

Adirondack Riviera, Part 2: Historic Essex

Story and pictures by Lee Manchester
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In the Adirondacks, we're familiar with the concept of "refreshment" — of damping stress with a dipper of water drawn from a deep well.

Our Adirondacks, after all, are the wooded wilderness where folk escape for refreshment when the world is too much with them.

And when the present is too strong a presence, we have another remedy: historic Essex, a township on the Adirondack coast of Lake Champlain, where the past is present.

Like so many other Essex County towns, iron making was once a major industry in Essex. Mills along the Boquet River ground the grain grown in Essex fields, and Essex shipyards built the bateaux that carried American troops into battle with the British in 1814.

Essex grew and prospered until the mid-19th century, but its maritime economy disintegrated when the railroad chugged into the Champlain Valley in 1849. The town's population plummeted from 2,351 in 1850 to 1,633 in 1860.

Because of this sudden, steep decline in population, there was little demand for new housing in Essex — and with the end of the town's economic growth, no one could afford to build, anyway.

"For the most part, what was standing in 1860 had to make do. It was used and preserved," wrote the authors of an excellent guide to the

historic architecture of Essex, published in 1986 by Essex Community Heritage Organization — ECHO, for short.

"As a result, Essex today retains one of the most remarkably intact ensembles of pre-Civil War architecture in New York state."

In 1975, the entire hamlet of Essex was listed as a historic district on the National Register of Historic Places.

Essex today is a quiet retreat on the Adirondack Riviera — and it has grown progressively quieter with each passing decade. The 2000 census counted only 713 permanent

residents, a 19 percent decline from the figure recorded just 20 years before.

Essex via Boquet

The trip of a little over 42 miles from Lake Placid to Essex takes about 1 hour 15 minutes, leading the traveler through Keene and Elizabethtown before entering the tiny hamlet of Boquet.

Boquet was a thriving mill town in its own right in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. By 1842 it had 50 houses and 400 residents.

The first sight you'll see as you enter Boquet is the stunningly simple Boquet Chapel, a white board Gothic Revival church built in 1855 by the Essex Episcopalians. The local builders followed a catalog design by architect Richard Upjohn, who later became one of the leading church architects in the country.

"This wooden chapel ... is a superb example of a rural Gothic Revival church," says the ECHO architectural guide, "without exaggeration, one of the finest of its type in the entire country."



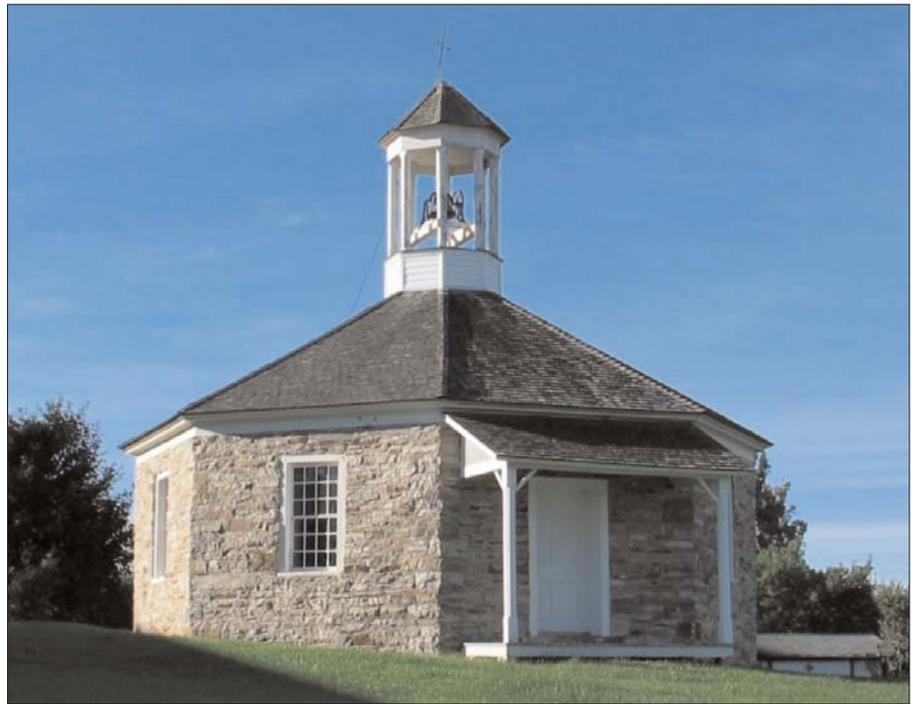
Boquet Chapel, built 1855.

