

Historic schoolhouses of North Elba

Story by Lee Manchester
Archival photos courtesy Lake Placid Public Library
and Gertrude Torrance Hare

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When today's Lake Placid visitors consider what the Olympic Village's old schools must have looked like, they may think of the earliest portion of the handsome, neo-classical Lake Placid High School building, overlooking the Speedskating Oval, the Olympic Center and North Elba's town hall.

The truth is, the modern Lake Placid High School building is the end product of an evolution in educational architecture that dates back to the first decade of the 19th century.

Some visitors might be interested in the fact that, in one form or another, all of the early Lake Placid schoolhouses — or, at least, their immediate successors — are still standing. For those with a few hours to spare, we've put together a car trip back in time through the roads around North Elba township to those old one-room schoolhouses.

As with our other historical surveys, this article depends on extensive research and original materials painstakingly compiled by the late local historian Mary MacKenzie. Her files are housed in the archives of the Lake Placid Public Library.

The first school

This area was first settled around 1800. No one homesteaded anywhere near Mirror or Placid lakes until 1850. The first colony here was established in a settlement that came to be called North Elba, some miles to the south of present-day Lake Placid. By 1810, the 40 families settled there had already erected a log schoolhouse for their children's use.

The "year without a summer," in

1816, drove three-quarters of the first colony out of the Adirondacks. The dust cloud created by the 1815 volcanic explosion of Mount Tambora, on the Javanese island of Sumbawa — said to have been 10 times more powerful than the Krakatoa explosion of 1883 — covered the sun for months, causing snow and frost in northern New York and New England well into August 1816.

The last living memory of the first North Elba schoolhouse was related to Mary MacKenzie by a local centenarian, who recalled that, as a little girl, she had seen its ruins still huddled behind the Torrance Farm on Heart Lake (Adirondack Lodge) Road, across Route 73 from where a later North Elba School building still stands.

'Little Red Schoolhouse'

The next attempt to settle North Elba after the "year without a summer" was more successful than the first. A second wave of immigration came here in the 1840s. By 1850, North Elba once again had about 40 families.

The first school built for the new settlers' families became known locally as the Little Red Schoolhouse. It was erected in 1848 on the corner of Sentinel Road and Summer Street on land donated by Iddo Osgood, a holdover from the first colony.

A couple of years later, when North Elba township voted to secede from Keene, the only public building available for the organizational meeting was Little Red.

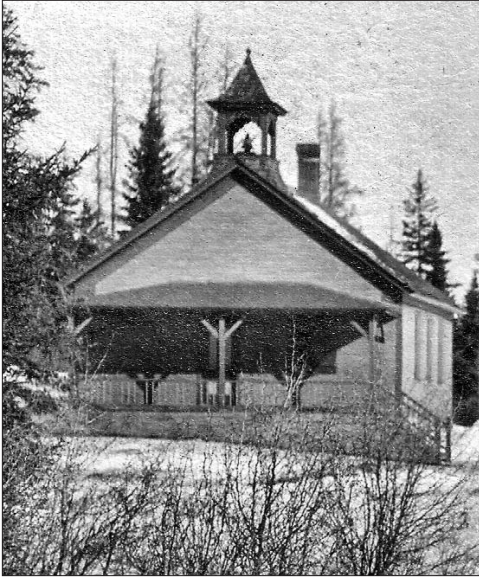
Even when the village of Lake Placid began growing up around Main Street in the 1870s, Little Red was the school Placid's children attended. A private school opened by the local librarian on Main Street in 1885 took some of the growth pressure off the Little Red Schoolhouse, succeeded in 1887 by a one-room public school built below the present high school site across from Town Hall.

The school in the village grew and grew by addition until, by 1902, it had become a two-story, barn-like structure with an enrollment of 335 students.

Growth continued. By the middle of the decade from 1910 to 1920, Lake Placid had begun debating construction



The "old wooden high school," which stood below the present high school on Main Street, started in 1887 as a one-room schoolhouse for the new Lake Placid hamlet.



North Elba's "Little Red Schoolhouse," seen on the left in a 1911 postcard, stands today on Johnson Road at Summer Street.

of an altogether new school building. In the midst of that discussion, in 1915, the Little Red Schoolhouse finally closed its doors as an educational institution.

Ten years later the Nov. 20, 1925, issue of the Lake Placid News reported that Little Red had been purchased by a private party. The house was moved one block over on Summer Street, from Sentinel to Johnson Road, "one of the streets in the new Hurley and Johnson tract, where it is to be hoped it may for many more years witness the continued development of the village."

