

AARCH

Preserving the human heritage of the Adirondacks

By Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, November 14, 2003

KEESEVILLE — “The Adirondacks” means many things to the many people who love this part of New York state.

To some, the Adirondacks is a network of state-sanctioned wilderness areas, a haven from “the things of man,” a place of wild, silent refuge in Nature’s sanctuary.

Others, however, view the Adirondacks through a wider lens. Without discounting the region’s natural beauty, they also honor the story of its settlement and human development.

It is for them that Adirondack Architectural Heritage, or AARCH, was formed in 1990.

Today AARCH works from its Keeseville office to awaken Adirondackers to their own heritage, present all around them in the ordinary architecture of this extraordinary region.

This is AARCH’s story.

THE CREATION of AARCH was a historical necessity — an essential product of the conflicting forces at play in the Adirondack Park in the 1970s, ‘80s and ‘90s.

On the one hand were a half-dozen Adirondack Great Camps — Nehasane, Topridge, Sagamore, Fox Lair, Colby and Santanoni — that had been acquired by the state.

On the other were the two agencies responsible for administering the state’s 6-million-acre Adirondack Park, the Department of Environmental Conservation and the Adirondack Park Agency.

A strict interpretation of the APA’s Master Land Use and Development Plan

required that, once these camps were given to the state, they be included in the Forest Preserve — and, once a part of the Forest Preserve, they had to be razed.

Nehasane and Fox Lair were torched by the state.

Topridge was auctioned off, despite laws against selling Forest Preserve land.

Colby was used by the DEC as an Environmental Education Camp.

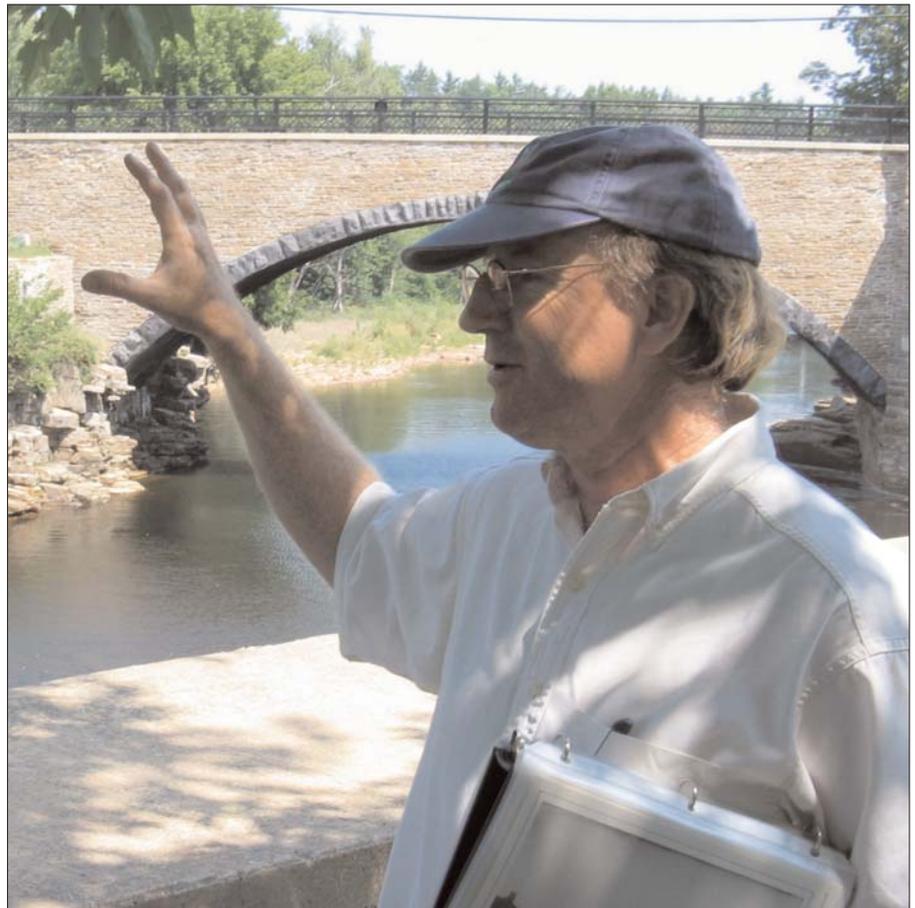
The Sagamore Institute was allowed, by a constitutional amendment, to trade 200 acres of private land for the 10 acres of state land where historic buildings were located.

That left Santanoni.

In 1990, a group of high-profile preservationists trying to save the Santanoni Preserve came together to form Adirondack Architectural Heritage. At the nexus of this group was Howard Kirschenbaum, who had just retired as executive director of the Sagamore Institute.