Continuing on toward Essex, just after turning a sharp right corner in the road, you'll see the other architectural wonder of Boquet: its famous octagonal stone schoolhouse, built in 1826 and used until 1952. ECHO and the town of Essex undertook its preservation in the early 1990s.

Entering Essex

Just a couple of miles beyond Boquet, across the railroad tracks and up a rise, you'll catch your first glimpse of Lake Champlain, laid out before you like a silver blanket between the Adirondacks and the Green Mountains. Driving down Station Road into Essex hamlet, you'll see squarely ahead of you the Essex Firehouse, now an art and antiques store, built around 1804. Figured in its pediment are the rays of the rising sun, a kind of Essex architectural trademark that you'll see reflected, over and over, throughout the hamlet.

Find a parking place — there are



The Boquet School, built 1826

plenty, and they're all free — and walk back up Station Road to the two-story, brick house on your left. This Greek Revival-style home, built around 1847 for merchant Cyrus Stafford, now houses ECHO's offices

in its second floor. This is where you'll get your copy of ECHO's architectural guide, an essential piece of equipment on your visit.

Essex schools

We're not going to try to cover everything the ECHO guide describes in this story. We'll draw your attention, instead, to a couple of aspects of Essex architecture that particularly struck us on our visit earlier this week.

The first is Essex's schools: all five of them!

Though the hamlet's first school, built in 1787, burned to the ground, its second school was built on the same site in 1818. The Old Brick Schoolhouse, as it's called, is located on Elm Street, which runs parallel to and one block west of Main Street. Old Brick started life as a one-room school, its belfry centered on its roof. When a second room was added to the north end in 1836, the belfry was moved, again centering it.

In 1867, though the hamlet's



Former Essex Firehouse, built shortly after 1800 on Main Street at Station Road, features the hamlet's graphic trademark, the sunburst ornament on the pediment, added ca. 1835.

population was declining, a new, larger school was built up the street, on the corner of Elm and Station. The two-story frame Union School had classrooms on the first floor and an upstairs gymnasium. The exterior was designed in the Greek Revival style, long out of date by the mid-1860s, “one of the many examples ... of the conservatism of Essex builders,” according to the ECHO guide. The building is topped with a replica of an earlier weathervane.

The Union School closed when

Essex’s fourth-generation public school opened in 1905 on — you guessed it — School Street. The two-story brick “high school” actually housed all 12 grades. It stood vacant for several years after consolidation drew Essex students to a new central school in 1950.

Today, the “new” high school and the Old Brick Schoolhouse have been renovated as private residences.

The Union School, renovated in the 1970s for the Adirondack Art

Association after decades of neglect, today stands empty once more.

The other two

But, wait ... We mentioned Essex’s five schoolhouses. Where are the other two?

One of them stands on Church Street at the corner of Elm — but you’d never know it to look at the building. St. John’s Episcopal Church was originally the private family schoolhouse of the H.H. Ross family. Built in 1835, the little school began hosting Essex’s Episcopal congregation for Sunday services starting in 1853. In 1880, the building was given over wholly to the church. It was moved a short distance to its present site, where large projecting buttresses, window points and a most delicate, most unusual belfry were added. The church bell comes from the wreck of the lake steamer Champlain, which grounded on the rocks north of Westport in 1878.

The fifth of Essex’s schoolhouses is another family school — and another octagonal structure. Standing like an ornate enclosed gazebo on the lawn of the Harmon Noble house, on Main Street north of the ferry dock, this school was built in the 1850s. After the Noble children had grown up, it continued serving as a study for their father.

