

New book surveys architectural history of Adirondack churches

by LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, June 23, 2006

TUPPER LAKE — Many of us think of the North Country as a serene wilderness island disconnected from the tumult of urban life and industry, an isolated region with a history that is almost exclusively local.

A new book shows, however, that the growth of Adirondack communities was influenced by the same historic trends that shaped the development of the rest of America.

The book is “Adirondack Churches: A History of Design and Building,” written by Sally E. Svenson and published by Adirondack Architectural Heritage, the Keeseville-based regional preservation society.

Unveiled at AARCH’s annual meeting last Saturday, held at Tupper Lake’s Beth Joseph Synagogue, the book is Adirondack Architectural Heritage’s second foray into the book-publishing business.

The group’s first book was “Santanoni: From Japanese Temple to Life at an Adirondack Great Camp,” by Robert Engel, Howard Kirschenbaum and Paul Malo. Published in 2000, “Santanoni” told the story of the unique Adirondack great camp, built in 1892 in Newcomb township, whose preservation was one of the primary reasons behind AARCH’s creation.

“I remember the first time Sally

and I spoke about this project,” said AARCH Executive Director Steven Engelhart at last week’s unveiling of “Adirondack Churches.”

“She said that she and her husband had just become seasonal residents, but that she was not the kind of person who could sit, dangling her feet in the water, reading all day. She had to have something to do.”

The process of creating the book took about two-and-a-half years, Engelhart said, adding that “it’s been a great ride.”

Svenson spoke at last week’s

meeting about her new book.

“There were two things that got me started,” she said.

The first, Svenson said, was a book from her son’s sociology class about the role of various churches in the westward expansion and settlement of the United States.

“It got me to thinking about where churches were in different communities, and who was involved in them,” she said.

The other seed for Svenson’s new book was the steeple of the Baptist church in Minerva, which she and her husband passed again

Adirondack Churches A History of Design and Building

Sally E. Svenson



Adirondack Architectural Heritage

and again on her way to and from the Adirondacks.

“It was a really interesting steeple, and I wondered how it got there,” she said. “I couldn’t find anything about it in New York, so I decided to contact AARCH.

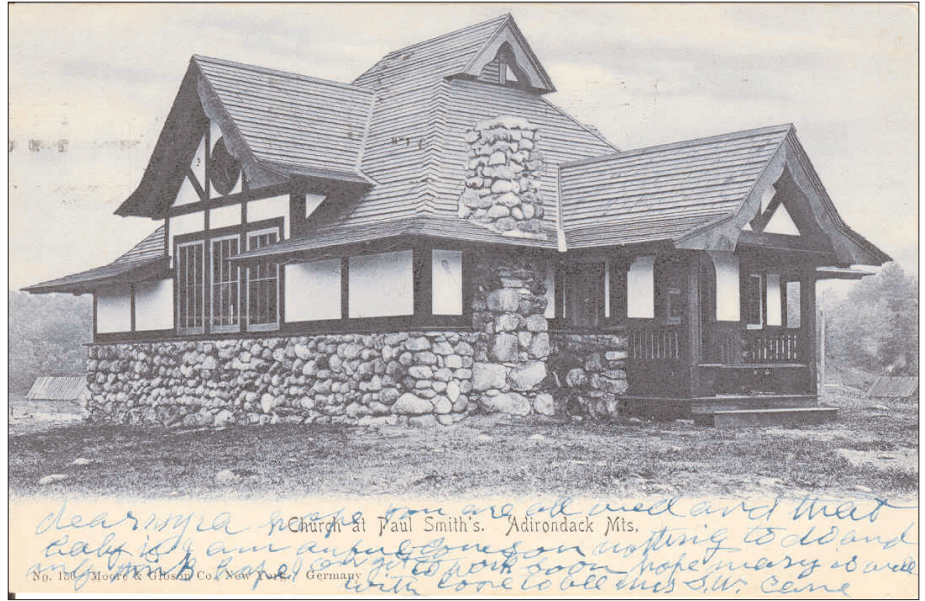
“And that’s really where the book started.”

WITH WORDS and archival images, “Adirondack Churches” surveys the confluence of social, religious and architectural trends that rippled through the region between 1825 and 1925.

Chapter One covers the period of the Adirondack settlement, focusing on the intensely competitive missionary impulse that drove the establishment of many earlier churches.

The rise and fall of local industries gave special challenges to the organization of religious institutions and the construction of their worship halls in the Adirondacks’ early days.

“The ironworks rise and decline with painful regularity,” Svenson quotes an 1885 Au Sable Forks chronicler, “and the people come and go accordingly, so that work is always beginning and it is difficult



to give to parochial labor stability or to measure a work by results.”

The second chapter, “Getting Churches on the Ground,” focuses on the dynamics that drove the organizing, funding and designing of church construction projects in the early and middle 19th century Adirondacks.

