

Adirondac ghost town awaits its future

LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, August 29, 2003

ADIRONDAC — These are the Adirondacks — not the Yucatan, not the Colorado Rockies, not the California High Sierra.

So what is this 19th century ghost town doing here, lining the paved road to the original Mount Marcy trailhead?

And what is this huge, stone pyramid doing here, rising from the forest bed near the source of the Hudson River like a Mayan temple?

Those are the puzzling, fascinating questions that continue to draw visitors each year to a hamlet called Adirondac (that's right, with no "k"), a 170-year-old iron-mining settlement in Newcomb township on the southwestern edge of Essex County.

Though Adirondac has recently found its way back into the headlines as part of the state's latest acquisition of land for the forest preserve, it has been smack dab in the center of the story of the Adirondack Mountains for nearly its whole, long life.

The human settlement of the Adirondacks, the region's economic and industrial development, the first ascent of Mount Marcy, the discovery of the Hudson River's source, the establishment of private wilderness reserves, state appropriation of private land — many of the issues most crucial to the political and social development of the Adirondacks were also keynotes in the history of the Adirondac village.

That's why Adirondack Architectural Heritage — or AARCH (pronounced like "arch"), for short — has been organizing tours through

Adirondac for the last several years. Like its predecessors, the tour offered earlier this month was led by George Canon, a former Adirondac resident and currently Newcomb

township supervisor.

Assisting Canon was historic preservationist Rick Rolinski, currently caretaker of a historic property in Elmira. Rolinski became something of an expert on Adirondac's 19th century iron-making equipment during his two summers as an intern at AARCH's nearby Santanoni Great Camp historic preserve.

Elba Iron Works

The Adirondac story actually starts in Lake Placid where, in 1811, New York's state comptroller



PHOTO BY LEE MANCHESTER

Tour guests listen to Rick Rolinski as he stands in the mouth of Adirondac's 1854 "new" blast furnace, explaining its historic significance.

Archibald McIntyre (an “a” was later placed before the “c” in his last name) set up a dam and iron forge. His Elba Iron Works were built where Lake Placid’s electric plant currently operates on the Chubb’s Power Pond.

The local iron ore from the Cascade Lakes, however, was not as rich as he had hoped. MacIntyre had a new road hacked through the wilderness to Wilmington in 1814 to bring richer ore from Clintonville, but he still couldn’t turn a profit. In 1817 he shut down the North Elba forge.

MacIntyre continued maintaining some of the buildings at the North Elba works, however, and in October 1826 was leading a silver-hunting expedition nearby when his party was approached by an Abenaki Indian. The man, Lewis Elija Benedict, had come from the area south of what would later be called Mount Marcy, carrying a nut-sized piece of rich iron ore to show MacIntyre.

“You want see-um ore, me know-um bed, all same,” Benedict reportedly told MacIntyre, who hired the Indian on the spot for \$1.50 and a plug of tobacco to lead them to the place. The party reportedly found pumpkin-sized pieces of ore just lying in the river, and an ore body 5 feet thick reaching 80 feet into a hillside.

MacIntyre and his men immediately set off for Albany to register their claim, taking Benedict with them for safekeeping. Over the next year or so, he bought up 105,000 acres in the central Adirondacks, including the highest peak in the state and the tiny lake that would prove to be the source of the mighty Hudson River.

Adirondac works start — and stop — and start again

Before any work was done to build a forge at the new site, a road had to be built from Port Henry through Moriah. By 1831, however, the first 6 tons of ore had been

mined. The following year, the real work on building a forge began at the settlement then known as McIntyre.

By 1834, however, the venture was producing so little iron that, once again, MacIntyre closed his works, leaving only a caretaker for the village’s produce farm.

But then came the famous 1837 state survey of the High Peaks, led by Ebenezer Emmons. Based in MacIntyre’s little village, the Emmons expedition was the first to scale Mount Marcy, where they identified the source of the Hudson River as tiny Lake Tear in the Cloud on the mountains northwest slope.

