

Preserving Santanoni

Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, September 10, 2004

NEWCOMB — Camp Santanoni, a unique Great Camp, stands in the woods north of Newcomb hamlet, a gem of Adirondack architectural history.

Much has been done to preserve — and, to some extent, to restore — Santanoni's century-old structures since the state created a historic district within the Adirondack Forest Preserve here some 4 years ago.

But a very great deal still needs to be done to preserve and interpret Santanoni's gate complex, farm, main camp and connecting road — all of which, by the way, have belonged to the people of New York state since 1972.

The need to take Santanoni's preservation plan to the next level has been the subject of much study by Adirondack Architectural Heritage, the Keeseville-based non-profit organization that spearheaded the original drive to create the Santanoni Preserve.

A fire this summer at Santanoni — maybe an accident, maybe arson — brought home the importance of moving ahead with the new conservation plan developed by AARCH last year, before another disaster strikes this irreplaceable historic treasure.

The barn fire

The call came in at about 1:45 on the afternoon of Tuesday, July 13: a Newcomb resident had spotted smoke that looked like it was coming from Santanoni.

Firefighter Gene Bush was sent in to check it out.

"When I got there, the barn was blazing," Bush said the next day.

"Flames were rising 150 feet, 200 feet into the air."

The fire was so hot in the dry, shingle-covered barn that all firefighters could do was stand by and try to keep it from spreading. Fortunately it had been a very wet summer, and the flames didn't push any farther than 20 feet into the surrounding woods.

Those responsible for Santanoni immediately started thinking about rebuilding the barn — but the cost was daunting, estimated at somewhere between \$800,000 and \$1 million. That's more than twice the amount that's been spent so far on the entire preserve.

After weeks of anguished deliberation, AARCH came out with a resolution last month detailing five steps that should be taken to protect Camp Santanoni:

1. Update and implement a fire protection plan for all the camp's remaining buildings.

2. Ensure the state pays its share of the costs for stabilizing and conserving the remaining buildings and infrastructure at Santanoni.

3. Hire a full-time, professional site manager and adequate staff to supervise, operate and interpret Santanoni for its visitors. (Optimally, staff would include a conservator, an assistant, and three resident guides, one living in each of the camp's three complexes.)

4. Rebuild the Santanoni barn — but with the understanding that doing so should not come at the expense of the buildings still left at Santanoni.

5. Push the state to designate a specific line in the Department of Environmental Conservation budget for preserving and operating Camp Santanoni.

Santanoni history

At least two farms were operating on the land north of Newcomb hamlet where Robert C. Pruyn, an Albany banker, started buying up land in 1892 for a private wilderness retreat. Pruyn built three main complexes along the 5 miles of road leading from the hamlet to



Work proceeds on the restoration of the boathouse at Santanoni's main camp.

Newcomb Lake: a gate complex, a farm complex and the main camp.

The most remarkable architectural feature of Camp Santanoni, named for the nearby mountain peak, is its Main Lodge, perched on the shore of Newcomb Lake. The lodge is remarkable not only for its rustic beauty, but for the origin of its design. This remote lodge, rising from the woods deep in the Adirondack High Peaks country, was designed along the lines of the ancient Japanese “ho-o-den,” a kind of palace whose ground plan conforms to the shape of a bird in flight.

The inspiration for this Adirondack ho-o-den (the word means “villa of the phoenix”) undoubtedly came, at least in part, from the design of the Japanese pavilion at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. A more personal inspiration came, however, from Pruyn’s own experience as a youngster, living with his father for a year in Tokyo. His dad, you see, had been the second American ambassador to Nippon after Commodore Perry forcibly opened the country to the West in 1854. Young Bertie and his father lived in the priest’s quarters of a Japanese temple in ancient Edo.

Flanking the Main Lodge are a small cabin called the Artist’s House, a boathouse, a gazebo, a wooden shed for the generator, a stone shed for the disposal of live ash, and the ruins of an ice house.

Closer to the hamlet, just a mile above the Santanoni Gate Lodge, Pruyn built an experimental farm. Its original purpose was simply to provide his family and staff with food, but it later served as an agricultural laboratory for some of the newest ideas in dairy and truck farming.

