

Historic Main Street: A Walking Tour

Story and current photos by Lee Manchester
Archival photos courtesy of the Lake Placid Public Library

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When you think of historic buildings in Lake Placid, several structures probably leap to mind: Melvil Dewey's Lake Placid Club complex, now just a landscaped hillside; the John Brown farm in the North Elba settlement, south of town; the 1932 Olympic Arena, on Main Street.

Placid's Main Street, however, is richer in local architectural history than you probably imagine. In some cases the buildings tell their own tales, just as they stand. In other cases, however, you have to know what's hidden inside Main Street's buildings to appreciate their stories.

This article tells the stories of some of the most important buildings still standing on Lake Placid's Main Street. We've designed it as a walking-tour guide, so that you can see the historic village

structures for yourself and develop your own sense of how Lake Placid was built, brick by brick.

THE FIRST settlement in North Elba township was on the Plains of Abraham, south of Lake Placid village toward the Cascade Lakes. While the North Elba settlement was begun around 1800, it was not until the 1870s that Main Street was first developed along Mirror Lake.

In the 130-or-so years since the first structure was built on Main Street, there have been three architectural periods: the Victorian, from the 1880s into the 1920s; the Neo-Classical, from about 1912 until the mid-1930s; and everything thereafter.

Architect and historic preservationist Janet Null, of Troy, compiled a historic survey of Lake Placid's Main Street

architecture nearly two decades ago. Null's study, published in 1990, and the historic files compiled by the late Mary MacKenzie, former Lake Placid and North Elba historian, were the primary sources for this article.

"The first impression of Main Street," Null wrote in 1990, "is of an aggressive commercial strip, lacking a clear identity, beset by an almost overwhelming visual clutter, and consisting of a diverse range of architectural quality.

"The crisis in identity is between being a quaint historical village street or being a modern commercial strip development.

"The irony is that Main Street has a genuine identity under the distractions, in its historic buildings which have not been generally appreciated for their inherent values and character," Null wrote.

"It is paramount to recognize ... that the vast majority of the original and historic structures on the street remain standing today, even if disguised."

1. North Elba Town Hall (1916)

The first stop on our walking tour of historic Main Street buildings is the North Elba Town Hall. Like many of the important buildings of the day, it was designed by architect Floyd Brewster, scion of a Lake Placid pioneer family, in the restrained Neo-Classical style.

The first Town Hall, built on the same site in 1903, was called "The Tin Playhouse" for its tin sheathing. That building burned in 1915.

The interior of today's Town Hall was completely gutted and rebuilt in 1977-78 in the runup to the 1980 Olympics. The clock tower was rebuilt in 1986.

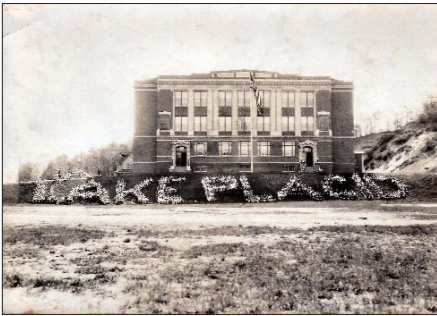
2. Lake Placid High School (1922; 1934-35; 2001-02)

Across Main Street from the Town Hall stands the impressive "new" Lake Placid High School, looking down on the site where the village's first high school was built in 1901. Another Neo-Classical structure, the central and southern portions of the building seen from the road were added in 1934 to a much smaller structure erected in 1922. It's hard to tell where the original structure ends and the newer portion begins because the designs are so completely in



The North Elba Town Hall, across Main Street from the Lake Placid High School.

sync. A major addition, not visible from Main Street, was built in the first years of the new century, behind the older building.



Above, the modern facade of the Lake Placid High School, framed by flags flying in front of the Olympic Center. Upper left, a pre-1934 postcard of the high school, at that time consisting only of what is now the school's North Wing, built in 1922. Lower left, students and faculty spell out "Lake Placid" on the slope below the school in this archival photo.