Emmons returned in 1839 to conduct a geological examination of the area. In his report, “Professor Emmons expressed the conviction that large-scale production of iron was commercially practicable,” wrote Harold Hochschild in his history of the MacIntyre mine, “and termed the ore deposits of such magnitude as to be of national importance.”

In fact, MacIntyre’s holding was

believed to be the largest iron deposit of the time in the United States east of the Mississippi.

Work started again, and the village of McIntyre — soon called “Adirondac” after the name given by Emmons to the nearby mountain group — grew.

Problems continued to plague the venture, however. An unidentifiable impurity in the ore hampered production, and repeated promises of a railroad connection from Adirondac to North Creek never materialized.

The last furnace

The MacIntyre company made one final effort to make the mine productive. In 1854 workmen completed a huge, new, \$43,000 blast furnace. The stone pyramid rose 48 feet to the forest canopy from a 36-foot-wide base.

Despite its 14-ton daily capacity, the new furnace was unable to save Adirondac.

In 1856, a flood wiped out part of the works.

In 1857, a nationwide economic crisis crippled the company.



PHOTO BY LEE MANCHESTER

A tour guest climbs over what’s left of the 1854 mechanical bellows that forced air into the Adirondac blast furnace.

Then, in 1858, MacIntyre died. None of his heirs would take responsibility for running the Adirondac iron works — and so, they just stopped.

“The cessation of operations ... was a sudden step,” wrote Arthur H. Masten in his classic 1923 history, “The Story of Adirondac.”

“Work was dropped just as it was. ‘The last cast from the furnace was still in the sand, and the tools were left leaning against the wall,’ ” Masten wrote, quoting an earlier source. “The workmen abandoned their homes, and Adirondac became, as it was for many years described, ‘The Deserted Village.’ ”

Fifteen years later, Adirondack photographer and writer Seneca Ray Stoddard passed through MacIntyre’s ghost town.

“On either side (of the grass-grown street) once stood neat cottages and pleasant homes, now stained and blackened by time,” Stoddard wrote in 1873, “broken windows, doors unhinged, falling roof, rotting sills and crumbling foundations pointed to the ruin that must surely come.”

Genesis of the Tahawus Club

Stoddard’s account was written four years after the publication of “Adirondack” Murray’s famous book, “Adventures in the Wilderness, or, Camp Life in the Adirondacks.” Murray was credited with triggering a flood of visitors to the Adirondacks, among them a group of sportsmen who leased from the MacIntyre heirs the Preston Ponds, a few miles north of Adirondac, in 1876.

The next year the group took a longer lease (20 years) on a larger tract: the entire 105,000 acres bought by the MacIntyre company. The new Adirondack Club established the first private preserve in the region, with headquarters in the Adirondac ghost village. The club refurbished Adirondac’s old boarding house and a couple of other buildings, but by



PHOTO BY LEE MANCHESTER

St. Therese’s Catholic Church, now located just off the main road in the 700-acre Winebrook development on the edge of Newcomb hamlet, was one of two churches and dozens of houses picked up and moved, whole, from the mining community of Tahawus in 1963.

1899 most of the hamlet’s original buildings had either completely deteriorated or had been demolished.

The rebuilding of Adirondac occurred in two phases, the first from 1899 to 1920, the second during the 1930s. But while the members of the club’s successor, the Tahawus Club, enjoyed their retreat, they also sold off their holding, bit by bit, or saw it taken by the state Conservation Commission in 1920 for public hiking trails, when Mount Marcy and lakes Colden, Avalanche

and Flowed Lands became part of the forest preserve.

Titanium for victory

In 1941, with America’s entry into World War II imminent, the Tahawus Club made a crucial decision: to lease 6,000 acres to National Lead Company. NL had been started by the successors to the MacIntyre Iron Company to see if there was some way of exploiting the mysterious contaminant in Adirondac’s iron ore: titanium. Used in paint pigments

used for naval vessels, it would be a vital supply for America's war effort.

The Tahawus Club leased the Adirondac village site for 6 years from NL, but when the time came to renew the lease, the company opted out, forcing the club to move about 10 miles south the MacIntyre Company's old "Lower Works," where they had another clubhouse.

