

A walk through historic Keeseville

Words and pictures by Lee Manchester,
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A group of about 30 “tourists” took a stroll last Thursday afternoon through the history of Keeseville, their hometown. The “tourists” came from two 3rd-grade classes at Keeseville Elementary School.

Steven Engelhart led the tour. Engelhart is the executive director of Adirondack Architectural Heritage — called AARCH (pronounced like “arch”) for short — a nonprofit historic preservation organization whose offices are located in the village’s former high school, which now serves as a civic center.

Engelhart is no stranger to the Adirondack “heritage tourist.” This year AARCH offered 34 tours of historic districts, sites and buildings throughout the Adirondacks, including one through Keeseville and nearby Au Sable Chasm.

Our route started at the “top” of Main Street, to the west of the Au Sable; down the street and across Keeseville’s famous Stone Arch Bridge; to the right, just one block up Front Street; to the right again, to the Swinging Bridge and the Iron Stairs; and up Liberty Street to its intersection with Main Street, where we started.

St. Stanislaus Academy, 1804 Main St. — Engelhart started his tour at a historic building that most

Keeseville Elementary students know as “The Annex,” where nearby KES held overflow classes until the school’s recent expansion. But the Annex, across a parking lot from the St. John the Baptist rectory, has a much longer academic history than any of the students on last week’s tour imagined.

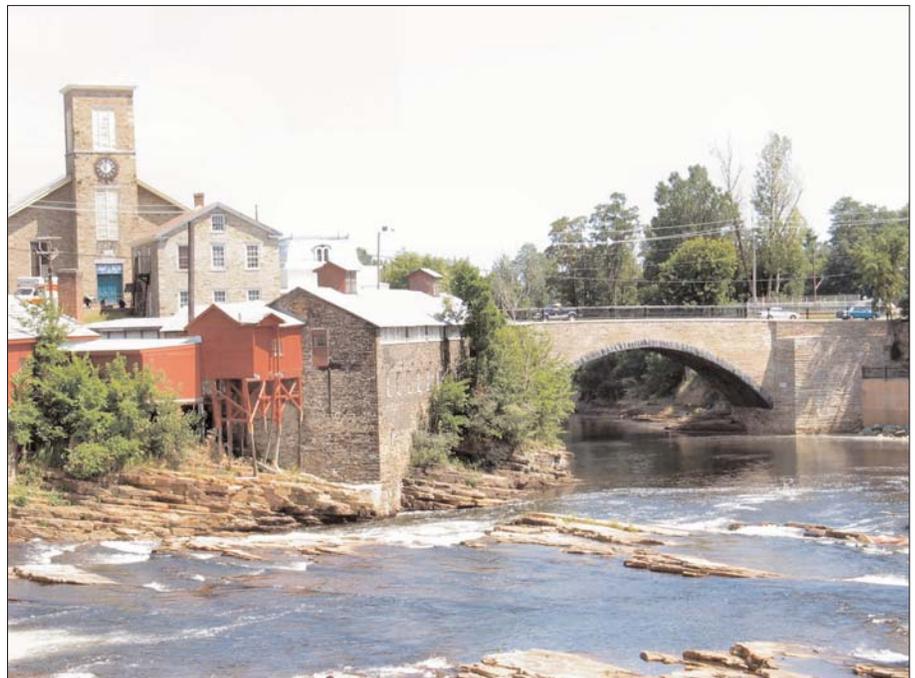
“There was a time when Keeseville had a Catholic or parochial school,” Engelhart told the students. “At one time this building was called St. Stanislaus Academy. It was built about 1880, and it ran at least until the 1940s.”

Keeseville Central School, 1759 Main St. — The big, brick Keeseville Central School, down the block from the Annex, was built in 1936 when improved methods of transportation allowed for the consolidation of the area’s small one- and two-room district schools.

The KCS building stands on Academy Hill, named for the two earlier public high-school buildings — both called Keeseville Academy — that stood on the site of the 1936 structure, the first one made of stone, the second of brick. Both were outgrown and replaced with larger, more modern facilities.

“Can you see another school from here?” Engelhart asked his young charges. One student pointed across the road to ...

District School No. 8, Liberty & Main streets — The small, red-brick building behind the village tennis courts — in wintertime, they’re ice rinks — is Keeseville’s



Keeseville's central Arch Bridge, with the 19th century Au Sable Horse Nail Factory to its left, the Nail Factory office, and the village's Presbyterian church.



