



'Seeing the furnace for the trees'

Archeological study released on 19th century iron-mining 'ghost town' in Newcomb

By Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, February 18, 2005

ADIRONDAC — Sometime soon, the Adirondack Park Agency will be considering a proposal to subdivide a 10,000-acre tract in Newcomb township. Known as the Tahawus Tract, the property includes the southern trail-heads to the central High Peaks, the headwaters of the Hudson River, a remarkably intact 19th century blast furnace, and a ghost town called Adirondac (that's right, no "k").

The Newcomb tract was purchased a couple of years ago from National Lead Company by the private Open Space Institute for \$8.5 million, which OSI borrowed from the state's Environmental Protection Fund.

The idea was that about 6,800 acres to the north would ultimately be sold back to the state for inclusion in the Forest Preserve. Three thousand acres to the south would be sold for sustainable timber management. In the center of the tract, a permanent historic district of about 200 acres would be set aside to preserve and study the 150-year-old Adirondac iron plantation.

A report was released earlier this winter on one of the steps that had been taken to help pinpoint the boundaries of an Adirondac Historic District: an extensive archeological survey of the site.

The report is called "Seeing the

Furnace for the Trees: Archeological Reconnaissance Survey of the Adirondack Iron and Steel Company's Upper Works." The cute title refers to a stone blast furnace on the site that rises through the forest canopy like a displaced Mayan temple ruin.

The study was conducted by the Cultural Resource Survey Program of the New York State Museum, which prepared its report for the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

Knowing of the report's pending release, a Lake Placid News reporter asked DEC Historic Preservation Officer Charles E. Vandrei to walk through the site with him last November. Vandrei, who had coordinated the field work for the State Museum study, described the project and what it found.

Why another study?

It's not like the Adirondac site has never been studied before — it has, again and again. In fact, there may be more already written about the ghost town of Adirondac than most of the "live" towns in Essex County. Three Adirondac publications, however, stand out above the others:

- "The Story of Adirondac," privately published in 1923 by author Arthur

H. Masten, was reprinted in 1968 with an introduction and notes by William K. Verner of the Adirondack Museum.

- A chapter from Harold K. Hochschild's legendary 1952 history, "Township 34," was published separately in 1962 by the Adirondack Museum under the title, "The MacIntyre Mine: From Failure to Fortune."

- In 1978, two years after Adirondac was placed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Historic American Engineering Record commissioned Bruce E. Seely to prepare a thorough documentary report on the iron works. Seely made extensive use of the correspondence of Archibald McIntyre, works owner, which had been preserved in the Adirondack Museum research library. Seely's complete report, titled "Adirondack Iron and Steel Company: 'New Furnace,' 1849-1854," can be found on the HAER Web site.

Seely's study "drew up a series of sketch maps showing roughly where things are," Vandrei said, but "you couldn't look at those maps and go to those places on the ground." To do

AT TOP: Lake Henderson, where the Hudson River begins, is part of the Tahawus Tract in Newcomb township

that, a systematic archeological study was needed.

Such a study was also needed to narrow down the boundaries of the Adirondac historic district, Vandrei said.

“When the property was placed on the National Register, they drew this really huge boundary — 780 acres — for a historic district,” he explained. “It took in a lot of ground on the west that didn’t include any sites that really had anything to do with the Adirondac works, and missed about 10 sites on the west shore of Lake Jimmy that did.

“The (HAER report) focused on known things. We were looking farther afield for the unknown.”

Identifying the unknown

This writer had been to Adirondac numerous times before visiting the site with Vandrei in November. He’d spent plenty of time scoping out the 1854 stone blast furnace, 48 feet high and 36 feet wide at the base, standing just off the road to the ghost village.

Never during any of his previous visits, however, had this writer paid attention to a stony, shrub-covered hill immediately east of the trailhead parking lot, at the end of the Adirondac road.

He should have.

