

Discovering 'hidden' New Russia

BY LEE MANCHESTER, LAKE PLACID NEWS, SEPTEMBER 30, 2005

New Russia is a pretty little spot along Route 9 at the southern end of the town of Elizabethtown — but there's more to the hamlet than meets the eye.

That's why we took a drive through New Russia last week with local historian Maggie Bartley: to get the stories behind the beautiful old houses, the quaint village post office, the famously dangerous swimming hole and the turn-of-the-century camps perched high on the hills above the Boquet River.

The area was first settled in 1792 by Revolutionary War veterans from Vermont who bought tracts along the road cut through the Adirondack wilderness by Platt Rogers. The road, which came down from Plattsburgh, hit a stone wall at Split Rock Falls and went no further, at least for the time being.

It was the mechanical power provided by the water flowing down the triple falls of Split Rock that made one of New Russia's early industries possible. The iron forge built by Basil Bishop in 1825 used a huge trip hammer, powered by water from the falls, to beat the impurities out of the raw local iron. Contemporary accounts say that the sound of that hammer could be heard for miles through the woods.

Next to New Russia's white

frame post office, Split Rock Falls may be the hamlet's best known landmark. A place of great natural beauty, the Route 9 pull-off at the top of the falls has been the car park of choice over the years for the thousands of youngsters who have come to swim in the pools formed by the falls.

Two years ago, four counselors from a nearby youth camp were drowned at Split Rock Falls, caught underwater by the incredible hydraulic pressure produced by the

tumbling waters. A small monument to the four boys, built by John E. Glomann Jr. of Keeseville, still stands on the side of Route 9, though it is slowly disintegrating.

Graveyards

"Everything is hidden here," said Maggie Bartley as we turned east off Route 9 onto the dirt driveway leading up to New Russia's oldest cemetery, just a hundred yards or so south of Windy Cliff (we'll go there in a few minutes). Lying buried in the Boquet Cemetery are pioneer settler Elijah Bishop, his brother-in-law and business partner William Kellogg, and quite a few of their neighbors.

This sign for the cemetery says that it was established in the 1790s, but the oldest tombstone inscriptions date only to the early 1800s. Bartley speculates that one old inscriptionless stone may mark the first burial there, "before they were set up to carve a proper headstone."

Another early graveyard can be found on the west side of the



New Russia post office

Lincoln Pond Road, north of the turnoff to the Kingdom Dam. The Simonds graveyard serves as the final resting place for locals who died in the early to mid-19th century — the same period when New Russia was finally given a name.

Essex County Clerk Edmund Williams gave the settlement its name in 1845, at the peak of its iron-mining activity. The name *New Russia* was probably meant to connect the community, by reputation, with the high-grade iron for which Russia was then famous.

“Basically, it was a marketing ploy,” Bartley said.

Schoolhouses

The children of New Russia, like those in many other Adirondack communities, were first educated in small, one-room schoolhouses, scattered around the settlement within walking distance of as many children as possible. According to Bartley, two of New Russia’s three old schoolhouses still survive.

One of them is a tidy, brown, frame structure standing on Route 9, south of the post office, on the east side of the road. With an addition built onto the north end, and without its signature belfry, only the lines of the building and the front alcove still suggest the building’s original function.

The second surviving schoolhouse has also been converted for residential use, though it is currently vacant. It stands on the west side of the Lincoln Pond Road just south of the Kingdom Dam Road intersection, where the Simonds Hill Road used to meet the Lincoln Pond Road before the Northway cut it off. Standing alone in a field, an addition built onto the north end, sans belfry, there is little about the building’s architecture but its lines to indicate its previous purpose.



Split Rock Falls

Lincoln Pond

The Kingdom Dam Road is a winding dirt lane, lined with camp driveways. At its end stands the Kingdom Dam, a 1920s hydro dam that holds back the Black River waters to form the Upper Lincoln Pond.

The original Kingdom Dam was built to harness water power for the old Kingdom Furnace, another of New Russia’s many small iron manufacturing factories.

According to Bartley, the road that runs to the Kingdom Dam used to wind farther along the Black River before cutting off to the east and ending in Westport.

“You can’t drive it anymore,” she said, “but you might be able to hike it.”

No trace of the Upper Pond’s industrial past remains at the end of the Kingdom Dam Road, except for the small dam itself. Today, it is a quiet spot of exceptional beauty.

“This is where we go on the weekends,” Bartley said, tongue only partly in cheek, “to get away from the hustle and bustle of New Russia.”

Hunter’s Home

Like most Essex County communities, New Russia has gone through four stages of development. First, it was settled by farmers from New England.

When iron was discovered, a wave of poor Irish immigrants came to burn the charcoal, work the forges and make their fortune.