3. Olympic Center (1932; 1977; 1984)

Immediately north of the high school is the Lake Placid Olympic Center, built in three stages. The historic core of the building is the Neo-Classical brick-faced, steel-arched Olympic Arena, built in 1932 by distinguished Adirondack architect William Distin, protege of Great Camp designer William Coulter, of Saranac Lake.

Three attachments have been added to the dignified 1932 Arena, none very gracefully. To the north a low-lying, utilitarian box of a building contains the Lussi Rink and the Lake Placid-North Elba Visitors Bureau. To the south and west rises the 1980 Olympic Arena, a very modern structure, attractive in its own way but architecturally incompatible with the 1932 Arena. Connecting the 1932 and 1980 buildings is a small "link building," constructed in the mid-1980s.



Three views of Lake Placid's Olympic Center. Above, an archival shot of the 1932 Arena. Below, the 1932 Arena today. Below left, the 1980 fieldhouse.



4. Lake Placid fire house (1912)

Look at the red brick building that stands across Main Street from the Olympic Center. In your mind's eye, take away the signs for Cunningham's Ski Barn, erected after the village sold the building in the 1980s; take away the 1-story, concrete block addition to the south, built after 1945; replace the storefront with two, big doors, and there you will have Lake Placid's early firehouse. The tall, brick tower rising at the rear was for hanging hoses to dry after a fire.

5. Adirondack Community Church (1923; 1958)

This is the second Methodist church built on this lakeside site. The first building was bought whole in 1923, when construction of the new building began, and moved a couple of blocks down Main Street next to the Speedskating Oval. It's been used ever since as a restaurant or nightclub. In the former church's latest incarnation, it's known as "Wiseguys."

The stone of the Neo-Gothic main building of the Adirondack Community Church was drawn from a granite quarry in Au Sable Forks. An addition, Erdman Hall, was built in 1958 on the north side of the building.

6. WWI Memorial (mid-1920s)

A small stone memorial to the eight Lake Placid boys who died in World War I stands in a quiet, dignified garden overlooking Mirror Lake, just below the Adirondack Community Church. The date of the memorial is uncertain.



Lake Placid's old fire station, next to the post office on Main Street.



Left, Placid's World War I Veterans Memorial. Above, Adirondack Community Church.