Housing for its workers was the key issue in National Lead's decision to turn the Tahawus Club out of Adirondac. When NL had opened its titanium mining operation in 1943, it had also had to build a new village for its employees and their families. The company called the new village, ironically, Tahawus. By 1945 it had a population of 300, with 84 houses, two apartment buildings, a boarding house and an 80-bed dormitory.

Tahawus was fully equipped with a restaurant, a movie theater, an elementary school, two churches — one Protestant, one Catholic — and a YMCA.

In 1963, when National Lead decided it was going



The house known today as the MacNaughton Cottage is the only Adirondac building still surviving from its days as an iron-mining hamlet. The house was built in 1845 for works owner Archibald MacIntyre himself. These photos show the house as it was in 1978, above, and in 2002, below.



Archibald MacIntyre's house in Adirondac is rapidly disintegrating, and without attention will almost surely collapse before the end of the decade. Both these photos were taken during the AARCH tour in mid-August 2003.



to get out of the landlord business, a 700-acre development on the eastern edge of Newcomb hamlet was laid out. Streets were paved, water and sewer lines were laid, and premeasured foundations were poured. NL workers were given the option of buying the houses they'd been renting from the company, provided they didn't mind having them moved.

"They just about gave those houses away," said George Canon during the tour earlier this month.

At the same time, workers living in the old Tahawus Club buildings in Adirondac were also forced to vacate their homes. Those buildings, however, were not moved to the new development, called Winebrook. They were left to disintegrate in place — and, for the third time, Adirondac became a ghost town.

In 1989, National Lead closed its titanium mine at Tahawus. The processing plant in New Jersey that took the material provided by the Tahawus mine had become outdated, explained former NL employee George Canon.

“When it came time to replace the (New Jersey) plant,” Canon said, “they just moved the operation to Louisiana, which shut the Tahawus plant as a source of raw material.”

Canon still chaffs at the 400 jobs lost when NL pulled out, stripping its Tahawus plant of everything salvageable and simply burying the rest.

When questioned in 1989 about what would happen to National Lead’s holdings in the area — more than 10,000 acres, including Adirondac — the plant’s manager, Gordon Medema, wouldn’t talk.

“Anything we could say at this point would be speculation,” Medema told Joan Youngken, writing for Adirondack Life magazine, “and we’re simply not willing to speculate.”

The future is now

It took 14 years to work out a deal, but a solution to the question of what would happen to the Adirondac ghost village, the historic 1854 blast

furnace, and the surrounding land was finally answered earlier this year. Governor George Pataki announced that, with state assistance, an organization called the Open Space Institute would be purchasing almost all of NL’s Adirondac/Tahawus holdings — nearly 10,000 acres.

About 6,000 acres of the OSI purchase will be bought back by the state, to be added to the forest preserve. About 3,000 acres will be sold by OSI for sustainable forestry. And the 400-acre site containing the hamlet of Adirondac, already listed on the National Register of Historic Places, will become a historic preserve — at least, that’s the plan.

There is little in the ghost town that’s truly worth saving, with the possible exception of the 1845 MacNaughton Cottage, the only structure surviving from the MacIntyre iron mining days — and that building is in very, very poor shape.

Preservationists, on the other hand, see the 1854 blast furnace and the intact remains of some of its associated works, as being very important.

“This is probably the most intact mid-(19th)-century ironworks in the world,” Stuart Smith told Youngken after visiting the site in 1989. Smith was director of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum in Shropshire, England, home of British steelmaking.

At present, no one has been identified as the organization that would take over the Adirondac historic site.

“It could be the town, or a non-profit group like AARCH, or the DEC,” said Canon, “but we’re only starting the discussions on that.”

A meeting with historic preservation leaders from groups like AARCH and the Preservation League of New York to begin developing a plan was scheduled for the end of this month, according to Canon.



PHOTO BY LEE MANCHESTER

Century-old buildings constructed for the Tahawus Club in Adirondac, like this one on the hillside above the road running through the hamlet to the DEC trailhead, are slowly being consumed by the surrounding forest.