

# The road to Adirondac

A 19th century toll road from Lake Placid to an iron-producing hamlet on the southern slopes of Mount Marcy became the 20th century Northville-Placid Trail

LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, Feb. 27, 2004

The story of the Northville-Placid Trail is a part of many a tale of exploration and settlement in the Adirondacks.

Possibly the least well-known of those tales is that of the 20-mile toll road built in the 1840s to bring grain and produce from North Elba farms to the iron works at Adirondac, on the remote southern slopes of Mount Marcy.

**THE NORTHVILLE-Placid Trail** was the very first project conceived by the young Adirondack Mountain Club. Opened in 1923, the N-P Trail runs 133 miles through the heart of the Adirondack Park. By 1993, nearly a thousand people had hiked its entire length, either in a single journey or in sections.

Those hiking the N-P Trail may be trying, like wilderness advocate Bob Marshal, “to escape periodically from the clutches of a mechanistic civilization.”

But the first modern New Yorkers to journey down the northern end of the Northville-Placid Trail sought no such escape; in fact, they were trying to draw the web of civilization closer around them, not to loosen it.

In 1810, Archibald MacIntyre had started the Elba Iron and Steel Manufacturing Company. His operation on what is now

Lake Placid’s Lower Mill Pond was not a success, however, because of impurities in the ore drawn from the Cascade Lakes. The infamous “Year Without a Summer,” in 1816, finished off

the failing enterprise. In 1817, MacIntyre’s North Elba iron works were closed.

But in 1826, still hoping to make something of the site, MacIntyre returned, this time searching the area for silver. Instead, MacIntyre found more iron — but in a completely unexpected location.

Lewis Elija Benedict, an Abenaki Indian, came to North Elba while MacIntyre was there, opening a cloth that held a nut-sized piece of iron ore.

“You want see ’em ore,”



The Averyville Road trailhead for the Northville-Placid Trail.



The 1854 blast furnace at Adirondac, the crown jewel of Archibald MacIntyre's ironworks, lay at the end of a toll road built in the mid-19th century from Averyville. Used for less than 4 years, today it rises from the surrounding forest, nearly intact.

Benedict told MacIntyre, “me know 'em bed, all same.”

Hiring Benedict for \$1.50 and a plug of tobacco, MacIntyre and his party followed the Abenaki up the Au Sable and over Indian Pass to a natural dam made of high-grade iron ore, forming a pool in a river that was later determined to be the Hudson, just a few miles from its source on Mount Marcy.

That site became the home of the Adirondac Iron Works, a place of great promise — and, eventually, of greater disappointment.

But what of the 1840s connection between MacIntyre's earlier and later iron-works sites?

**THE LATE** Mary MacKenzie, former North Elba town historian, picks up the story:

“When I became town historian 35 years ago,” MacKenzie wrote in a 1999 letter, “I think a descendant of every one of our

extant pioneer families told me about an old road from Averyville, in North Elba, to MacIntyre's Adirondac Iron Works, bragging that his forebear had had a hand in building it.

“The Adirondac Iron Works was in full throttle in the late 1840s and provided a ready market for North Elba farm produce. The problem was, how to transport it? It was a long trek from North Elba to [Adirondac] via established highways, and wagons and sleds could scarcely negotiate the trail through Indian Pass. A group of North Elba men therefore banded together, laid out, built and maintained a toll road from the end of the Averyville Road down through the wilderness to the iron works.

“The road started at the end of Averyville Road in North Elba (the same back then as it is today) and went south to Moose Pond, then southeast to Preston Ponds, and thence down to Lake Hender-

son and the [Adirondac] works.

“Of course,” MacKenzie added, “the Adirondac Iron Works closed down just a few years later, so the road served its original purpose for a very short time. It seems to have continued as a trail ever afterwards.”

MacKenzie's account is supported by Winslow Watson in his 1869 “History of Essex County,” where he wrote, “During the brief operations of the Adirondac works, the affairs of North Elba received a fresh impulse. A road cut through the forest, in the gorges of the mountains, gave to the inhabitants a winter communication with that place, where they enjoyed the advantages of a ready market, at liberal prices, for all their agricultural commodities.”

**A SOMEWHAT** later account, published in 1907 in the Essex County Republican, provides more detail.

“From the hamlet at Wescott's [farm],” said the writer, referring to the area known as Averyville, “trails to [several sites, including] Preston Ponds deflect. In early days the Preston trail was the winter highway to [Lake] Henderson, or Iron Works, and Newcomb. The Thompsons, Nash brothers, Robert Scott, Martin Lyon, Ira Boynton et al. were proprietors and operators of the route (and) made their own rates. ...

“In ‘breaking out the road’ or in transit, if necessary, the carriers stopped for the night in housings made by shoveling openings in the snow and over-covering with spruce, cedar, hemlock or balsam boughs. Timothy Nash on one of these trips succeeded in rescuing his ox team from a cold bath in Preston Pond, made pos-

sible by treacherous ice.”