Today, almost 80 years after its move,

Little Red is the home of the James Wilson family. Without a photo in hand of the old schoolhouse, it may be difficult to see Little Red in the Wilson home. The house today, however, has the same roof lines as the old school, and the enclosed porch corresponds pretty clearly to the old open porch of the one-room schoolhouse.

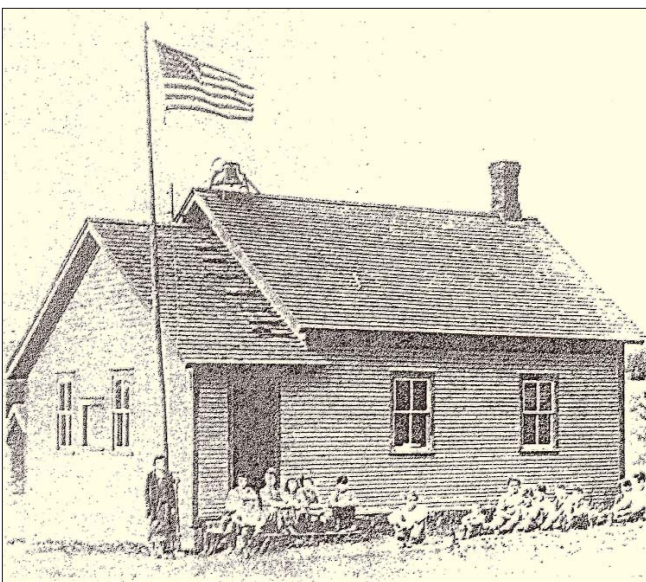
North Elba School

A couple of years after the Little Red School was opened, families in the old North Elba settlement built a new schoolhouse for themselves across the

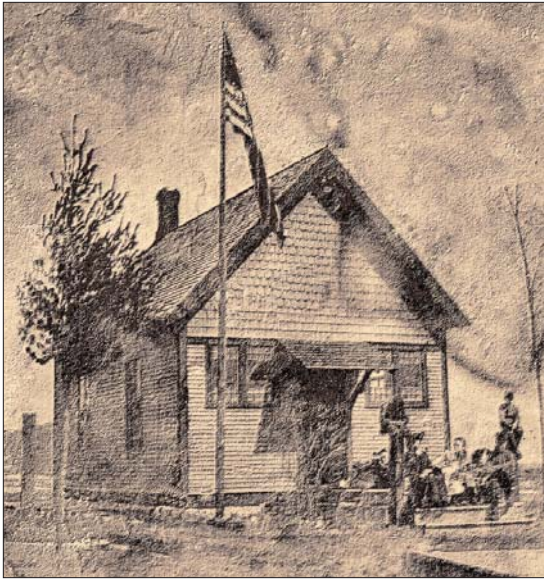
Keene road from the Torrance Farm, where the original log schoolhouse had stood. Gerrit Smith, founder of North Elba's famous Black colony, sold the land for the new schoolhouse to the school district for \$1 in 1850.

That second log schoolhouse stayed in use for some years. It was torn down in 1886, and a frame building was erected in its place. In 1920, a small vestibule was added to the west end facing the road, containing a cloakroom and rest-rooms — thus, the double roof line still evident in the structure.

"Back in the old days, when school



The North Elba School is seen at left in a photograph taken between 1920 and 1924. At right is the home belonging to Gertrude Torrance Hare that has been redesigned around the old schoolhouse. Mrs. Hare attended North Elba School as a youngster.



At left is a very rough photograph of the Cascade School, built in 1879. Since 1940 the old schoolhouse has been a residence, right, belonging to the family of current resident Marie Goff Senecal.

buses were not available to bring pupils of outlying sections in to the village to attend classes in a luxurious central school, at times there were 85 pupils in the one-room (North Elba School) building on the Cascade road, one teacher teaching all grades,” said a Lake Placid News article on Jan. 24, 1941.

Gertrude Torrance, born in 1919, lived as a child on her father Rollie’s farm across the road from the North Elba School, which she attended.

“I started school when I was 5 years old,” she recalled, “and went there through the 6th grade, a few years before they centralized. They drove us in to Lake Placid in a Pierce Arrow car.

“My sister stayed on, though, for a little (at the North Elba School) — she was 4 years younger than me. By the time the school closed, there were only four students going.”

The last class at the North Elba School was held in 1936. The building was sold in August 1941 to school-board trustee Rollie Torrance. Twelve years later he deeded the school building to his daughter, Gertrude Torrance Hare. Mrs. Hare still lives in the converted schoolhouse with her husband Walter.