“We got the idea to form AARCH because there was a need for regional coordination and support among preservationists,” Kirschenbaum said in a recent interview. “The urgency of the Santanoni situation made us think that the time was right to launch an organization.”

AARCH was able to get the APA to reclassify the areas immediately around



AARCH Executive Director Steven Engelhart leads a tour of Au Sable Valley bridges listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

the Main House and the experimental farm complex at Santanoni as historic areas within the Forest Preserve. That made it possible for AARCH, the DEC and the town of Newcomb, acting as partners, to restore the buildings and run an interpretive program.

Santanoni today draws up to 10,000 visitors each year.

IN THE EARLY days, AARCH was run out of his (Kirschenbaum's) home," recalled Steve Engelhart, AARCH's current executive director, in a recent interview. "He dedicated two to three days a week to the organization on a volunteer basis."

"In the first year, we were totally run by our volunteer board members," Kirschenbaum said, "and we had no members to speak of. A foundation gave us a \$10,000 grant to fund a membership campaign. We were able to put together a nice brochure and buy mailing lists, and that gave us 300 members right from the get-go."

AARCH's first paid staff member was Mary Hotaling, who worked for several years as a part-time program coordinator. Still a very active member of AARCH's board of directors, Hotaling now directs a local preservation organization called Historic Saranac Lake.

Then came the full-time staff members. AARCH hired Engelhart as its executive director in 1994. Administrative Assistant Bonnie DeGolyer came on board in 1997, followed by Program Director Paula Dennis in 2000.

Together, the board and staff of AARCH conduct an incredibly wide array of activities. Their programs are aimed not only at the preservation of "high end" historic camps and buildings in the Adirondacks, but at educating everyday Adirondack people about the everyday history of the ordinary "built environment" around them — the architectural heritage of their families and their communities.

"The kind of work we do is admired and envied by other preservation groups across New York state," Engelhart said, a claim backed up by a recent award.

The Preservation League of New York State gave its Excellence in Historic Preservation Award to Adirondack Architectural Heritage last year. The cita-

tion said, "This award recognizes AARCH's sustained achievement through 10 years of advocacy, saving historic sites and educating the public about preservation's central role in revitalizing communities in the Adirondack region."

"We take a balanced approach," Engelhart said. "It isn't all advocacy; it isn't all education; it isn't all packaging National Register (of Historic Places) applications.

"Some preservation organizations always seem to be in a confrontational mode, going to public hearings and the courts. There may be communities where that's what's called for," Engelhart continued, "but that's not the Adirondacks.

"If I were to identify our primary goal,

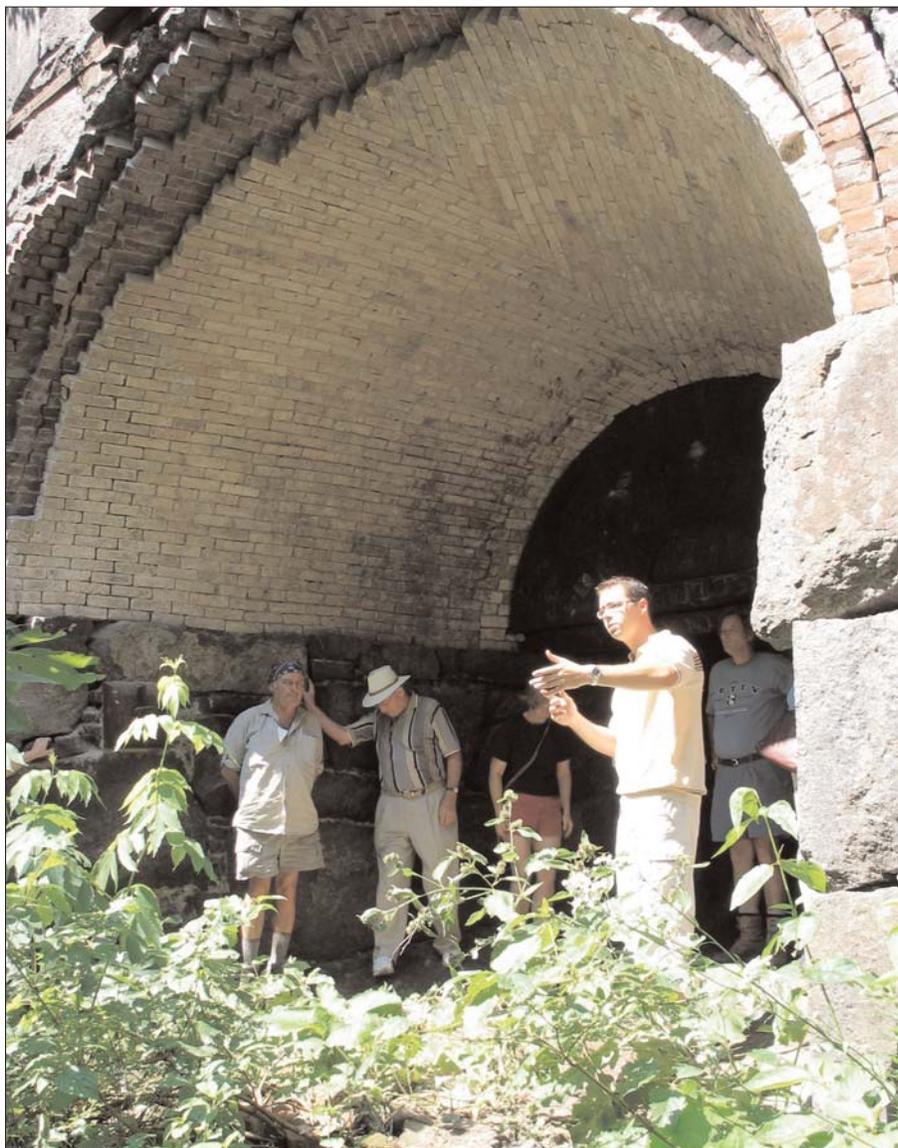
it would be this: We want to make preservationists out of people by changing their hearts and minds."

