Lake Placid's first hotels

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Lake Placid Public Library,
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Today Lake Placid is known the world over as a double-Olympic village, a comfortable base for treks into the Adirondack High Peaks, and a prime four-season resort.

But in 1871, Lake Placid consisted of just two farmhouses: One belonged to Joseph Nash; the other, to Benjamin Brewster.

Brewster's land ran up Signal Hill, between Placid and Mirror lakes, and all the way around the "Morningside" of Mirror Lake.

Nash owned most of Mirror Lake's west side.

Nash had bought his tract in 1850, when he was 23.

Brewster, Nash's brother-in-law, followed a year later. He was 22.

Joe Nash boarded a small but steady stream of travelers in his home, expanding his "Red House" in 1855 to accommodate the growing traffic.

It was Ben Brewster, however, who built the first real hotel in Lake Placid - that is, the first building specifically meant as a hostelry. In 1871 he erected a big frame structure between the lakes, with a big front porch. He called it the Lake Placid House, though most folks knew it simply as Brewster's.

In his book, "History of the Adirondacks," Alfred Donaldson described Brewster's as "ugly, jerry-built and primitive in the extreme - unpainted, two-storied, with only 10 rooms, nails for coat hooks, barrels for tables, doors leading nowhere, and a leaky roof," recounted Mary MacKenzie, the Lake Placid historian.

"Unpainted it may have been for a time, but otherwise a different story is told by Seneca Ray Stoddard's 1873 photo of the Lake Placid House," MacKenzie wrote. "It was, in fact, a commodious, three-story, sturdy and honest structure, and quite attractive in a backcountry fashion."

The Lake Placid House's could accommodate 60 guests.

Though the railroad wouldn't arrive until 1894, an ever-growing flood of tourists came by horse, foot and carriage to Lake Placid. In 1876, just 5 years after his brother-in-law opened the Lake Placid House, Joe Nash built the settlement's second hotel, called Excelsior House, high on Signal Hill above, directly across from today's St. Agnes Catholic Church.

"It was a pretty little structure," MacKenzie said, "3-1/2 stories high, with a broad veranda and an observation outlook. Capacity was 90."

Nash built the place as an investment, not as a new career. He leased it for a couple of years to Moses Ferguson, then sold the inn to John Stevens, a 30-year-old from Plattsburgh. The new owner promptly renamed it Stevens House.

BUSINESS GREW, but competition was growing, too, and quickly. Moses Ferguson left the Excelsior to build his own hotel in 1878, this one on an even

Brewster's Lake Placid House, the hotel that started it all. Built in 1871, it was the first structure erected specifically as a hotel. This photo was taken by Seneca Ray Stoddard in 1873, just a couple of years after the hotel opened.

higher hill close to the middle of Mirror Lake's western shore.

"Only 20 years before," MacKenzie wrote, "Joe Nash had trapped a panther on the very spot where Ferguson erected a little hotel, aptly named the Grand View. A small, plain but tidy building, it boasted three stories capped with an observation look-out, and an encircling veranda amply stocked with rocking chairs."

The Grand View occupied the site where the Lussi family now operates the Lake Placid Resort Holiday Inn.

Within 4 years, two more hotels were built at the base of the hill below the Grand View. The first, Allen House, was opened in 1880. The proprietor, Henry Allen, had managed Brewster's since 1876. He also ran the stagecoach line connecting Lake Placid with the railroad depot in Au Sable Forks.

"Architecturally, Allen House was totally unlike the typical boxy Adirondack hotel of the period," Mary MacKenzie wrote, "and it was big, easily outclassing its three competitors. It could accommodate 100 guests."

In his Adirondack guidebook, Seneca Ray Stoddard gave the Allen House top marks.

"A great, roomy, rambling structure," he wrote.

So successful was Allen House that, after just 1 year's operation, Allen was in a position to buy the Grand View above, operating the two hotels together for several years.

In the meantime, Allen House got a new neighbor: the Mirror Lake House, opened in 1882 by Joe Nash's daughter Hattie and her husband Charlie Green. The graceful little four-story structure, with a three-story rear wing, could accommodate 75 guests.

Joe Nash's Excelsior House was renamed the Stevens House, seen here in an engraving from the tourist picture book, "Among the Adirondacks."

The Mirror Lake House (not to be confused with today's Mirror Lake Inn, at the northern end of the lake) must have been an instant success, for after just one summer's operation it drew a hefty offer from Silas and Spencer Prime, of Upper Jay, to buy the hotel.

When the Allen House burned in 1886, the Mirror Lake's only nearby competition was the Grand View.

Ira Isham, of Plattsburgh, bought the Mirror Lake in 1888 and immediately set about with a major improvement program. In 1889 he installed an electric plant, making the hotel one of the first electrified buildings in the area.

Isham also expanded the building so that, by 1890, "the Mirror Lake ... was a magnificent, imposing palace of a place, the likes of which had never before been seen in the North Country," MacKenzie wrote.

But in 1894 the Mirror Lake House burned to the ground, suffering the fate of most of the grand, old, wood-frame hotels of the early Adirondacks, leaving

The Stevens House, as seen in a portion of a 1911 panoramic photo.

only the Grand View on the hill that bore its name.