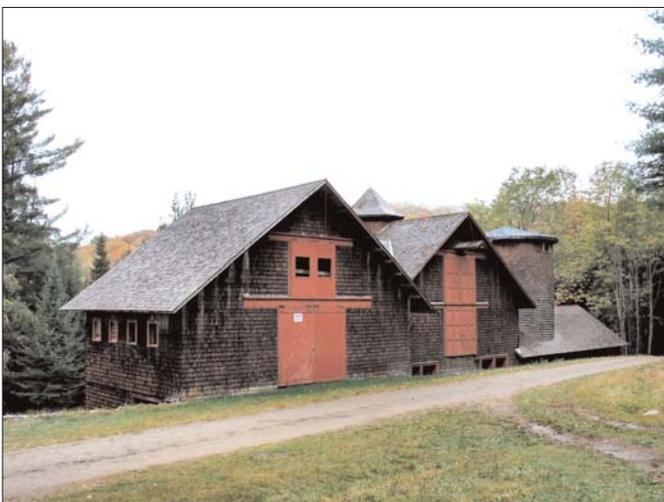
Two structures already stood on the site of Santanoni’s farm complex when Pruyn bought it in 1892: a heavy, timber-framed farmhouse built around 1850, remodeled and called the Herdsman’s Cottage, and the original Santanoni barn, built sometime before the Pruyn purchase.

Added to the Farm Complex were a number of working farm buildings no longer standing. Several Pruyn additions, however, are extant at Camp Santanoni: a low, stone creamery building for processing the milk that was brought from the dairy barn across the road; a two-story house built in 1904, called the Gardener’s Cottage; the “New” Farm Manager’s Cottage,

built from a Sears catalogue kit in 1919; and a small, stone smoke-house.

The original Santanoni barn was just the section farthest to the left, as one faced the brown, shingle-covered structure from the road. It had a horse barn in its basement, which opened onto grade (the barn was built into a hillside). Another barn was attached to the first between 1902 and 1904, to the right. A cupola provided ventilation for the second-story hayloft, where feed was stored for the cows housed in the basement. Farthest to the right, a silo rose above a cowshed — a silo that, records indicate, was used only one season.

Closest to the hamlet is the Gate Complex, reached by crossing a bridge over the narrow river running between Harris and Rich lakes. The main feature of the Gate Complex is the handsome Gate Lodge, built in 1905, dominated by its stone-arched porte cochere. An existing farmhouse, later called the West Cottage after the last family that lived in it, stood along the road past the Gate Lodge, across from an old barn that burned in 1990. Completing the complex during the Pruyn years was a circa 1915 boathouse, which still



At left, the Santanoni barn on Oct. 4, 2003. At right, a fire consumes the barn on Tuesday, July 13, 2004.



The front porch of the central pavilion in the main lodge, on Newcomb Lake.

stands (albeit precariously) on Lake Harris.

Robert Pruyn and his family enjoyed Camp Santanoni for many years. It was not until 1953 that the preserve's 12,900 acres were sold at auction to banker Crandall Melvin and his brother, lawyer Myron Melvin, both of Syracuse. The price was just \$79,100 for the entire preserve — about \$525,000 today, accounting for inflation.

The Melvins maintained the camp as best they could for the next 19 years, but erected no new buildings except a garage at the Gate Complex. When a Melvin nephew became lost in the woods in 1972, the family was so overwrought they decided to give up Santanoni. It was conveyed into the hands of the state — which did nothing with it for years and years.

Alphabet soup, Santanoni-style

After watching Santanoni decay for nearly two decades, concerned preservationists banded together in 1990 to form Adirondack Architectural Heritage, which

pressed for the state to develop a plan to preserve the great camp and open it to visitors. It took another decade of wrangling, however, before the Camp Santanoni Historic Area Unit Management Plan was compiled and approved by both the DEC and the Adirondack Park Agency.

The APA had a particularly difficult problem to solve before giving its OK to the Santanoni UMP: When the camp was given to the state in 1972, it became part of the “forever wild” Forest Preserve. Wilderness advocates argued strenuously against cutting back the woods that had returned to the Santanoni farm clearings and camp areas; they claimed that rebuilding Santanoni structures that had fallen into ruin would violate both the spirit and the letter of state law; they even advocated the demolition of the surviving structures at the gate complex, the farm and the main camp, something the state had always done whenever private land was brought into the Forest Preserve.