"We want to give them the tools to understand what's in front of them," Dennis added.

ENGELHART is now in his 10th year as AARCH's executive director.

"I've always been interested in history and architecture," he explained. "After high school I decided to become an architect, but when I got to architecture school I found out I wasn't really interested.

"I didn't finish college then. I became a stonemason, and that's what I did for 6 years.



Guests on an AARCH tour of the mining ghost town of Adirondac listen while Rick Rolinski explains the significance of an 1854 blast furnace — while standing inside it.

“I worked on a couple of historic buildings, including the Kent-DeLord House in Plattsburgh, and that’s where it all clicked,” Engelhart said, “the tremendous satisfaction of being involved in restoring a significant historic structure. Gil Barker, the supervising architect on that project, encouraged me to pursue a career in historic preservation.”

Engelhart went back to college, finishing his history degree at Plattsburgh State before earning his master’s degree in historic preservation from the University of Vermont.

Engelhart spent 10 years as director of housing and historic preservation for Friends of the North Country, in Keeseville, and was a founding member of AARCH’s board of directors before becoming its executive director 9 years ago.

“While I was in grad school, I had to do an internship,” Engelhart said. “They sent me to the Fayerweather Island Lighthouse, in Bridgeport, Conn., probably because of my background as a stonemason.”

The lighthouse, decommissioned in the 1930s, had been severely vandalized. The area was a mess when Engelhart arrived in 1983.

“They wanted me to spend my 10-week internship planning what to do the following summer,” Engelhart recalled. “I scoped it out and decided I could do the job that summer.

“The guy who trained me as a mason, Antanis Matulionis, taught me to get things done, to work quickly and efficiently, to anticipate problems. He was really concerned about giving the client the best value for the least money.

“That’s what I brought to Fayerweather Island — that kind of impatience to get things done on a shoestring,” Engelhart continued. “It’s that same kind of attitude I’ve brought to AARCH: to do as much as you can, in as many places as possible, with the limited resources at your disposal.”

Educate

Educational activities form the core of AARCH’s overall program.

Almost from its inception, interpretive tours have been a key component of Adirondack Architectural Heritage’s educational program.

“We had three tours the first summer,”

recalled founder Kirschenbaum. “The next year it was seven, then 10 — now we have 30.”

In addition to monthly tours of the Santanoni Preserve during the summer, AARCH offers programs on such diverse topics as Valcour Island, old Essex schoolhouses, historic Au Sable River bridges, 200 years of Adirondack farming, the Otis Mountain camps, the great camps of Ben Muncil, and the trail taken by John Brown’s body on its journey home to North Elba after the Harper’s Ferry massacre.

In its second year AARCH started to publish a highly informative newsletter twice annually. In addition to regular features like the AARCH Endangered Properties list, updates on preservation issues throughout the North Country and notes from the organization’s president, most issues also feature one or two articles on people, building styles, or particular structures important to the architectural heritage of the Adirondacks.

In 1993 AARCH held its first workshop for local preservationists on how to conduct historic surveys of their own communities, the first step in the process of preserving a community’s historic architecture.

“The state or federal government can’t force people to take care of their community,” Kirschenbaum said during that first workshop. “Good stewardship comes from local people and local governments appreciating their architectural heritage and wanting to pass it on to the next generation.”

In 1997 Adirondack Architectural Heritage started bringing its educational program into the public schools. According to the AARCH newsletter, “Architecture in the Classroom,” a project coordinated with the Plattsburgh City School District, uses the Kent-DeLord House Museum as a primary resource.

“They learned to date buildings and understand how they are made, how the culture and local history are reflected in the buildings, and how buildings change over time,” the newsletter said.