That nondescript heap is the remains of a smaller, earlier blast furnace, built in 1844. Sticking out of it at odd angles are some of the iron rods that held that furnace together. Scattered on the ground nearby are numerous castoffs of the iron-making operation: the cast-iron, brick-lined furnace stack; a heavy iron disc on the end of a piston arm, which forced a blast of air out of a blower and into the furnace; and several of the huge, iron hammers used to beat impurities out of the hot, raw iron poured from a yet earlier forge.

Going systematically through about 640 acres of the surrounding terrain, eight archeologists from the State Museum worked in the fall of 2003 and the spring of 2004 with Vandrei and two DEC surveyors to identify



PHOTO FOR HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD BY JET LOWE

The “New Furnace,” built in 1854, rises like an ancient stone tower from the woods outside Adirondac in this 1978 photo.

road beds, industrial debris, garbage dumps, dam works and building foundations.

“We found new stone building foundations that really have to be looked at to determine what they were associated with,” Vandrei said. “We also noticed that a lot of the later structures ... were built on older, pre-existing foundations.”

The iron works went out of business in 1859. Sportsmen’s clubs formed by the heirs of Archibald MacIntyre started re-occupying the ghost village of Adirondac in 1876. Naming their group the Tahawus Club in the late 19th century, the sportsmen eventually tore most of the old buildings down — but many of the new cottages were apparently built on older Adirondac foundations.

Saving MacNaughton

The only Adirondac building still standing intact is called the MacNaughton Cottage, for the MacIntyre grandson who occupied it

while president of the Tahawus Club. The house was built in 1845 for iron-works supervisor Andrew Porteous. In the interim between the iron-making operation and the genesis of the Tahawus Club, it was the home of the Hunter family — first Robert, then David — who were caretakers of the Adirondac remains.

Legends have it that Vice President Teddy Roosevelt was staying as a guest in this house in September 1901 when he learned of the impending death of President McKinley, which would make him the next president of the United States. Documentary evidence, though, shows that T.R. was actually staying in the Tahawus Club clubhouse, a large rooming house that used to stand across the street from the MacNaughton Cottage. The clubhouse was bulldozed in the 1960s by National Lead.

That doesn’t make the MacNaughton Cottage any less historic — or any less worthy of preservation. It was, after all the headquarters

of this important piece of Adirondack industrial history.

Even the little, one-room extension tacked on to the south end of the cottage is significant. Called the “Banking House,” it was home to the tiny McIntyre Bank — the first bank in the Adirondacks.

The MacNaughton Cottage has seen better days. A photo taken at the turn of the last century shows a handsome frame house with a trim lawn on a sleepy, rural lane. Pictures shot by Jet Lowe for the HAER report in 1978 show a solid but utterly abandoned house, windows boarded, paint peeling. By last November, the cottage appeared to be on the verge of collapse.

“It’s in much better shape than it looks,” Vandrei assured a reporter.

Last spring, during visits for the State Museum study, DEC crews shored up the fieldstone foundation of the MacNaughton Cottage with 4-by-4-inch “T” supports.

“I pulled the porch roof off in December,” Vandrei said.

The roof of the front porch, a 20th century addition to the MacNaughton

Cottage, had collapsed since 1978. Still attached to the building, however, it was gradually pulling the cottage over toward the road in front. Vandrei simply cut the bolts connecting the porch roof’s ruins to the house, allowing it to fall safely away from the historic cottage.

“We’ve cleared more of the vegetation away from around the house, too,” Vandrei added. “It looks much less decrepit with all that removed.”

The ceiling of the Banking House had collapsed shortly before our visit to Adirondac last November.

“There was one huge cross-support beam going east-west,” Vandrei said, “held up on either end by a single 1½-inch wooden pin. The north-south beams, to which the ceiling was nailed, were just laid across notches in that main support beam.

“When one of those two wooden pins disintegrated, the whole ceiling came down.”

Vandrei salvaged the framework for the ceiling, inventorying and numbering the pieces before stacking them in the MacNaughton Cottage living room for future restoration.

“The roof [of the Banking House] is in good shape though,” Vandrei added — somewhat surprising, since the roof of the cottage itself desperately needs to be replaced. The cottage roofing job was put out to bid last fall, Vandrei said, but outside contractors wouldn’t take it — too remote, he conjectured.

