbank and for the creation of original statuary to be placed in the heritage center.
- The church has been seeking funds from the state's Barns Restoration and Preservation Project to renovate the rearmost building on the heritage-center site, known as the Methodist Barn. Hopes are that the large, central area in that structure can eventually be used for community gatherings.