Under Henry Allen's leadership, the Grand View grew and grew, reaching its final proportions by 1900.

TO THE NORTH, the Stevens House was experiencing one successful season after another.

Then came Christmas Eve 1885. At 8 a.m. that day, an overheated stovepipe caught the upper rooms afire. Before long, the entire building was ablaze.

John Stevens and his partner, brother George Stevens, pulled themselves together and, the next spring, set about rebuilding a bigger, better hotel. Even a microburst that tore down the nearly finished framework on May 14, 1886, couldn't stop them; the new hotel opened that July 4.

It was an amazing place, "a splendid structure, built on lines of classic simplicity," wrote MacKenzie. "It was four stories high, with a wide, encircling piazza [porch] on the ground floor and a central observation tower. The appointments were lavish."

The new Stevens House could accommodate 200 guests; a major expansion 14 years later doubled that.

Meanwhile, down the hill at Brewster's, things were much more quiet. The Stevens brothers had bought Ben out 1887, putting the Lake Placid House in the hands of caretakers.

The Grand View Hotel, at the turn of the century.

Lake Placid's original hotel changed hands two more times before being sold in 1897 to George Cushman, who immediately began a breathtaking expansion of the property.

"The result was a spacious and imposing four-story structure. An unnamed architect finished off the facade in a style that might be called Adirondack Gothic," wrote MacKenzie.

To modern architectural critics, MacKenzie observed, "the building comes across as grandiose, even a bit absurd, but it was greatly admired in its day. Dominating the rise of land between the two lakes, the new Lake Placid House was quite a sight. Given its size and location, it shows up in the majority of the early Lake Placid picture postcards and photos."

Extraordinary as were the results, the cost of financing the expansion was too much for the Lake Placid House. It went into foreclosure just a couple of years later.

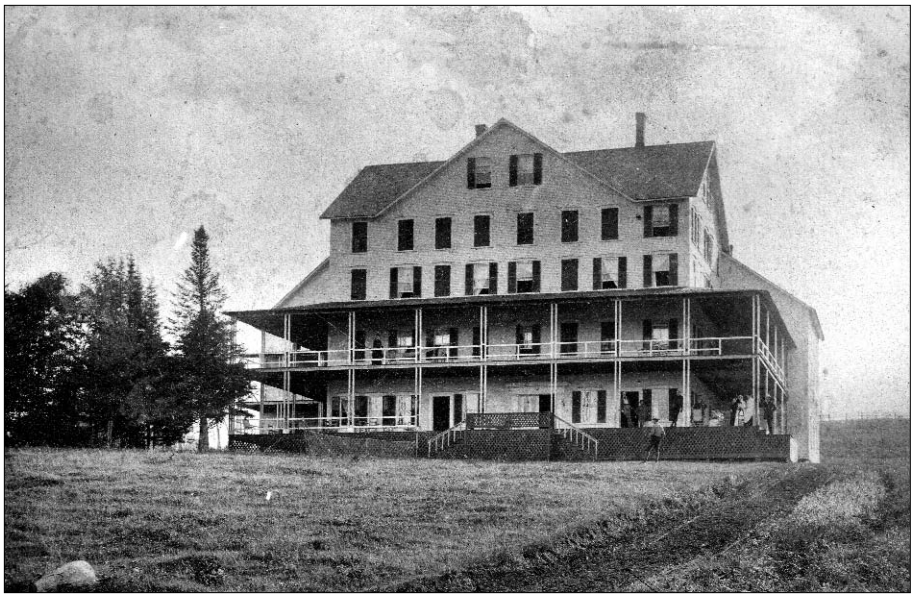
BY THE TURN of the 20th century, the Stevens House, Lake Placid House and Grand View were no longer alone on the Lake Placid hospitality scene.

Ever since he built the Excelsior, Joe Nash had been engaging in a brisk real estate trade, selling off the lots that quickly became the homes, shops and small hotels of early Lake Placid's Main Street.

When the railroad finally made it to Lake Placid in 1894, access to the area was made relatively easy, and tourism grew exponentially.

In 1900, the village of Lake Placid incorporated. By the end of the 20th century's first decade, the village had paved streets.

It all started with two young pioneers, Joe Nash and Ben Brewster, and their pioneering Lake Placid hotels: Nash's "Red House," Brewster's Lake Placid House, and the Excelsior.



The Mirror Lake House, built below the Grand View by Joe Nash's daughter Hattie and her husband Charlie Green, burned in 1894.

A panoramic photograph looking out on the veranda of the Grand View, 1912.

The fate of the big three

The Grand View, in 1922, became Lake Placid's first Jewish-owned hotel, breaking the Adirondacks' notorious ethnic barrier. A refuge for refugees of Hitler's Third Reich during World War II, the Grand View closed in 1956. It was razed in 1961, making way for the Holiday Inn.

Stevens House was financially crippled by the stock market crash of 1929. Auctioned off in 1933, the hotel was taken over for taxes by Essex County a decade later. It was bought in 1947 for the express purpose of demolishing what had become a notorious eyesore.

Lake Placid House operated successfully until 1920, when a pair of fires finished off the inn that contained at its core the village's original hotel.

The Lake Placid House, in an undated photo.