“We’ll probably have to get one of our own crews to do it, when we can,” he said. “Our guys are used to working out in the middle of nowhere with no electricity and no water.”

‘New Furnace’ ruins

The “New Furnace,” built in 1854 and abandoned just 4 years later, is probably the piece of MacIntyre’s 19th century iron works that most people are familiar with. The furnace stands about a mile down the road from the Adirondac hamlet.

The stone blast-furnace tower and the charging-bridge framework that let workers feed ore and fuel into the top of the furnace were originally contained within a building that surrounded the entire complex, as shown in an 1859 pencil sketch by Benson Lossing.

Fourteen years later, an 1873 photo by Seneca Ray Stoddard shows the charging-bridge framework still in place, but the surrounding building completely gone.

By 1900, even the charging bridge had disappeared, as shown in a photograph from the Tahawus Club collection.

Gone now are the buildings that once covered the casting floor below the furnace, where streams of molten iron poured into sandy depressions, or “pigs.”

Gone, also, is the building that housed the waterwheel and pistons for the blower that forced air into the blast furnace — though the huge, broken gear wheels and massive iron piston cylinders still sit in the wheel-house pit on the edge of the Hudson River, just below the stone furnace tower.

DEC crews have recently cleared away the vegetation around the New Furnace itself, Vandrei said, giving the



PHOTO BY LEE MANCHESTER

The remains of the water wheel that powered the blower for the 1854 “New Furnace” at Adirondac lie in the gear pit on the banks of the Hudson River.



ABOVE: PHOTO COURTESY NYS DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

BELOW: PHOTO BY LEE MANCHESTER



The MacNaughton Cottage, in good times and bad. At top, the cottage at the turn of the 20th century, part of the Tahawus Club. At bottom, in November 2004.

structure a little more light to help reduce moisture within the stonework. Moisture buildup causes frost heaves, which could eventually tear the entire structure apart from the inside.

“They cleared the vegetation off the charging platform across the street, too,” Vandrei said, referring to the stepped bridgehead cut into the opposite hillside.

“It now looks even more impressive than the furnace,” he said. “Some of our crew members have joked, ‘This is where the Mayans spent their summers.’”

What now, Adirondac?

The future of the Tahawus Tract in general — and the Adirondac Historic District in particular — is currently in the hands of the Open Space Institute, which still holds the deed to the entire 10,000 acres. Several questions about the tract’s future need to be answered before it can be broken up and sold:

- What boundaries will be proposed for the historic district?
- When will the official subdivision permit application be filed with the Adirondack Park Agency?
- Who will manage the historic district?
- What will happen to the Mount Adams fire tower and the fire-observer’s cabin at the mountain’s foot, both of which also lie within the Tahawus Tract?
- How much will the DEC have to pay OSI for the 6,816 acres of the Tahawus Tract scheduled for inclusion in the Forest Preserve?

Joe Martens, president of the Open Space Institute, gave us the best answers available when we spoke on Feb. 8.

“We are still preparing the APA subdivision application,” he said. “It’s mostly a fairly large mapping job, and the DEC is helping us prepare the actual maps.

“Also involved are the conservation easements that have to be written for the historic district, the fire tower and observer’s cabin, and the 3,000 acres of timberland before the subdivision. Our counsel, Dan Luciano, is the one who’s working on that.

“We’re getting close,” Martens said, “but every time we get a draft finished, we think of something else that needs to be addressed. We have set a target date, though, an informal deadline. By the middle to the end of March, we hope to have the final application in to the APA.”

Once the subdivision permit goes through the APA, OSI will be able to proceed with the sale to New York state of the northern 6,816 acres for addition to the Forest Preserve. The DEC was given a Forest Legacy grant of \$1.7 million in this year’s federal budget to help cover the anticipated \$4.77 million cost.

“We paid about \$700 an acre when we made this purchase in 2003,” Martens said. While the subdivision process has proceeded, OSI has been paying interest on the state loan given to facilitate the purchase, and property taxes to Newcomb township as well.

“The state will have to appraise the land before a final price can be fixed,” said Martens, “but we’re not going to argue about the price, once they set it.”

