

Old roads abound in backcountry

by LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, December 16, 2005

Old roads.

They're everywhere.

Chances are good that if you take a drive or a hike this week between any two points in Essex County, you'll cross over, pass near by, or actually travel along one of the dozens of roads blazed by the Adirondack pioneers who settled this land two centuries ago.

A few weeks ago, we spent some time sharing with you our reporter's adventures on the old winter road above the Wilmington Notch that once linked North Elba and Wilmington.

Among the readers responding to that series was Ed Palen of the Adirondack Rock & River Guide Service, headquartered in an early 19th century house situated along the Old Mountain Road between Keene and North Elba. He wanted to share with us another old road he had found: the old road leading from St. Huberts over the Chapel

Pond Pass to the Old State Road, now known as U.S. Route 9.

PALEN'S INTEREST in the old Chapel Pond road was first piqued by a February 1982 article in *Adirondack*, the magazine of the Adirondack Mountain Club. The article was a reprint of a letter that had been written in 1900 by Scott Brown, of the Au Sable Club, to his brother, Elizabethtown Post editor George Brown. It described the course of the old road, which he had picked out in his tramps through the mountains.

Some of Scott Brown's presumptions about the road's history were sheer nonsense — old wives' (or old guides') tales served up over the years around Adirondack campfires and taken at face value.

Brown, for instance, related a fantastic explanation for why the trail was called "Old Military Road" having to do with Army

movements during the War of 1812.

The truth is simply that it was a road passing through the remote stretches set aside by New York state after the Revolutionary War to be given to veterans for homesteading — the Old Military Tracts.

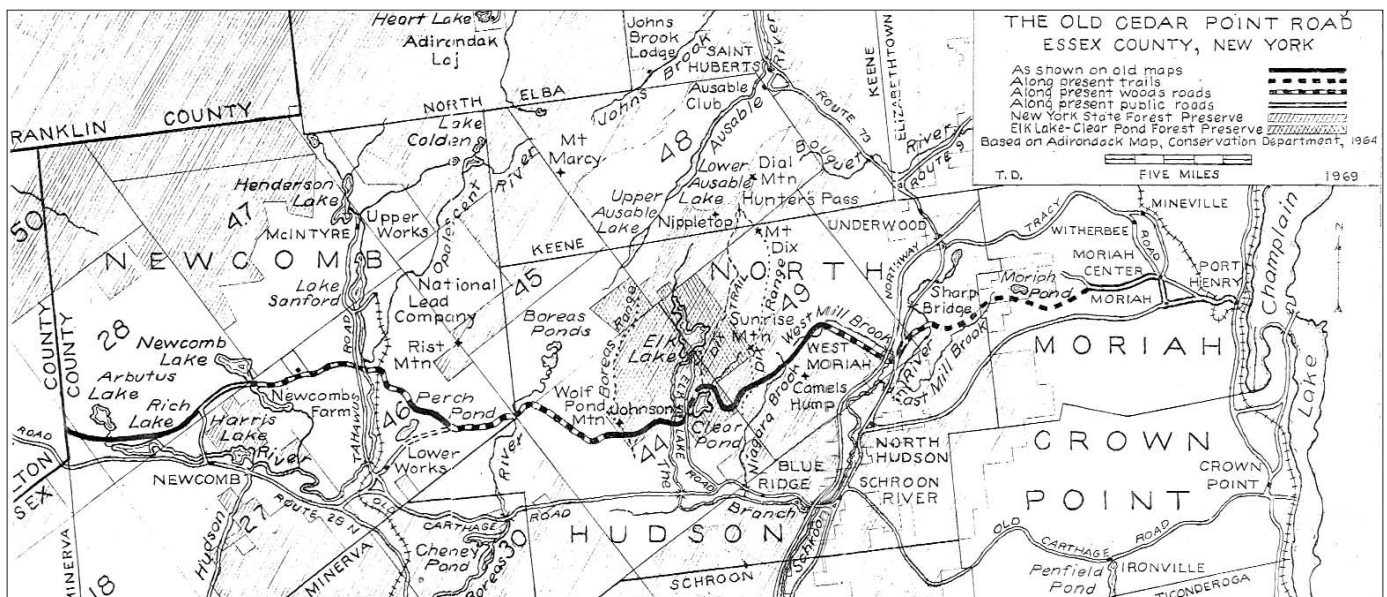
Palen was given much of the real history of the Chapel Pond roads by Lake Placid historian Mary MacKenzie.

A road was first extended up through Chapel Pond Pass shortly after 1811, authorized by an act of the Legislature.

That road fell into disuse, and another had to be built in the late 1860s — authorized, again, by acts of the Legislature.

By the 1920s, that mid-19th

BELOW, Thorn Dickinson's composite map of the Old Cedar Point Road, which ran from Port Henry to Newcomb



century road had once again fallen into rough shape, becoming almost impassable until some major re-engineering by the state opened it back up in the mid-1930s.

Brown's history may not have been worth much, Palen said, but his account of the trail itself was both accurate and revealing.

Palen supplemented Brown's account with recollections provided by legendary local guide Jim Goodwin. Goodwin's sister, Peggy O'Brien, was the person who had sent the Brown letter in to Adirondac for publication in 1982. As teenagers, Jim and Peggy had puzzled over trail maps to figure out the route Scott Brown had described, never quite getting it completely right but drawing close in many places.