AARCH’s latest educational efforts are in the field of book publishing. Its first book was released in 2000. “Santanoni: From Japanese Temple to Life at an Adirondack Great Camp” is a beautifully made, 234-page illustrated book written by Kirschenbaum, former

Preservation League of New York State president Paul Malo and Robert Engel, AARCH’s first intern/interpreter-in-residence at the Santanoni Preserve.

Another AARCH book is scheduled for release next year. Mary Hotaling, AARCH’s first staffer, has written “William L. Coulter, Adirondack Architect.”

A third, as yet untitled AARCH book is still in the works, Engelhart said. The book surveys the history of the Adirondacks’ religious institutions.

Advocate, preserve and restore

The restoration and ongoing operation of the Santanoni Preserve, AARCH’s first major project, is still the biggest single preservation enterprise the small non-profit organization has undertaken — but AARCH, as a provider of technical assistance, is involved in many more historic preservation projects in the Adirondacks.

“We probably do 50 or 60 of those each year, providing basic information and ‘hand holding’ for people doing projects in their own communities,” Engelhart said. “For instance, Paula (Dennis) is involved with a local group working on a little cottage in Lake Luzerne, the Rockwell-Harmon Cottage, that was badly damaged in a fire last year. The cottage is owned by a local historical society.”

“A lot of what we do in these situations,” Dennis added, “is give the community the confidence that they can do what needs to be done.”

In addition to providing technical and moral support for the preservation projects of others, AARCH itself has gotten involved in the preservation of a dying breed of Adirondack architecture: fire towers.

A decade ago the DEC announced that it intended to remove many of the remaining fire towers from the Adirondack forest. AARCH fought on two fronts to save the towers. It nominated 10 towers — seven in the Adirondacks, three in the Catskills — for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, emphasizing to the DEC that the towers had more than merely sentimental value.

AARCH also lent its support to four independent fire-tower preservation projects on Poke-O-Moonshine, Mount Arab, Azure Mountain and Bald Mountain.

“Of particular note is the success of the Azure Mountain group,” a recent AARCH newsletter noted. “In less than two years they have put together an active and talented group of volunteers, raised sufficient funding for their work, produced an interpreter’s guide to the mountain, undertaken restoration work and officially re-opened the tower to the public in September.”

AARCH is also playing a role in ongoing efforts to save two more pieces of Adirondack history: the mid-19th century mining hamlet of Adirondac, in Newcomb township, and the Land of Makebelieve, a much-loved children’s theme park in Upper Jay that operated between 1954 and 1979.

Adirondac is now a ghost town, but it was once the headquarters of the Tahawus Club, the region’s first private preserve. The 10,000-acre Tahawus Club tract, which sits next door to the Santanoni Preserve, is arrayed around the southern slopes of Mount Marcy. The entire tract was recently bought by the Open Space Institute. About 6,000 acres will become part of the Forest Preserve; another 3,000 will be sold for sustainable forestry, but the remainder will become a historic preservation district. While plans are far from complete, sources say that AARCH may have some role in the management or operation of that district.

Another “ghost town” in which AARCH has expressed an interest is Arto Monaco’s abandoned Land of Makebelieve, where ruins still stand of “Cactus Flats,” a kiddie-sized Old West town, and a fanciful children’s castle. Some AARCH members have formed a group called “Friends of Arto,” whose goal is to restore the castle and turn part of the property around it into some kind of recreational park.

WHAT’S NEXT for Adirondack Architectural Heritage?

“In a way, at 12 years old, we’re at a kind of turning point,” Engelhart observed.

“Our focus so far has been education, raising the region’s consciousness about its architecture. In that, I think we’ve been really successful. I think there is, right now, a different attitude in the region about how its historic architecture adds to the quality of life and makes these communities better places in which

to live.

“Having achieved this, we have the luxury of doing other things.

“In the last couple of years we’ve been doing a lot more National Register work,” Engelhart said. AARCH has helped several public and private entities in the Adirondacks to prepare the paperwork needed to nominate significant structures for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, including the Whiteface Veterans Memorial Highway, in Wilmington, and Wellscroft, a historic B&B in Upper Jay.

“We are still trying to get education work for young people off the ground,

beyond our program in the Plattsburgh City School district,” Engelhart said. “I would like to see the time when we had a full-time educator on our staff.

“I want to reach an earlier generation of Adirondackers, to give them an appreciation for their heritage. With the right kind of teacher, it’s amazing to take a group of 10 or 20 kids around their own village and point out things they’ve never seen before.”

“They come back and tell you about conversations they’ve had with their parents about their own homes,” Dennis added. “You want to help these kids feel proud of their homes.”



Steve Engelhart describes a water fountain for cows in the dairy barn at Santanoni.