

Old Port Henry church to be restored as residence

By Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, March 5, 2004

PORT HENRY — A beautiful old church building in Port Henry, once on the verge of demolition, will be restored over the next couple of years by a new owner, Chris Ingram, who plans to make it into a home for his family.

The former Christ Episcopal Church building is part of the Adirondack Architectural Heritage walking tour of Port Henry, which was featured in a story published last September in our "Visiting Lake Placid" section.

The building is located on Foote Street where it curves into Henry Street. The wooden High Victorian Gothic structure was erected in 1872 at a cost of \$10,000 (about \$150,000 today). 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.

In the late 1990s the Historical Society was given another building that was in much better shape and much easier to restore. Today the coach house of the old Witherbee, Sherman Company office building, on Port Henry's Park Place, is the home of the Iron Center museum.

Shortly after the Historical Society was given the coach house, the Christ Episcopal Church building was sold to a private developer, Kristen Bronander. Bronander had previously restored two other historic Essex County structures. One of them was Woodruff House in Elizabethtown, which Bronander used first as an antiques showroom, then as a B&B.

Bronander also bought the former St. Mary's Episcopal Church building, in Willsboro, in 1999. Built in 1902 and desanctified in 1956, the vacant church building has been transformed by Bronander into the Cornerstone Gallery, which sells Adirondack crafts and furnishings.

Last September, Bronander was still speculating on possibilities for the Port

Henry Episcopal church building.

"I'd like to create a nonprofit performance space, a theater/cinema," she said. "As with all such things, though, financing is the issue."

Bronander estimated the cost of such a project at \$150,000.

Though she could not afford to do anything right away with the Christ Church building, Bronander said last fall that the structure did have one urgent need: "money to patch the roof."

In the meantime, the beautiful little building continued to disintegrate where it stood. The front steps were rotten through; the cut limestone foundation was shifting; the clapboard siding was falling apart, and several panes of stained glass had been broken.

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

And sure enough, last Friday, Bronander reported that Chris Ingram, program director at radio station WIPS-AM in Crown Point, was buying the Christ Church building from her.

Bronander and Ingram say they expect to close the sale in April.

Ingram says that the pace of the building's restoration will depend on both his ability to get financing and the amount of time he has available to work on the project. His immediate plans are to repair the roof and shore up an interior beam that is on the verge of collapse.

"I hope to have the build-

ing buttoned up by the time the snow flies," Ingram said. "Maybe next spring we'll start on the exterior painting."

Ingram said that he planned to make the rear of the building over into a home for his family. He hoped they would be able to move in to the converted church building within two years.

The future of the large, open sanctuary in the front, he said, is still an open question.

"My kids are musicians, and I'd love to be able to turn that area into a public performance space. It could have everything from chamber music to punk rock, as far as I'm concerned," Ingram said, "maybe a coffee house. We'll see."

Ingram said that he is very aware of the Christ Church building's architectural and historic significance to the Port Henry community.

"I'm going to be as sensitive as possible to preservation concerns for the structure," he said. "There's a lot you can do without significantly altering a building like that."

Making major changes to a historic church building like that, Ingram quipped, "would be a sin."

"By the time I'm through," Ingram said, "you won't be able to see much difference in the exterior — except for the restoration."

