

Former Adirondack milltown may get second birth from historic preservation

By LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, March 29, 2002

AU SABLE FORKS — This 19th century iron-forging hamlet on the Au Sable River was once a prime example of the kind of compact, self-sufficient working-class town that characterized the Adirondacks.

The 1971 shutdown of the paper mill that succeeded Au Sable's iron forges damped the fire in the settlement's economic furnace.

Historic preservation could be one factor in the renewal of Au Sable Forks, making it a living museum of the North Country's working past.

The idea of establishing a historic district in Au Sable Forks, while not a new one, was given new currency a couple of weeks ago at the last meeting of Jay's Town Board. Sharron Hewston, vice chairwoman of the township's Planning Board, suggested that Jay and Black Brook combine forces to back a joint task force seeking National Historic Registry listing for the community. (The Au Sable River, which runs through the hamlet's core, is the dividing line between the townships of Jay and Black Brook as well as the counties of Essex and Clinton.)

Councilwoman Amy Shalton, who also serves as deputy historian for the town of Jay, immediately raised concerns that listing on the National Historic Register might keep people from making changes to the buildings they own within such a district.

Councilwoman Vickie Trombley seconded Shalton's concerns.

"I can't support this tonight," said Trombley. "I would have to know more about this."

After a few more minutes of discussion, the idea was tabled for reconsideration when the Town Board gets more information on how historic districts work, including the advantages they offer to property owners and

communities and the disadvantages that might come with their creation.

Historic Au Sable Forks

In 1990 and 1991, three architectural historians working for the organization that later became Friends of the North Country undertook something called a "reconnaissance-level survey" of the four townships in the Lower Au Sable Valley, including the hamlet of Au Sable Forks.

"Before 1825 there were only three families in this district," the report said. A sawmill was built in 1825. In 1828 the first iron forge began to process ore mined at Palmer Hill, several miles north of the settlement.

"But it was not until 1837, when the J&J Rogers Company purchased the Sable Iron Company," the report continued, "that the village of Au Sable Forks began to grow, to become one of the largest settlements in the region."

One might think that the ruins of the Rogers paper and pulp mills, deteriorating along the riverbanks where the West Branch of the Au Sable enters town, would be the most visible reminders of the company that made this company town — but one would be wrong. The strongest reminder of the mill in this former milltown are the former homes of its managers and millworkers, the houses and tenements that line every street in every direction from the confluence of the Au Sable's branched sources.

The grandest homes were those built by the owners and directors of the Rogers Company in the last quarter of the 19th century, when the iron industry was peaking. Co-founder James Rogers had a Second Empire mansard-roofed home built on Main Street in 1874. His son-in-law, Henry Graves, feeling he had to outdo his

wife's family, built a veritable palace at the corner of Church and College street — with money, it was later learned, that he had embezzled from the Rogers Company.

"The last of the grand houses to be built in Au Sable Forks," the report said, "was a very large 1920 Colonial Revival house built by I.H. Chahoon, grandson of James Rogers and a president of the Rogers Company."

The workers' homes

The humbler homes of the Rogers millworkers, however, far outnumbered those of their masters when the plant was in operation, and still do so today.

"Rogers company houses are noteworthy in that they are at least a cut above most company-built housing seen in most company towns," said the historical survey of Au Sable Forks.

"Many of the houses were built between 1860 and 1890, when the popular Victorian style was manifested with a variety of shapes, textures and detailing," continued the survey. "The company houses dating from 1890 to 1920 reflect the Colonial Revival Style, with a more symmetrical, often pedimented gable front usually with the addition of a front porch.

"The southernmost Jersey section of town is made up of nearly identical gable-front workers' houses built in the last quarter of the 19th and early 20th centuries."

Two features typified the Rogers houses and tenements: the diagonal clapboard or fish-scale patterns found in the gables, and the diamond-shaped windows usually found in the topmost stories.

After the flames

"In 1925 a huge fire devastated the Au Sable Forks commercial district,

which was located in the southern, Jay side of town,” the report said. “In the northern, Black Brook side, directly across the river on Main Street, there is a unique circa 1860 three-story frame commercial building. Despite being underutilized and deteriorated, the building retains a feeling of what the commercial district might have been like pre-fire.

“Because the downtown was completely destroyed and rebuilt, the present Main Street is a cohesive example of a 1920s commercial block architecture. It is interesting to note the emphasis on fireproof construction, with all buildings being brick, stone or cement block.”

To replace some of the burned houses adjacent to the business district, Rogers built 14 new bungalow-style houses.

The only residential development in Au Sable itself since then has been the building of a uniquely shaped one-story structure on Pleasant Street with an A-framed portico in front. The Sixties-era structure, now a home, was originally the Coffee Kup diner.

Survey says ...

Jessica Smith, Ann Cousins and Steven Engelhart, the authors of the survey of Au Sable’s historic resources offered several recommendations for future preservation research in the community, which they called “a significant and reasonably intact concentration of historic sites ... (that) merits more intensive survey work. This would be done with the intention of eventually establishing (a) ... National Register historic district and/or listing several individual properties on the National Register.”

The trio also listed several specific sites “which are likely to be eligible for the National Register on their own merits. These sites include, but are not limited to, the Graves Mansion, Henry Rogers House, James Rogers House and the Chahoon House.”