Historic preservationists, howev-

er, urged the APA to do something it had never done before, but which was envisioned right from the agency's start: create a “historic area” within the Forest Preserve, allowing for the preservation of Santanoni's historic buildings. That's exactly what the agency did in August 2002. The territory designated for the historic area was the minimum needed to preserve the standing buildings and the road that links them together, just 32.2 acres out of Santanoni's former 12,900 acres.

With the historic designation came a Unit Management Plan detailing the DEC's optimistic 5-year plan for conserving the great camp. The \$769,400 budget estimate for stabilizing and preserving Santanoni was, those close to the process say, “pulled out of thin air.”

Between the three partners that operate Santanoni — the DEC, AARCH and the town of Newcomb — much has been done, slowly but steadily, to solve the great camp's biggest preservation problems over the last 4 years. New roofs were put on the Main Lodge, the Artist's House, the three houses at the farm complex, and the barn. The most serious structural problems on several buildings were addressed with major renovations, not to make the buildings habitable but to “secure the envelope” against the harsh Adirondack elements.

Grants have been secured to pay some of Santanoni's biggest preservation tickets. In 2002 the state's Environmental Protection Fund ponied up about half the cost — \$92,000 — of restoring the main camp's surviving boathouse. And last year a \$120,000 Getty grant was used to do a comprehensive architectural study of the entire Santanoni Historic Area, giving AARCH and its partners the hard

data they needed to develop realistic plans for preserving and interpreting what's left of Robert Pruyn's wilderness retreat.

Several more grants are still pending. One of them is from the National Trust for Historic Preservation's "Save America's Treasures" program.

"That one's for \$375,000," said AARCH Executive Director Steven Engelhart. "We may hear about that this fall.

"The other grant is another one from the Getty Grant Program, for \$250,000. We may apply for that this spring."

Engelhart said that his group has spent about \$50,000 a year on Santanoni preservation. The DEC has also used its staff to shore up several structures on the preserve since 2000, just finishing up now on the Herdsman's Cottage.

"We're trying to pick up the pace of conservation work," Engelhart said. "Instead of doing \$50,000 worth of work a year, we'd like to do \$250,000."

A detailed "Conservation Plan for Camp Santanoni" was completed in July 2003 by AARCH, calling for state expenditures of more than \$3.4 million. The plan is currently under review by the DEC.

In the meantime, Santanoni is open to the public. You can't drive the 5-mile road from the Gate Lodge to the main camp, but you can ride your bicycle or walk the gently inclined dirt road whenever you like. An AARCH intern offered tours throughout the summer, and several AARCH tours throughout the year give visitors a chance to learn about this unique historic preserve from those who know the most about it.

A week from Sunday, on Sept. 19, AARCH will offer its next tour of Camp Santanoni. Leading the tour will be architect Carl Stearns, whose firm conducted the study leading to last year's Conservation Plan, and master carpenter Michael Frenette, who has supervised much of the restoration work at Santanoni. Participants will see restoration in

progress and learn first-hand about the conservation planning and restoration work underway at the main camp on Newcomb Lake.

Those who want to read up on Camp Santanoni before their visit are encouraged to buy "Santanoni: From Japanese Temple to Life at an Adirondack Great Camp." The 234-page paperback coffee-table book, filled with photographs, tells the story of how this unique camp was built and how AARCH and other preservationists joined forces to ensure its survival. Published by AARCH in 2000, the book retails for \$24.95 at local bookstores, or you can buy it directly from Adirondack Architectural Heritage.

AARCH was formed in 1990 to promote better understanding, appreciation and stewardship of the unique architectural heritage of the Adirondacks through education, action and advocacy. With offices in Keeseville at 1790 Main St., AARCH's phone number is (518) 834-9328. Its Web address is www.aarch.org.



Doug Alitz (in suspenders), owner and driver of the High Peaks Stable carriage, talks with AARCH Executive Director Steve Engelhart, right, in the Santanoni Farm Complex, the Creamery in the background.