Architectural ‘quirks’

Another aspect Essex architecture that struck us was its quirks. Maybe “quirks” isn’t quite the right word for what we mean, but you’ll get the idea.

Most of Essex is a 19th century historic preservation district, it’s true — but there’s more to Essex architecture than the 19th century. To prove it, take a walk down Begg’s Point Road, which runs off Main Street along the lakeshore of — you got it again — Begg’s Point.



St. John's Episcopal Church, originally a family schoolhouse built 1835, rebuilt as a church in 1880, Church and Elm streets.



Two Essex architectural 'oddities': Above, the lovingly restored Lakeside, a 1954 tourist motel. Below, the ultramodern Nail Collector's House, recently designed by famed architect Steven Holl and still under construction on Begg's Point.



There on the right-hand side, looking out over the Essex docks, is an oddly poignant bit of recent Americana: a restored 1954 four-unit tourist motel, the Lakeside. Interpretive signs placed on the structure tell us that the building was restored in 2001 as an homage to its late proprietor.

Just a hundred yards or so down the road, on Begg's Point itself, screened by a thick stand of trees, rises another Essex architectural landmark that is definitely not of the 19th century — not even the 20th. A slender, ultramodern, two-story house, sheathed in metal, is being built in this historic district, the design of famed avant garde architect Steven Holl.

“It’s called the Nail Collector’s House, because it’s being built on the site of a 19th century nail factory,” explained ECHO Executive Director Bob Hammerslag.

The land upon which it is being built is the former site of the 1963 summer home of Donald Beggs, whose family contributed the lot next door to the town for a lakeside public park. Beggs, an ECHO member, gave his house to the preservation group with the idea that it would be sold to raise money.

“When we sold it [the Beggs house] to Alan Wardle, of New York City, it was subject to several development restrictions,” Hammerslag said, “shorefront, commercial, size — but not style.

“It’s generated a lot of controversy,” Hammerslag admitted, “but I see it as the newest architectural specimen in the Essex collection.”

Besides the Lakeside Motel and the Nail Collector’s House, we spotted one more bit of architectural quirkiness to appreciate in Essex. Heading back up to Main Street and moving southward, one spots the old Texaco emblem on a sign rising over two gasoline pumps — but,

upon closer examination, one realizes that it's not the Texaco symbol at all, but the Essex Garage's stab at making a historic allusion.

Essex may be one of the best collections of restored and preserved 19th century architecture in the country — but it's not without a sense of humor.

Sidewalk to the Adirondacks

Before you finish your Essex tour in the central Main Street shops and restaurants, we'd like to suggest one more walk: about half a mile northward on a sidewalk to the edge of town, past some of the grandest homes in the hamlet.

The sonic backdrop to everything in Essex — the sound of

water lapping rhythmically at the lake shore — comes into the aural foreground on this walk, with nothing but the road between you and Lake Champlain.

As you walk farther, the road turns ever so slightly away from Champlain and toward the fields surrounding Essex. The water sounds are gradually replaced, step by step, by the random stereophonic symphony of crickets chirping in the grass along both sides of the road.

And then, suddenly, you're out of the hamlet ... and there, on your left, a meadow opens out, and no longer are you in the 19th century — you're back in the Adirondacks, the foothills rising on the far side of the fields before you.

Essex resources

- For more information about the historic architecture of Essex township, contact the Essex Community Heritage Organization at (518) 963-7088, or visit their Web site at essexny.org.

- “Essex: An Architectural Guide,” a 48-page illustrated booklet, contains maps and narrative of a complete walking-driving tour of significant architectural sites in Essex township. It's published by ECHO.

- “Essex, New York: An Early History,” a 94-page illustrated paperback book, is the latest update of the town's official history, published last year by the Belden Noble Memorial Library in Essex.



The view from the end of the sidewalk: the Essex landscape just north of the hamlet, the Adirondack foothills in the background.