The kind of work done by Smith, Cousins and Engelhart is called “the first step” in any kind of historic preservation project by Essex County

Planner Bill Johnston, who also serves as chairman of the board for Adirondack Architectural Heritage, the North Country’s preeminent preservation organization.

“The reconnaissance-level survey tries to understand the forces that drove a community’s development,” Johnston said in an interview conducted earlier this week, “and look at examples of the buildings produced by those forces during various architectural periods.”

According to Johnston, a reconnaissance-level survey also identifies further research and preservation efforts necessary to understand and save a community’s architectural heritage.

In the case of Au Sable Forks, those efforts might be furthered by filing an application to have the entire community, or significant portions thereof, listed as a National Historic Register District.

What historic districts *don’t* do

Lots of people have lots of ideas about what the establishment of a historic district does. Some of those ideas are accurate; some are not.

“One of the most prevalent myths is that, once your building is listed on the National Register, you can’t do certain things to your property,” observed Steve Engelhart, now the executive director of Adirondack Architectural Heritage, in an interview last week.

A pamphlet from the Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau of the N.Y. State Office of Parks spells this out even more explicitly: “Listing on the National Register in no way interferes with a property owner’s right to remodel, alter, manage, sell or even demolish a property when using private funds for projects that do not require state or federal permits or (environmental quality) reviews.”

One of those who has been most vocal over the last couple of weeks in opposing the creation of a National Historic Register District is Howard Aubin, operator of a small lumber mill outside Au Sable Forks and a long-

time member of the Adirondack Solidarity Alliance.

Aubin said he was opposed to “registering (our historic places) with the state or national governments” for fear of “some kind of control” being imposed upon the local community from those outside forces.

“I’d love to see us set something up under local control,” Aubin said. “Nobody is better able to express local history from a local viewpoint than local people.”

Ironically, most of the restrictions many people associate with historic districts are not imposed by the National Register; they are the products of strictly local historic districts, creations of communities that seek stricter controls over historic properties than those offered by the federal or state governments.

What historic districts do

What are the benefits that accrue from creating a National Historic Register District or having a historic building listed on the National Registry?

First: money.

“New York state has a matching fund for the renovation of public or quasi-public historic buildings,” explained Bill Johnston. That kind of funding is available for restoring properties listed on the National Historic Register and owned by municipalities and nonprofit organizations. The Moriah Town Hall, Johnston said, was renovated using such matching funds.

“Also, the Sacred Sites Fund has various kinds of grants for renovating historic religious structures,” Johnston said, “but the buildings must first be listed on the National Historic Register.”

“There’s also an investment tax credit offered by the federal government for the renovation of historic commercial buildings. For every \$100 invested, you get \$20 taken off your tax bill,” Johnston continued. He cited the example of Hubbard Hall, in Elizabethtown.

“The building was in terrible shape,” he said. “People thought it should be knocked down. The county was able to find a developer capable of renovating it, and the tax credit made the difference between the project being unfeasible and its profitability.”

“As far as private homes are concerned, there is proposed legislation to make the tax credit available at both the federal and state levels,” the county planner added, “but with everything that’s happened over the last year, I wouldn’t be too sure about those right now.”

“But once those are enacted, and once individual homeowners learn about such benefits, people will be clamoring to create historic districts.”

It should be noted that, in historic preservation, “he who pays the piper calls the tune.” Those renovating a historic commercial property will have to meet federal preservation standards before they can claim the federal tax credit.

National Historic Register listing is also a prerequisite for many of the historic preservation grants and loans available through nonprofit organizations or private foundations like the Preservation League of New York State.

Historic tourism, historic pride

One of the latest trends in the tourism industry is something called “historic tourism.” Some people like to

spend their vacation time visiting places that mean something more than just a suntan, good surf or an array of great restaurants. They want to spend time that matters in places that matter — the kinds of places listed on the National Historic Register.

The research that goes into filing for historic-district listing is also crucial in marketing that district once it gains recognition.

“Once you do the research,” said Bill Johnston, “you can produce a book and design walking tours that give visitors an idea of what to do, of what’s interesting about an area.”

The final benefit of preserving historic structures and historic districts may be the least tangible: a renewed sense of pride in community.

New York state’s brochure on the National Register notes that not only do “listings honor a property by recognizing its importance,” but “listing raises the community’s awareness of and pride in its past.”

Steve Engelhart of Adirondack Architectural Heritage put it this way:

“If you studied the most successful communities in the northeast, you would see that one of their most common characteristics is that they have decided to preserve their historic heritage.”

In other words:

- if we understand the extraordinary historic significance of the “ordinary” buildings all around us;

- if we appreciate what they tell us about the series of decisions that have made our communities what they are; and
- if we respect the vision, the courage, the sacrifice — the spiritual mortar — that went into the construction and conservation of every historic building —

If we learn to appreciate and preserve our history, we will come to appreciate ourselves all the more.

But historic preservation doesn’t just happen.

“If we don’t preserve and protect what we have, it taint going to be there,” cautioned Ann Ruzow Holland, executive director of Friends of the North Country, the organization that manages community development projects for the towns of Jay and Black Brook.

“National Register listing gives us a tool that we can use in raising funds. It helps us protect historic buildings,” Ruzow said, “and historic preservation controls created by the community prevent sprawl, allow for infill, and protects that quaint, small, Adirondack community feel that’s so valuable to us here.

“But it takes years,” she cautioned, lest anyone think that historic preservation is a quick, easy fix. “You have to set your feet on the path, and everyone has to work together.”