After the bottom fell out of the Adirondack iron industry in the

1880s, with the discovery of far richer iron fields in Minnesota’s Mesabi range, New Russia’s entrepreneurial energies turned toward tourism. Several hotels and guest houses operated along the State Road (Route 9), including the famous Hunter’s Home, an expanded version of an early hotel built in 1830.

The main house of Hunter’s Home burned to the ground in October 1925; all that is left are the decorative stone-and-cement posts on the west side of the road, just before the rise to Split Rock Falls, that once marked the carriageway entry to the hotel.

Two of the remote buildings from the Hunter’s Home complex escaped the 1925 fire. To the north is Brookside, a large, two-story, white frame house with the characteristic sunburst decoration typical of so many buildings of the era in eastern Essex County. Built to handle the overflow from Hunter’s Home, Brookside is now a private residence.

To the south of the Hunter’s Home driveway is a red, barn-like, two-story house, with a dry-docked boat standing in the yard. This was the dance hall for Hunter’s Home, converted for use by the YMCA in the 1950s but now a private residence.

Otis Mountain camps

Going back up Route 9 toward Elizabethtown, on your left you will see a brown barn flanked by a stone wall ending in a decorative gate post, in front of which stands a sign reading “Windy Cliff.”

From the road, this is the only indication you’ll get of one of New Russia’s main “hidden” features: seven isolated camps erected between 1895 and 1905 on the New Russian hillsides overlooking the Boquet River, all built by William Otis and his son Albert.

Two of the camps were built on Iron Mountain, to the river’s west; the other five were raised on Otis Mountain to the east — but all of them are referred to collectively as “the Otis Mountain camps.”

Windy Cliff, the first of the seven camps, was built high up on Iron Mountain in 1895. The barn and house at the base of the mountain, on Route 9, were built for the camp’s live-in caretaker.

During the Depression, Windy Cliff was sold by the county for back taxes. The buyer was famed Russian cellist Gregor Piatigorsky,



Entrance to Windy Cliff, one of the Otis Mountain camps

who bought title to the camp for just \$5,000. In 1941, Piatigorsky remodeled the caretaker's cottage for year-round living, as the camp itself was not winterized. He sold the property in 1950 to a Montreal family.

Bartley is something of an expert on the subjects of Piatigorsky and the Otis Mountain camps, having written about them for *Adirondack Life*. Today, she conducts an annual tour of the camps for Adirondack Architectural Heritage, the regional preservation organization. Her book about Piatigorsky, "Grisha," was self-published last year.

Another New Russia character about whom Bartley has written is Ozzie Sweet, the famous photojournalist. Bartley's story about Sweet is slated for an upcoming issue of *Adirondack Life*. Bartley stopped briefly on Route 9 to show us one of Sweet's early artistic creations: the outline of a Native American profile, titled "Indian Joe," inspired by the carving of the Mount Rushmore figures in the late 1920s.

Stage Four

Earlier, we mentioned four stages in the lives of most Essex County communities, but we only listed three: settlement, iron working, and tourism.

A variety of factors led to the latest stage in the development of many Adirondack communities. After World War II, fewer and fewer families were able to take off several months during the summer to vacation at a camp or resort hotel in the Adirondacks. Easier access to trains, planes and automobiles opened up more destinations to vacation travelers than those that could be visited by regional rail.

The final blow to the resort communities along Route 9, however, was the completion of the Adirondack Northway in 1967.

Suddenly, the only people going through places like Pottersville, Schroon Lake, North Hudson and North Russia were people who were going, specifically, *to* those places; everyone else just passed the old towns by, at 70 miles an hour, on their way to Plattsburgh and Montreal.

"All the traffic went away," Bartley said, "and all the business dried up."

The opening of the Northway signalled the beginning of the fourth and latest stage in the development of communities like New Russia.

Today, New Russia has no churches, no shops, no grocery, no restaurants, no hotels or guest houses. The center of community life is the post office, from which postmaster Margaret McCoy serves about 70 families. New Russia is a quiet, pretty little spot along Route 9 — and not much more than that.

But that may be changing.

Pointing to several houses that have been built in the last year or two, or that are being built now,

Bartley said, "We're having something of a renaissance."

Several properties are for sale, too, for those who want to buy their own piece of New Russian peace and quite — including the home of one of the original settlers, the Simond house on Lincoln Pond Road. Built in 1820 by New England immigrants, it was bought in 1864 by an Irish immigrant, John Otis, with the \$300 one of his sons earned as a bounty for enlisting in the Union army during the Civil War.

Getting there

New Russia is just a few miles south of Elizabethtown on U.S. Route 9. It's about 30 miles from Lake Placid, or about a 45-minute drive. Take state Route 73 out of Lake Placid and through Keene. Turn left onto state Route 9N between Keene and Keene Valley. In Elizabethtown, turn right on U.S. Route 9. The New Russia post office is about 4 miles from the intersection of routes 9N and 9.



Upper Lincoln Pond, seen from the Kingdom Dam