

Local landmark purchased by ‘hometown boy’

*Tommy, Nancy Cross buy 120-year-old
Graves Mansion, in Au Sable Forks*

By Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, February 23, 2001

AU SABLE FORKS — The most prominent architectural landmark in this former mill town, vacant for years, has been bought by a “hometown boy done good.”

Tommy and Nancy Cross bought the Graves Mansion last fall, with plans to renovate it a floor at a time. They hope to move into the mansion by the end of this summer, says local historian and family friend Sharron Hewston, who led a reporter on an extremely rare tour of the home on Tuesday, Feb. 20.

The three-story, 15,000-square-foot structure sits on a 9.8-acre wooded lot across from the Au Sable Forks Primary School at the corner of Church and College streets.

Ground was first broken for the mansion in the 1870s. Built at a cost of \$75,000 — or about \$1.25 million today, adjusted for inflation, a tremendous bargain — the 32-room Second Empire-style edifice has 20 bedrooms, nine baths and nine fireplaces, each one unique.

The mansion was built by Henry Graves, a clerk from Plattsburgh who married into the family of James Rogers Sr., brother of John Rogers. The siblings owned the famous J. and J. Rogers Co., whose early iron foundry, then its paper and pulp mills, served as the center of economic life in this 19th century Adirondack industrial village.

According to notes in an architectural survey of the area compiled by Friends of the North Country, Graves built his mansion “reportedly in an attempt to out-do his in-laws, with whom he was feuding.” Father-in-law James Rogers had bought a smaller Second Empire home on Au Sable’s Main Street several years before.

“Lest this gesture be too subtle,” say the architectural survey notes, “Graves emphasized his point by building a barn, no longer extant, as a replica of Rogers’ house. According to local lore, Graves was also at odds with the governing body of St. James Episcopal Church, and he proceeded to construct an ice house reminiscent of the church.”

Born Aug. 17, 1825, in Plattsburgh, a grandson of one of George Washington’s Revolutionary War orderlies, Graves was an ambitious man. Coming to work for the Rogers Co. at age 20, he romanced James Rogers youngest daughter Mary. When he asked for permission to marry her in the mid-1850s, however, Graves was told the young woman could not be wed before her older sister Kate was married. Jumping tracks, the young clerk wooed the elder Rogers daughter, marrying her in 1861.

Ten years later Graves was named to the board of directors of J. and J. Rogers Co., assuming the vice presidency in 1877 when his father-in-law retired. Upon the death of his wife’s uncle, John Rogers, in 1879, Henry became company president.

Graves began building his mansion in the mid-1870s, financing the project with funds embezzled from the Rogers Co.

The former clerk’s drive to prove his superiority to everyone may have proved his undoing, according to historian Hewston.

“When President Cleveland came through town in 1886, he stopped at the

mansion on his way to Paul Smiths,” Hewston said. “In the president’s entourage were officials who may have caught wind of something fishy in Graves’ finances.”

An 1890 audit uncovered Graves’ embezzlement. Relieving him of his duties at the Rogers Co., his in-laws nonetheless took pity on him, assuming the debt for his grandiose house and allowing him and his wife to live out their lives in the simple but spacious servants’ quarters in the rear of the building.

Graves died in the mansion on July 1, 1917, at the age of 91.

His youngest son Harry lived in the house with his wife Anna, a schoolteacher from Vermont, for a few years before the mansion was bought by a local man named Featherstone, who listed the property for sale with George Stevens, a Lake Placid realtor — but no buyers were found.

At one point, a local person bid \$3,000 to demolish the mansion for its bricks, but the offer was declined.

For nearly 20 years the empty mansion was known to local youngsters as a haunted house, visited from time to time by boys and girls looking for ghosts.

Then in 1937 it was sold to Louis Robare, who originally thought he would tear it down. The more he saw of the Graves Mansion, though, the more difficult it became to demolish it.

He and his wife moved into the place, restoring it to its original grandeur. The Robares began subdividing the house in 1945, renting off portions as apartments and moving Louis’ insurance brokerage, the Robare Agency, into the ground floor of the old servants’ quarters in the mid-1960s.

One of the Robares’ apartments was rented in the mid-1970s to James and Karen Votraw. Karen, an English teacher at Peru High School, wrote what is still considered to be the definitive article on the Graves Mansion while living there. Her piece was published in the July-August 1977 issue of Adirondack Life magazine.

Another couple took over the place from the widowed Nancy Robare in the early 1980s. Planning to turn the mansion into a bed and breakfast, they painted over the walnut and the oak doors on the third floor, installing a bizarre faux skylight in the ceiling of the central hallway.

Then Rodney Fye, a man in his mid-60s, purchased the building, doing some restoration work in the 1990s and opening the mansion for public tours led by curator Tom Campbell.

Fye, who had restored some 200 Victorian-era homes in San Francisco, had originally planned to retire to the Graves Mansion. However, in April 1995, at the age of 67, he began looking for a buyer to take the property off his hands, saying that he planned to relocate overseas. As a purchase incentive, Fye offered to make the purchaser the beneficiary of a life insurance policy that would wholly compensate the buyer for the mansion’s \$1 million price.

The taker of this offer was a California-based group that intended to use the Graves Mansion and its expansive grounds as a drug rehab. The group ran into fire-safety problems when they tried to get permits for the facility, however, according to Hewston.

“The fire escapes and all would have been costly,” she said, “and they would have significantly detracted from the beauty of the place, which is one of the reasons they wanted to locate there.”

And so the property went on the market again. This time, the buyers are native

folk who plan to make their home in the mansion. As a result, those closest to the house are breathing a sigh of relief.

“Tommy Cross always dreamed of buying this place,” Hewston said. “He’s a hometown boy, respected by everyone, and everybody’s happy to see him and Nancy be able to pick it up.”