



**Iron Center museum**

A walking tour of

# Port Henry



**Moriah Town Office Building**

## Mining capital of the Adirondacks

**PORT HENRY** — There is no one thing, no single place, that defines the Adirondacks.

The rocky, alpine summit of Mount Marcy; Lake Placid's busy Main Street; the festive fortifications of Ticonderoga and the ghostly ruins of Crown Point; a hundred blackfly-infested swamps behind a hundred beaver dams; the picturesque, old-style resort towns like Schroon Lake; the overgrown stone pyramid of Adirondac's abandoned 1854 blast furnace, rising like a ruined Maya temple from the forest floor, and the ski slopes of Whiteface Mountain — all of these are the Adirondacks.

And so is Port Henry, the capital of the small iron-mining kingdom that is Moriah township, nestled in the eastern Adirondack foothills of Essex County above Lake Champlain.

The vast Adirondack iron deposits were crucial to the early development of the area, drawing 19th century settlers to North Elba, Jay, Au Sable Forks, Clintonville, Au Sable Chasm, Adirondac — and to Port Henry, in the town of Moriah.

### A little history

The first record of Moriah iron fabrication comes from the region's Revolutionary War annals. Starting in 1851, the Moriah mines were run by the Witherbee, Sherman Company.

When the Great Depression struck in the 1930s, Witherbee, Sherman had a hard time running the mines at a profit, shutting them down for long stretches at a time.

In 1939, as American industry began gearing up for involvement in World War II, Republic Steel leased the Witherbee, Sherman mines and facilities, modernizing them into profitability.

By the 1960s, though, the mines had gone so deep underground that it took workers an hour and a half just to get from the surface to their work sites. The profits became slimmer each year until finally, in 1971, Republic closed the Moriah mines.



**Port Henry Railroad Depot**



**1) Lee House**



**2) The Warner Block**



**3) Old Port Henry Fire Hall**

### **Port Henry in transition**

Today's Port Henry is a village in transition. Architecturally, the village that remains is mostly what's left of the iron-kingdom capital built between 1870 and 1930. Like other mill towns that have lost their mills, such as Au Sable Forks, Port Henry is seeking a new identity — down, but far from out.

"To me, when I go to Port Henry, I get very excited," says Steve Engelhart, executive director of Adirondack Architectural Heritage — or AARCH, as it is called for short — a nonprofit preservation group headquartered in Keeseville. "I see a community that has, for its size, some of the best architecture in the whole region."

In 1989 Engelhart was part of a three-member team that produced a detailed survey of Moriah township's historical resources.

"What this (the town's commissioning of the survey) tells me is that this is a town that wants to recognize and celebrate its historical resources, and it wants to build on that," Engelhart said.

"Port Henry had a lot going for it: a beautiful setting, commerce, and enough distance from Plattsburgh and Glens Falls that it was still quiet, out of the mainstream," Engelhart continued.

"When an industry goes south, there's a tremendous sadness — but, in Port Henry, they also have great pride in their past."

Now may be the best time in its history to visit Port Henry, an industrial village on the edge of the Adirondacks — and the edge of its future.

### **The walking tour**

One measure of the justified pride Port Henry takes in its past is the walking tour put together by the Moriah Historical Society. A brochure leading visitors to the 13 sites described below is available at the Iron Center museum, located in the Park Place heritage district just south of downtown Port Henry off Route 9N.

**1)** First stop is the *Lee House* on the northeast corner of South Main Street and Church Lane (soon to be renamed St. Patrick's Place). Once the largest hotel in Port Henry, the Lee House was opened in 1877 just off the old village green at the intersection of Main and Broad streets. As a hotel it boasted 50 guest rooms served by one of the first Otis elevators. It was saved from demolition and refurbished about 10 years ago. The hotel is used today as a seniors apartment building. The Lee House is one of several commercial buildings around the old green built in the Italianate style. So is ...

**2)** The *Warner Block*, on the northwest corner of North Main and Broad streets. Built around 1870, this commercial building features an unusual cutaway corner, allowing the building to flow around the contour of the road.