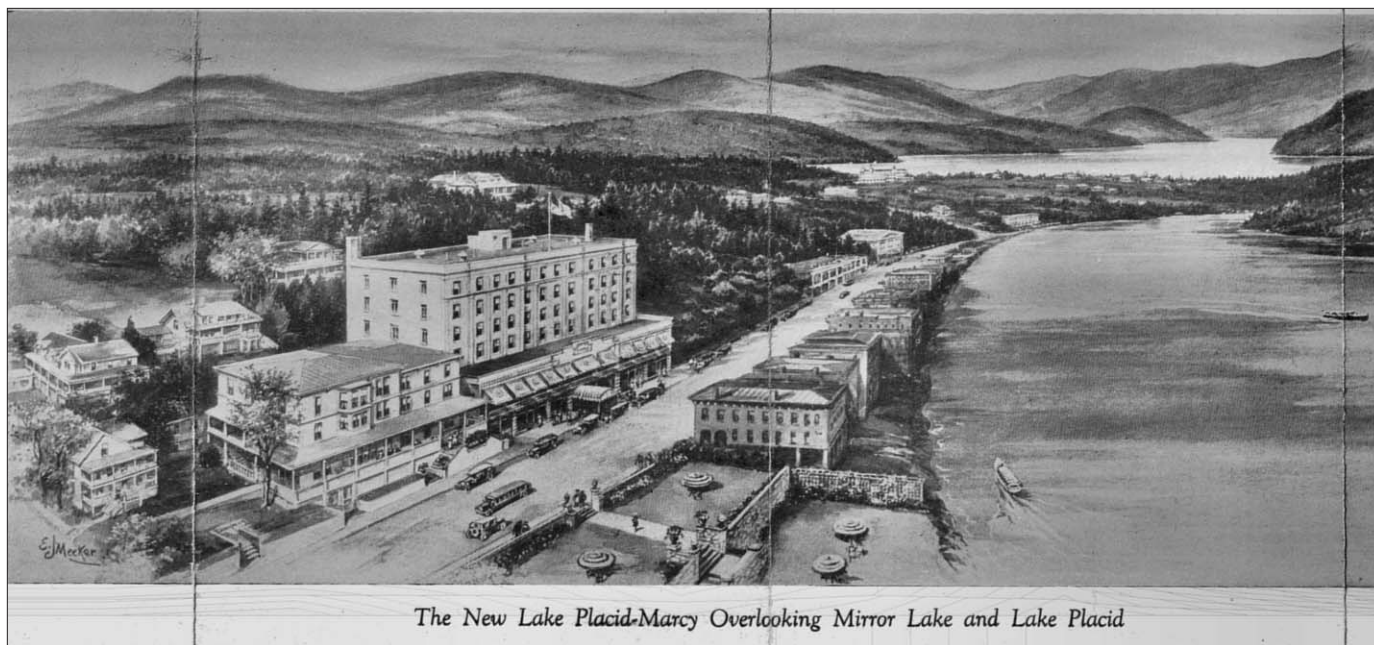
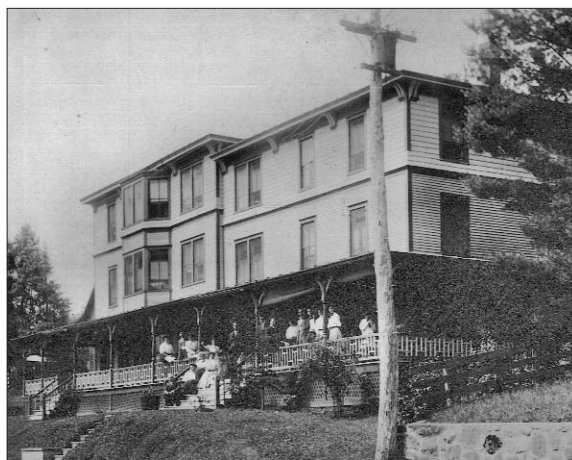
7. Northwoods Inn/Hotel Marcy (1897; 1927; 1967)

The building that now bears the name “Northwoods Inn,” at the south end of the central stretch of Main Street, is actually the Hotel Marcy, Lake Placid’s first fireproof hotel, opened in 1927. The real Northwoods Inn, opened in 1897, a hostel adjacent to and south of the Marcy, ironically burned to the ground in December 1966. The concrete-block structure now standing on that site was hurriedly erected the year following the fire.

The Marcy and the Northwoods Inn were simple, elegant structures, in sharp contrast to the buildings now standing in their place.



Above, the Northwoods Inn today. Left, a 1920s postcard of the Hotel Marcy. Below, a 1900s archival shot of the original Northwoods Inn. Bottom, an architect’s 1927 rendering of the new Hotel Marcy, just before it opened.



The New Lake Placid-Marcy Overlooking Mirror Lake and Lake Placid

8. Lamoy House/Alford Inn/Peacock Building (1880; later additions)

Nestled within the structure of the bizarre, warehouse-like, rustic Tudor-industrial gift store on the lot north of the Marcy is the oldest extant edifice on Main Street. In the fall of 1880 Marshall Lamoy, a Wilmington immigrant, built a large, handsome house on the hillside here. After running it as a boarding house for some years, the Lamoys sold it in 1900 to the Rev. William Moir, rector of St. Eustace-by-the-Lakes, the new Episcopal church in town. After Moir's death, it passed to North Elba farmer Harvey Alford in 1919. Six years later he made a large addition to the south end of the house, calling it the Alford Inn. In 1937 the name was changed again, to the Lake Placid Inn, after the famous lake-side hotel that had burned in 1920. The "LPI" operated until the 1970s, when it was sold to Eastern Mountain Sports and became a retail store. What is now the first floor was excavated out of the hillside beneath the Alford Inn/LPI in the 1990s by new owner Greg Peacock.