A still later account, written by G.A. Alford in his “Early Days” column and published in this paper in early 1952, said that, “When the iron works started up at what is now Tahawus [the name of a private club that took up residence in the abandoned village of Adirondac around 1900], the iron company cut a winter road thru to Preston Pond. North Elba men banded together and cut the road from Averyville to Preston.

“After that,” Alford wrote, “they concentrated on raising a large quantity of oats and would spend a good share of the winter hauling oats to the iron works for horse feed. The trip took two days, and with two mountains to go over, the load couldn’t be too heavy. Oats brought them 30 cents per bushel delivered, but they were glad of a chance to get some cash money.”

Thirty 1848 cents, by the way, is equal to about \$5.60 today, adjusted for inflation. Considering that oats are trading today at just over \$1.50 a bushel, the North Elbans don’t seem to have gotten too bad a bargain for their wilderness trading with the Adirondac Iron Works, if we can trust Alford’s price quote.

**MacKENZIE** referred to the relatively short life of the Averyville-Adirondac toll road.

Opened sometime in the 1840s, the road would not have been used to supply the iron works after 1858, for in that year the MacIntyre operation was abandoned for good.

As in North Elba, impurities in the Adirondac iron ore plagued Archibald MacIntyre. Started in 1826, the Adirondac venture was

producing so little iron by 1834 that MacIntyre shut it down for a time, leaving only a caretaker for the village’s produce farm.

But then came the famous 1837 state survey of the High Peaks, led by Ebenezer Emmons. Based in MacIntyre’s little village, the Emmons expedition was the first to scale Mount Marcy, where they identified the source of the Hudson River as tiny Lake Tear in the Cloud on the mountains northwest slope.

Emmons returned in 1839 to conduct a geological examination of the area. In his report, “Professor Emmons expressed the conviction that large-scale production of iron was commercially practicable,” wrote Harold Hochschild in his history of the MacIntyre mine, “and termed the ore deposits of such magnitude as to be of national importance.”

In fact, MacIntyre’s holding was believed to be the largest iron deposit of the time in the United

States east of the Mississippi.

Work started again, and the village of MacIntyre — soon called “Adirondac” after the name given by Emmons to the nearby mountain group — grew.

Problems continued to plague the venture, however. An unidentifiable impurity in the ore hampered production, and repeated promises of a railroad connection from Adirondac to North Creek — vital for moving finished iron to markets — never materialized.

The MacIntyre company made one final effort to make the mine productive. In 1854 workmen completed a huge, new, \$43,000 blast furnace. The stone pyramid rose 48 feet to the forest canopy from a 36-foot-wide base.

Despite its 14-ton daily capacity, the new furnace was unable to save Adirondac.

In 1856, a flood wiped out part of the works.

In 1857, a national recession crippled the company.



This cottage in the ghost town of Adirondac, built in 1845 for ironworks owner Archibald MacIntyre, is quickly falling into oblivion, as seen in this photo taken in the summer of 2003.

Then, in 1858, MacIntyre died. None of his heirs would take responsibility for running the Adirondac iron works — and so, they just stopped.

“The cessation of operations ... was a sudden step,” wrote Arthur H. Masten in his classic 1923 history, “The Story of Adirondac.”

“Work was dropped just as it was. ‘The last cast from the furnace was still in the sand, and the tools were left leaning against the wall,’ ” Masten wrote, quoting an earlier source. “The workmen abandoned their homes, and Adirondac became, as it was for many years described, ‘The Deserted Village.’ ”

Fifteen years later, Adirondack photographer and writer Seneca Ray Stoddard passed through MacIntyre’s ghost town.

“On either side (of the grass-grown street) once stood neat cottages and pleasant homes, now stained and blackened by time,” Stoddard wrote in 1873, “broken windows, doors unhinged, falling roof, rotting sills and crumbling foundations pointed to the ruin that must surely come.”

And so the ghost village of Adirondac looks today, nearly a century and a half after its blast furnace let out its last gasp.

**THE OLD** Averyville-Adirondac Road above Duck Hole, at the end of the Preston Ponds, appears to have been used in its entirety for the Northville-Placid Trail for 55 years, starting in 1923. In 1978, however, the state altered the trail’s route.

Instead of following the left bank of the Chubb River above Wanika Falls, about halfway be-

tween Duck Hole and the Averyville Road, northward to Wescott Farm, as the old road had done, the Department of Environmental Conservation had the N-P Trail cut across the Chubb to the right bank above Wanika, veering off toward the northeast.

Why?

“Traffic on the N-P Trail had increased,” wrote Bruce Wadsworth in the 1994 edition of the Adirondack Mountain Club’s guidebook to the Northville-

Placid Trail, “and it was decided that it would be better to have the trail pass over state land than to traverse so much private land. The rerouting adds 2.6 mi. walking distance” before hikers reach the Averyville Road.

“The new route is through magnificent hardwood forest,” Wadsworth added. “It is significant that the changes made in the route [of the N-P Trail] over the years have always improved the quality of the trail.”



A small cabin is nearly swallowed by the thick woods that have grown up around Adirondac, whose environs were clear-cut for charcoal-making during the hamlet’s iron-forging days, which ended in 1858.