**3)** Going up Broad Street, the next stop is the old *Port Henry Fire Hall*. Built in 1883, it is one of the many civic buildings contributed by mining magnate George Riley Sherman, who inherited his father's interests in the Moriah iron industry. It was recently renovated



**4) Walter C. Witherbee House**

as a private residence.

The fire hall was built in the style of the Romanesque Revival, a harkening back to pre-Gothic architectural forms that was popular in the late 19th century. Some of the signature marks of that style in the old fire hall are its heavy, round window arches, separated by brick pilasters.

"The difference between an ordinary building and a really fine one is in the details," Steve Engelhart said.

"How much do those details add to the cost of such a building? Maybe 5 percent? ... We don't go to that effort today, we are so driven by cost. But Sherman saw this building as an (aesthetic) contribution to the community, not just something to sit there."



**5) Port Henry School**

**4)** The next stop on our walking tour is the *Walter C. Witherbee House*, located a good walk up the Broad Street hill on the corner of Stone Street. This was one of the two really grand homes built in Port Henry. Constructed in the 1890s for one of the Moriah mine owners, it was built in the "Shingle Style" used by architects of the era especially for large, oceanside summer homes. Typifying the style are, of course, the wooden shingles used to accent the peaks of the gables and to create a visual distinction between floors. Two corner towers and a "port-cochere" — a 19th century garage port — have elegant conical roofs.

Though the Witherbee House is currently "between renovations," it is still considered one of the best examples of a large Shingle Style home in the entire region. While the exterior has remained intact, its interior has gone through several generations of alterations, once when it was headquarters for Port Henry's post of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and most recently when it served as home to the Knights of Columbus.

A more modest but better-preserved rendition of the Shingle Style stands across Stone Street from the Witherbee House. Also built in the 1890s, it was originally part of the Witherbee estate.



**6) Methodist Episcopal Church**

**5)** We come back down Broad Street, turning right on College Street, to visit our next stop, the former *Port Henry School*. If you are interested in this building, we suggest that you visit it soon, before it's completely gone. The old two-story brick school building, the third on its site, dates from 1917. When the new Moriah Central School was built just outside Port Henry in 1967, this building was left vacant. It was bought a decade ago by New Jersey developer Thomas Eliopoulos, who also owns the Walter Witherbee house. Eliopoulos once had thoughts of possibly converting it into an apartment building, but nothing came of the idea. The building was condemned a couple of years ago by the village, and Eliopoulos was ordered to tear it down last spring. Before that could happen, however, a group of six kids exploring the old building accidentally set it ablaze with the rolled-up newspapers they were using as torches to light their way through the darkened hallways.

**6)** Our next stop is down Church Street on corner of Foote Street at the former *Methodist Episcopal Church*. Built in either 1872 or



**7) Christ Episcopal Church**



**8) Henry's Garage**

1874 (sources differ), this large, fairly sophisticated, High Victorian Gothic church structure — along with Christ Church, just down the block — was part of an expansion of the religious horizons of Port Henry, previously monopolized by the First Presbyterian Church and St. Patrick's Catholic Church. Today this building houses a restaurant and take-out pizzeria.

**7)** Down Foote Street where it curves into Henry Street is *Christ Episcopal Church*. This smaller High Victorian Gothic structure was erected in 1872 at a cost of \$10,000. It was desanctified in 1993 and given to the town for refurbishment as the home of the Moriah Historical Society. The structure's many restoration challenges, however, delayed work on the building. Then, in the late 1990s, the coach house of the old Witherbee, Sherman Company office building on Park Place was given to the society for its new museum.

The Episcopal church building was sold to a private developer, Kristen Bronander. Through her Heron Properties company, Bronander had restored Woodruff House in Elizabethtown, first as an antiques showroom, then as a B&B. She initially planned to turn the Port Henry Episcopal church building into an antiques shop, according to locals, but the building needed so much work that she put her plans on hold indefinitely.