An archival shot of the Lamoy house in December 1901, showing a horse-drawn sleigh traversing Main Street. The house was enlarged in 1925 when it served as the Alford Inn. Below, the building has been transformed into Adirondack Decorative Arts & Crafts.

9. Happy Hour Theatre/Wanda Building (1911; additions, 1920s)

At 117 Main stands another "building within a building." As you face it, imagine a building about half the size, three stories high, simple, elegant, with a hipped roof. That building, the 1911 Happy Hour Theatre, Lake Placid's first cinema house, stands as the core of the Wanda Building. The Happy Hour was bought by the company that built the larger, more modern Palace Theatre, a few blocks up Main Street, in 1926. Converted into an apartment building with storefronts, it was substantially expanded in the 1920s.



Left, the Happy Hour Theatre as it appeared on the cinema program for August 3, 1925.

Right, the Wanda Building today. An extra floor has been added, and design features that lent the Happy Hour grace have disappeared.



10. Former St. Eustace Parish Hall (1901)

The building that currently houses the Imagination Station store, at 107 Main Street, was originally built as a “parish hall” or community center for the St. Eustace Episcopal congregation. It housed a gymnasium, a lecture and dance hall, bowling alleys, game rooms and a boat house. In 1915 the building was sold to George Stevens, of Stevens House fame, who converted it for commercial use.



11. Masonic Temple (1916)

Next door to the former parish hall, local architect Floyd Brewster designed the Neo-Classical Masonic Temple, built in 1916 and substantially unaltered today.

Photos below: On the left is the former St. Eustace parish hall, today a storefront and apartment building. On the right is the Lake Placid Masonic Temple today.



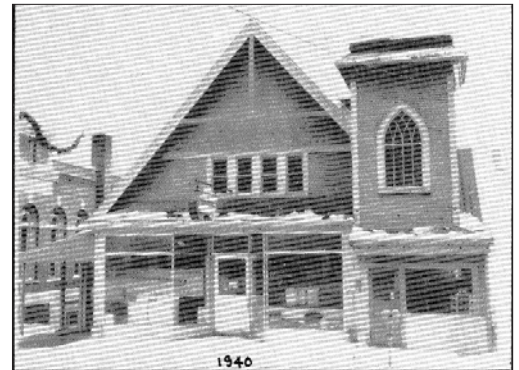
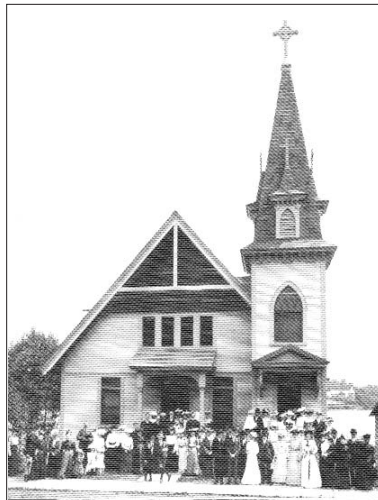
12. St. Agnes No. 1/Ben & Jerry's (1896; addition between 1908 & 1917)

Take a look at the building at 83 Main St. while you still can. The owners of the building where Ben & Jerry currently has its store have big redevelopment plans that will leave the structure’s historic origins utterly unrecognizable.

What you’re looking at, believe it or not, is the original St. Agnes Catholic Church, built in 1896. The congregation grew so quickly that, by 1906, a new church had been erected on Saranac Avenue, the predecessor of the current church building.

The old Main Street building was sold to Frank Walton, who removed the steeple before moving in the stock and fixtures from his Mill Hill hardware store. A major addition to the building was erected sometime between 1908 and 1917.

When the Lake Placid Hardware Store went out of business in 1990, the old church windows from St. Agnes No. 1 were still stored in the basement.



Upper left, St. Agnes Church, Main Street, 1896. Upper right, Lake Placid Hardware, 1940. Lower left, Ben & Jerry's today. Lower right, architect's rendering of the next version of St. Agnes No. 1.