The former North Elba School house stands today on Route 73, opposite the entrance to the Adirondack Lodge Road. The old building is only barely recognizable within the expanded structure the Hares have built around it. Little but the

old double roof line can still be seen of the North Elba School in the Hare home today.

Cascade School

In 1879, Sabrina Goff deeded half an acre to a new school district situated at the far end of North Elba township, on the Cascade Road to Keene Center. Jacob Wood, grandfather of famed local golf pro Craig Wood, built the schoolhouse for \$240.

A 1911 yearbook indicates that the Cascade School was, in large part, a Goff family operation, though three other families’ children also attended. Three of the 10 pupils were Goffs, as were the district trustee and clerk.

The Cascade School was one of the last of the one-room schools still holding class in North Elba township — possibly the very last one — and the farthest away from the Lake Placid Central School. When the question of closing the school was debated in August 1940, Chairman C. Walter Goff broke the 4-4 tie vote to send the Cascade children in to Lake Placid.

“The call for the closing of the school was issued by the Lake Placid Central School to eliminate the expense of a teacher,” read the Aug. 30, 1940, issue of the Lake Placid News, “inasmuch as the board of education did not think the number of pupils attending warranted it.”

Albert Goff purchased the building after the school was closed, turning it into a summer home. Albert deeded it to his nephew Harold Goff; Harold’s widow, Marie Goff Senecal, still lives in it. The homes of Harold and Marie’s children surround the old schoolhouse.

Standing on the left side of Route 73 just past the entrance to Mount Van Hoevenberg on the way from Lake Placid to Keene, the Cascade School building has been extended in the rear, but the form of the old schoolhouse has been lovingly preserved in the structure, as seen in the bell tower.

Averyville School

Out on the Averyville Road stands another of North Elba township’s early one-room schoolhouses. The yellow, frame building is the second of the Averyville settlement’s schools.

The first Averyville School was built sometime in the first half of the 19th century, after Simeon Avery settled here in 1819. That building was sold in 1888 and moved to a farm run by Frank Alford, who later moved to Main Street and operated the Alford Inn, next to the Marcy. Mary MacKenzie could find no evidence of the first school building’s survival anywhere in the township.

The second Averyville School, built in 1888 when the first school was moved off the site, was closed at the end of the 1932 school term. The building was sold

at auction in 1936 to Lester E. Otis.

“He (Otis) has partitioned it off into rooms and made an attractive cottage which is used by the family on occasion,” read a Lake Placid News article of April 21, 1939. “The schoolhouse property is cultivated as a vegetable garden.”

“For a long time it has been a part of the Malone family summer residence property,” MacKenzie wrote in November 2001. “Sadly, it has long been neglected and now presents a very shabby and forlorn appearance.

“An effort should be made at some level to restore this historic little building,” MacKenzie added. “There have been no additions made to it, and the bell tower readily identifies it as an old rural schoolhouse.”

The house is on the right-hand side of the Averyville Road, past several sharp curves, about 3 miles from the Old Military Road.

Ray Brook School

The last school on our little tour is in Ray Brook, between Lake Placid and Saranac Lake.

The original one-room Ray Brook schoolhouse was built before 1876 on the road off Route 86 that now leads to a federal prison. That school either burned or was demolished, according to MacKenzie; no trace of it has been identified.

Another school was built on the Old Ray Brook Road between 1903 and 1905 for the children of the employees at the new state tuberculosis hospital.

An odd bit of history concerning the Ray Brook School was recorded in 1915 in the Lake Placid News:

“Shortly after entering upon his duties (as school district trustee) last August, (Merle L.) Harder cut the schoolhouse in two and started to remove part to another site,” the LPN reported. “His action

was declared illegal, and the removal of the part of the building stopped after it had been gotten on trucks. He was directed to replace the school house upon its foundations and restore it to its former condition.”

Exactly when the Ray Brook School was closed, we do not know. According to Charles Damp, current resident of the old schoolhouse, the building was used as a community center through the 1950s.

“He (Damp) has made many improvements,” MacKenzie wrote, “but has retained the bell tower so that the building still has the look of an old schoolhouse.”

The 100-year-old Ray Brook School can still be recognized as the core of the modern Damp house.



At left is the former Averyville School, built in 1888, now a dilapidated, abandoned summer residence. At the core of the house on the right is the former Ray Brook School, built around 1904, now the home of Charles Damp.