Today this beautiful little building is, unfortunately, disintegrating where it stands. The front steps are rotten through; the cut limestone foundation is shifting; the clapboard siding is falling apart, and several panes of stained glass have been broken.

"If this building can just hang on a little longer," said Steve Engelhart, "as the economy gets better there will be more people willing and able to restore a structure like this."

**8)** Going back out Foote Street we make a right onto Church Street, going down about a quarter of a block to *Henry's Garage*.

"This is a really utilitarian building," observed Steve Engelhart, "but there was still a little attention given to detail, even here, like the use of rusticated block in the construction, the corners and pilasters coming out to provide definition and create a visual pattern, and the little conical caps on the corners.

"And I like the pride of placing the sign on the top with the building's name and the year it was constructed."

Henry's Garage was, as the sign built into the structure says, constructed in 1911. According to local histories, it was one of several garages built around Port Henry to accommodate the Adirondack advent of the automobile. Sources do not say, however, why an auto garage had to be so huge — four stories high, and built to extend back from Church Street all the way to Henry.

Like many of the structures erected in the interior of Moriah township around the turn of the last century, Henry's Garage appears to be built from concrete blocks made with tailings from the iron mines, which bound the concrete into an especially durable construction material.

Today, Henry's Garage is home to the village fire department.



9) Sherman Free Library

9) Just down the block from Henry's Garage is the *Sherman Free Library*. The front half of the library was built in 1887-88. In 1907 the library was extended backward, nearly doubling its space.

The Sherman Library seems to defy the laws of physics: it is much larger inside than appears possible from the outside. It is one of several structures in Port Henry built in the Richardsonian Romanesque style, a variation on the Romanesque Revival developed by Henry Hobson Richardson.

The library is a heavy brick and stone structure with symmetrically placed, arched windows and a large, central, arched entry beneath a steeply gabled dormer. Inside, from hardwood floor to high, open ceiling, it is paneled in dark, gleaming oak. A second-story-level walkway, lined with the shelves where the institution's older books are kept, circumscribes the room to the library's rear.

Another example of the benevolence of George R. Sherman, the entire collection of 2,500 books initially housed in the library bearing his name was donated by Sherman. He also created an endowment that covered the library's operating expenses for many years.



10) Mount Moriah Presbyterian Church

10) Directly across Church Street from the library is the *Mount Moriah Presbyterian Church*. Built in 1888 at a cost of \$9,236, this church building is yet another part of George R. Sherman's legacy in Port Henry. The Mount Moriah Presbyterian Church is a heavy, impressive Richardsonian Romanesque stone structure.

11) Back across Church Street on the corner of Main Street stands the *Glens Falls National Bank* building. Originally the First National Bank of Port Henry, this Neoclassical-style building, with its distinctive gilded dome, was completed in 1908.



11) Glens Falls National Bank

12) Crossing Main Street and turning onto Church Lane, we pass behind the grocery store to take a look at what's left of *Ledgeside*. This once-grand French Second Empire manor was the home of Frank S. Witherbee, another one of the village mining magnates. Built in 1872 and once the architectural centerpiece of Port Henry, Ledgeside has twice suffered insults rendered by "progress": once when the Grand Union grocery (now Tops Friendly Market) was built on its front lawn in 1965, and again when the Essex County ARC, Ledgeside's current occupant, built multiple additions to the structure, taking no care whatsoever to respect the structure's original design in any way.



12) Ledgeside

13) Directly across the ARC parking lot from what's left of Ledgeside is *St. Patrick's Catholic Church*. Set on one of the most picturesque sites in Port Henry overlooking Lake Champlain, St. Patrick's was a work in progress for many years. The initial stone structure was built in 1854. Enlargements and renovations that took place between 1863 and 1875, including a new High Victorian Gothic bell tower, brought the building to its current size. Following a major fire in 1897, large-scale restoration gave the church its current configuration of door and window placement.



13) St. Patrick's Catholic Church

**A map to the walking tour of Port Henry**