Managing historic sites

When asked about who would manage the Adirondac Historic District and the Mount Adams properties, Martens said, “OSI will hold onto them until we find a better home for them. The two most likely long-term holders, at this point, are the town of Newcomb and Adirondack Architectural Heritage.”

Adirondack Architectural Heritage, often referred to as AARCH for short (pronounced like the word “arch”), is a Keeseville-based nonprofit organization that, in partnership with Newcomb township and the DEC, manages the nearby Camp Santanoni historic district. Newcomb Supervisor George Canon, who lived in Adirondac for a



ARCHIVAL PHOTO BY SENECA RAY STODDARD

The "New Furnace," left, and the wheelhouse, right, in this archival photo from 1873.

time when he worked for National Lead, is a founding member of AARCH's board of directors, and he has been a tireless advocate for the preservation of the Adirondac hamlet and associated sites.

AARCH Executive Director Steven Engelhart was guardedly enthusiastic when told of Martens' remarks about managing the historic sites.

"For years, we have expressed our interest in seeing the site better managed and better used," Engelhart said, "and we are always ready to help. However, although there have been some preliminary discussions about managing the historic district, there have been no substantial discussions about long-term management.

"I also need to say that AARCH would not undertake a substantial role at Tahawus without ensuring that grants and other significant funding sources were available to cover the costs."

Canon's reaction matched Engelhart's, both in enthusiasm and in caution.

"The town of Newcomb is certainly going to step to the plate, to the greatest extent possible," Canon said. "That's a part of our heritage, especial-

ly the big blast furnace.

"I can see the town and the Newcomb Historical Society joining forces on this. Does that mean we have the resources to do some of the things that have been discussed, like providing interpretive guides on the site? We'll have to wait and see."

As for the fire-observer's cabin and tower at Mount Adams, Martens expressed confidence that a Newcomb group, Friends of the Mount Adams Fire Tower, would play a major role in restoring and managing those historic structures.

"An informal 'friends' group has already been formed around the Mount Adams tower and cabin," Martens said, "which may be able to take from us the responsibility for managing those two sites."

Martens added that OSI was very close to signing off on an application prepared several years ago by fire-tower enthusiast Bill Starr to place the Adams tower and cabin on the National Register of Historic Places.

"Our only concern, at this point, is that the trail between the cabin and the tower never be used for anything other than a foot trail," Martens said. "Apart from that, we support the application."

THE NAMES OF THE PLACE

Several different names are used in different sources to refer to Archibald McIntyre's 19th century iron-mining settlement in Newcomb and its surroundings:

"McIntyre" was the name first given to the iron plantation village, established in the early 1830s.

An "a" was later added to the name, so that some sources show the spelling, "MacIntyre."

When a U.S. post office was finally established at the settlement in 1848, the hamlet was renamed "Adirondac," without the ending "k."

The name of the company that operated the McIntyre works, however, was the "Adirondack Iron and Steel Company," with the ending "k."

Adirondac is sometimes referred to as the "Upper Works." In 1844, owners of the McIntyre company began construction of facilities about 10 miles south of Adirondac on the Hudson, where they hoped to turn the raw Adirondac iron into true steel. That site was called the "Lower Works." Virtually the entire Lower Works was washed away in a catastrophic flood in 1856.

"Tahawus" is the name supposedly given by unnamed "Indians" to Mount Marcy; the name is supposed to mean "Cloudsplitter." The name, however, was a complete fiction created by a tourism writer. It is used by various writers to refer to both the Adirondac settlement — home of the Tahawus Club, starting in 1897 — and to the Lower Works site, to which the Tahawus Club was relocated in 1949.

Tahawus was the actual name of the post office at the Lower Works. When National Lead built a company town in 1943 to house workers for its titanium mine, about 4 miles south of Adirondac, the Tahawus post office was moved there — and so was the name. The NL Tahawus settlement was dissolved in 1963 to give NL more room to dump mine tailings; the Tahawus buildings were sold to workers and moved to the Winebrook development, on the eastern edge of Newcomb hamlet, where they still stand today.