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14. Lake Placid Public Library (1886; later additions)

One of the oldest buildings on Main Street, as well as one of the most attractive, the Lake Placid Public Library was built for just \$1,200. Even adjusted for inflation, that's still less than \$25,000 in modern money — quite a bargain. The shingle-style cottage has been refurbished and added to several times, but it has retained its original character very well. For a special treat, visit the quiet lakeside garden on the rear of the library lot, overlooking Mirror Lake.



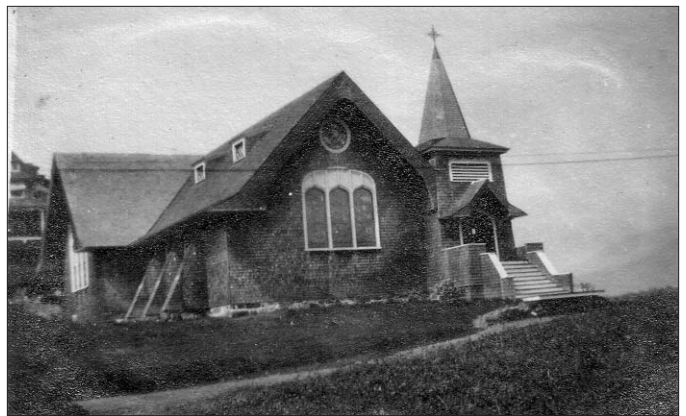
15. St. Eustace Episcopal Church (1900; moved 1926)

St. Eustace-by-the-Lakes, one of Lake Placid's two turn-of-the-20th-century Episcopal churches, was originally built on the corner of Lake Street and Victor Herbert Road, between Mirror and Placid lakes. The building was designed by renowned Great Camp architect William Coulter.

After maintaining two churches for more than 20 years, however, the congregation sold its St. Hubert's Church (since destroyed by fire) in the Newman neighborhood south of Lake Placid, and decided to move St. Eustace to a church-owned lot on Main Street. Coulter protegee William Distin supervised the dismantling of the church, the numbering of its component parts, and the reconstruction of the church. The original wood tower was replaced with a taller stone tower on the opposite front corner of the building, possibly to visually anchor the building on its new corner lot.

Inside, an authentic Tiffany stained-glass window depicts Whiteface Mountain and Lake Placid, figuratively depicting "an experience of spiritual redemption in the wilderness," according to Null.

"With its dark-stained siding, random stone tower and simple detailing, the church is a fine example of almost-rustic Gothic Revival," wrote Null. "Its siting overlooking the village park and lake, and conversely its high visibility, make it a focal point of the center of the village. Its excellent state of preservation enhances its value. ... St. Eustace must be ranked as one of the most important buildings on Main Street."



Above, St. Eustace-by-the-Lakes, circa 1910.
Below, St. Eustace on Main Street today.



16. Palace Theatre (1926)

Lake Placid's second — and only surviving — movie house is the Palace Theatre. Outside, the building retains its Neo-Classical cast-stone detailing, including the large central window, lotus-capital pilasters and pediment. Inside, through several subdivisions of the theater space to increase the number of viewing rooms, the interior design has preserved the late Art Nouveau stenciling and other details on the walls, even going so far as to reproduce them on the new interior walls. The main theater, on the ground floor, is graced by the Palace's original Robert Morton pipe organ, restored in 1998 and played for the Palace's annual silent-film festival each October.



17. Pioneers monument

In the park at the head of Main Street, overlooking Mirror Lake, is a small stone with a memorial legend carved in its face. The memorial honors the two men who, with their families, pioneered the settlement along the lake shore: Joe Nash and Benjamin Brewster. Main Street itself was created by carving up Nash's farm in the late 19th century and selling it piece-meal to the homebuilders, hoteliers and entrepreneurs who were creating the first version of modern-day Lake Placid village.

If it's not too chilly or too wet, sit down in this little green park, look out over the stillness of Mirror Lake, and contemplate the century-and-a-quarter of Lake Placid history through which you have just walked. You have been given a glimpse into a side of the Olympic Village rarely afforded to anyone, neither visitors nor residents. Maybe, now that you know a little about the avenue's origins and development, your next shopping trip down Main Street will be a little more meaningful for you.