Palen took Brown's letter and the Goodwin youngsters' maps and headed into the hills, looking for physical indications of the nine miles of old roads running between St. Huberts and "Crazy Corners," the modern-day junction of routes 9 and 73.

Next year, Palen will be guiding



MARY MacKENZIE HISTORIC SLIDE COLLECTION

Cascade Road stagecoach, 1870s

us along the old Chapel Pond roads, and we will be walking you down the trail with GPS waypoints and trail descriptions.

Last week, just to get a little taste of what is waiting for us next year, we went up the road from St. Huberts with Palen to do a little exploring.

WE PULLED OVER at a park-

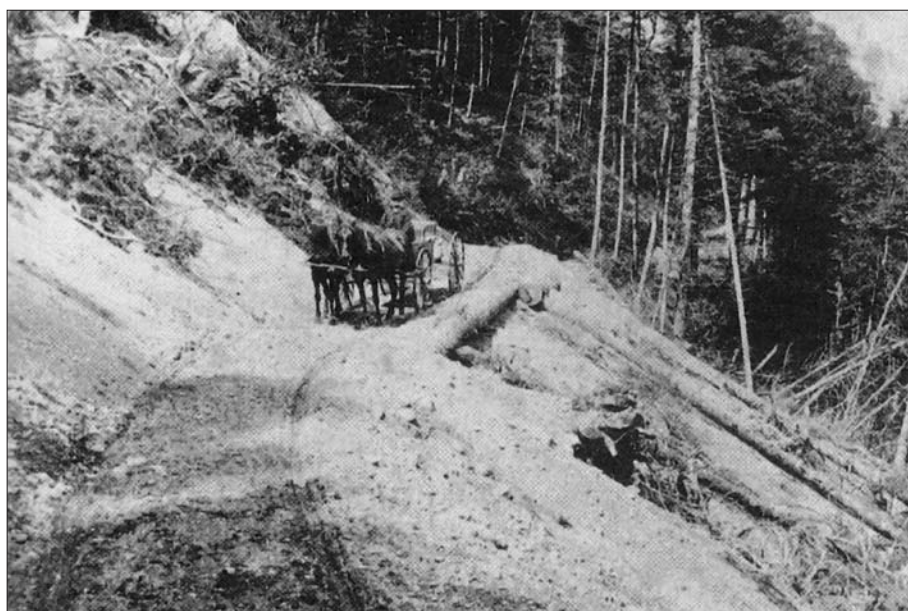
ing spot about a mile north of Chapel Pond. Palen guided us straight up the adjacent hillside, where one of the old roads made its way along a ridge.

"Jimmy Goodwin would lead Au Sable Club people on this hike as a guide," Palen said. "They would go up the trail along Artist's Brook to Chapel Pond, and then come back down the Old Military Trail. There were signs and everything. It was a nice loop; you could do it in two hours."

The "Old Military Trail," which followed the course of one of the earlier roads, paralleled Route 73 — and at not too great a distance, either. The traffic could be heard through the forest, whizzing by below us at 60 mph.

We followed the old road for about two-thirds of a mile, tracking easily in spots where the trail had been graded, following straight through along flat stretches, ending up at Chapel Pond's outlet brook.

"Right there is where the bridge for the 1860s road crossed," Palen said, "just upstream from the mod-



from "Keene and Keene Valley: Two Adirondack Hamlets in History"

Chapel Pond Road, August 1886

ern road. The 1860s road went around that big rock outcropping instead of blasting through, like the 1935 road did.”

AFTER RETURNING to our cars, Palen took us down the road into North Hudson, pointing out different places where the old road beds left the course of the modern highway.

After we crossed under the Northway, we entered territory where several old roads intersected east of the former settlement known as Deadwater, where the New York Serpentarium stood in the 1950s, near the 19th century Weatherhead’s Inn site east of the Sharps Campground.

We parked the car and left U.S. 9 for a brief excursion down one of these old roads, the Cedar Point Road, built in part as an attempt to connect the Adirondack Iron Works in Newcomb to a Lake Champlain port, where finished iron could be shipped to market.

The stretch upon which we walked was the same one that had been hiked about 15 years earlier by Jay poet Roger Mitchell when he was trying to trace the whereabouts of Israel Johnson, an early 19th century inhabitant of the area. Mitchell described his historical detective project in “Clear Pond: The Reconstruction of a Life” (Syracuse University Press, 1991):

“After a long, straight stretch, the road [U.S. 9, going north] bends slightly to the left. At that point, an almost invisible dirt road turns east into the woods,” Mitchell wrote. “If you weren’t looking for it, you could easily miss it. Even if you knew it was there, you would pay little attention to it. ...

“The road went into a forest of

tall, shadowy white pines mixed with aspen and big-toothed aspen. The vegetation on both sides came right up to the edge of the single set of tracks. It was a tunnel, and the further I walked into it, the stiller the air became. In a hundred feet or so, it was as quiet as any place I’d ever been.”

WITH WINTER coming now in earnest, we won’t be doing any more old-road hunting for a few months. Come the spring, howev-

er, we’ll be tracing the Old Chapel Pond Road, stretches of the Cedar Point Road, the winter road around the High Peaks between Averyville and Adirondac, some of the bypassed sections of the Old State Road — and, perhaps, other old roads about which only you can tell us.

If you’d like to suggest an old road for us to track down next year, just send an e-mail message to our reporter at LManchester@LakePlacidNews.com.



Ed Palen on the Old Chapel Pond Road