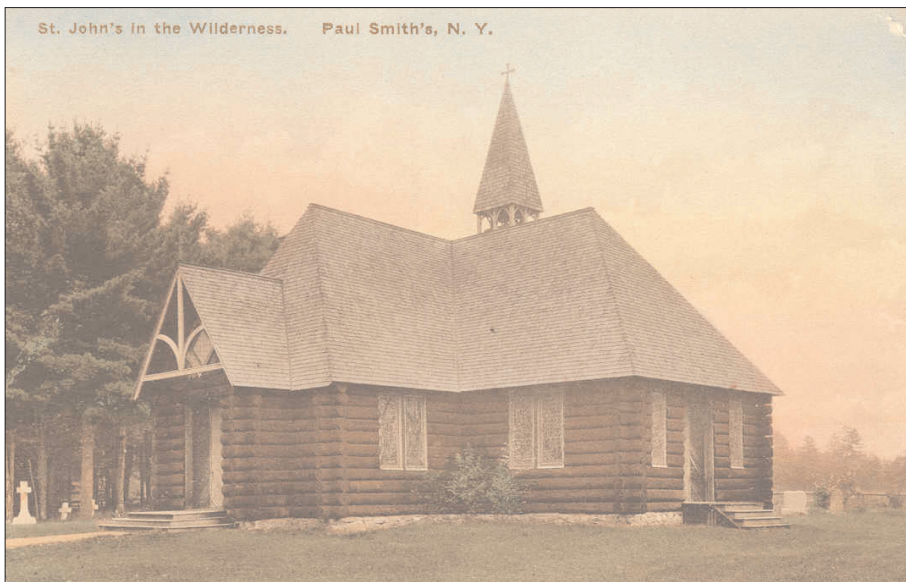
For some church builders, Svenson wrote, “architecture was not an overriding concern.” Many Adirondack church buildings of the period, she said, were “straightforward, respectable structures conceived by unheralded architects and local builders or built to stock

plans ordered by mail,” though Svenson also notes that several churches were more architecturally ambitious, hiring established architects like William L. Coulter and Joseph M. Huston.

Svenson does a good job of walking the reader through several distinct stages and styles of Adirondack church building, explaining how various architectural trends expressed themselves in the design of ecclesiastical structures in this relatively remote part of the country.

With the help of editor Ted Comstock, project consultants Richard Longstreth and Wes Haynes and designer Jane Mackintosh, Sally Svenson has put together a remarkably thorough survey of a tremendously diverse array of sacred architecture built over the span of a century across the Adirondack Park’s 6 million acres.

“Unfortunately, concern with the appearance of many Adirondack houses of worship today is rather beside the point,” the author says in her afterword. “Churches, many of which have assumed important community roles that are only tangential to



denominational preoccupations, are struggling simply to survive.”

“What should be done to insure a future for Adirondack churches, or even whether to do so, are open questions,” she concludes, “but before too many more are abandoned, destroyed or sold, we need to examine our feelings for them and determine what, if any, meaning they hold for us as physical expressions of our collective experience and our regional heritage.”

LOCAL HISTORY enthusiasts will note the absence of several key elements of Lake Placid and North Elba’s ecclesiastical history in Svenson’s book, including:

- the “White Church,” North Elba’s original Union Church, which first opened its doors in the summer of 1875 at the corner of Church Street and Old Military Road (it stands today behind the Jewish cemetery off Old Military);

- Lake Placid’s original Baptist church, founded in August 1879, which stood on the current site of the Main Street parking lot next to the former Nazarene Church building;

- the three renditions of Placid’s St. Agnes Catholic Church: the original Main Street sanctuary, built in 1896; the first building on Saranac Avenue, 1905, and the second Saranac Avenue structure, 1925; and,

- last but not least, the day in 1923 when the old wooden Methodist church building was moved, whole, from the shore of Mirror Lake to its new site on School Street, where it still stands today: the sports bar called Wiseguys.

We can’t fault Svenson for these omissions. A book with as wide a reach as “Adirondack Churches” simply cannot cover every single detail of its subject’s history in

every single one of the hundred hamlets and villages within the Blue Line.

By and large, Svenson and AARCH have made an extraordinary contribution to the history of the Adirondacks with “Adirondack Churches: A History of Design and Building.”

PUBLISHING DATA

“Adirondack Churches: A History of Design and Building,” by Sally E. Svenson. Published by Adirondack Architectural Heritage, Keeseville. Release date: June 17. Published in hardcover and paperback, 10-by-9 inches, 240 pages, B&W illustrations, bibliography and subject index. Prices: \$29.95 paperback, \$44.95 hardcover. Available directly from AARCH, 1759 Main St., Keeseville NY 12944, on the Web at www.aarch.org, telephone (518) 834-9328. Soon to be available in bookstores, distributed by North Country Books.