St. John the Baptist Catholic Church, built in 1903.

oldest surviving schoolhouse. Built around 1850, it had two rooms: one for the boys, the other for the girls.

Intersection, Main & Pleasant streets — Engelhart next brought his guests down the street to the northeast corner of Main and Pleasant, where he pointed to a semi-circular stone, about 3 feet across and 2 feet high, sitting in front of the house at 1764 Main St.

“Does anyone know what this mysterious object is?” Engelhart asked.

After much speculation, one student came up with the answer: “It’s a stepping stone for getting into a horse-drawn carriage.”

The stone stands in front of the

white frame house built in 1820 and expanded in 1840 for Silas Arnold, who made his fortune from the iron mine at nearby Arnold Hill.

On two of the other three corners of this intersection stand the brick homes of the Kingsland brothers, Edmund’s (ca. 1832) on the southwest and Nelson’s (ca. 1850) the southeast. The brothers came to Keeseville from Fair Haven, Vt., bringing with them their ironworks expertise, which they applied in creating Keeseville’s nail factory.

1760 Main St. — Next door to the Silas Arnold house is a two-story home built of native sand-

stone brought up from the Au Sable River. The house was built around 1823 for Richard Keese II, namesake of the local banker, iron mill operator and one-time congressman for whom the village of Keeseville was renamed (it was first called Anderson Falls).

“In 1823, we weren’t shipping in building materials from Chicago and New York and Boston,” Engelhart pointed out to his student-tourists, explaining the building material used in the Keese home. “To build houses and stores and churches and factories, we had to use materials we could find right here. One of the things that’s really plentiful in Keeseville is river stone. You would use crowbars and

hammers to pry out whole sheets of it from the river bed.”

Keeseville’s first library, the Lee Memorial Library, was a small building sitting in what is now the driveway of the Richard Keese II lot. It was demolished when the new library was built on Front Street.

Intersection, Main & Au Sable streets — Just a bit farther down Main Street, on the south side of the intersection with Au Sable Street, are two similar stone buildings, both built by the company that drove the Keeseville economy in the middle of the 19th century, the Eagle Horse Nail Company, later renamed the Au Sable Horse Nail Company.

On the southeast was the company’s shipping office, built around 1856, which later became home to the Au Sable Valley Grange (1903). On the southwest corner the company built its headquarters around 1852, adjacent to



The earliest of Keeseville's surviving schoolhouses, District School No. 8, ca. 1850.

the long, red factory building running up the east bank of the Au Sable River below the former dam.

Across the street, on the northern side of Main, stand the village’s former Presbyterian church and Keeseville’s post-Civil War bank. A gothic-style Congrega-

tional church stood on the corner earlier, built in 1830, but the Presbyterians outgrew it and around 1852 erected the building we see today, built from local sandstone. It later became Keeseville’s Masonic lodge.

By the way: The old-fashioned,



Keeseville Central School, built in 1936, was the third public school built on its Academy Hill site.



The Richard Keese II House, 1760 Main, ca. 1823.

wind-up, counterweighted clock in the Presbyterian church's belfry still works, and it is wound and set regularly.

The Second Empire-style building next to the church was the Keeseville National Bank, built around 1870 by banker E.K. Baber. It's still a bank, but now it's owned by the huge Banknorth corporation, headquartered in Maine.

Neither the church nor the bank building has changed much in appearance since the 19th century, as evidenced by old photographs.

Stone Arch Bridge — Our next stop was Keeseville's central bridge, a structure that is, itself, one of the village's gems of his-

toric architecture. Standing in the middle of its single span and looking upstream, it's also a great vantage point from which to view the remains of Keeseville's industrial past.

Work on the bridge was begun in 1843, but a flood that year washed all the stonework away in mid-progress. The Stone Arch Bridge was not finished until 1844.

Looking upstream from the middle of the Stone Arch Bridge, one sees on the right Keeseville's abandoned horse-nail factory. A plaster mill, grist mill and factory-machine shop stood across from it on the left bank, replaced in the 1870s by a twine factory. Upstream from the twine factory was the

Prescott furniture factory, which operated in one form or another well into the mid-20th century. Today, most of these sites are occupied by grassy vacancies and public walks.

At the east end of the bridge, on the downstream side, once stood the imposing Commercial Hotel. It's gone today, and much of the riverbank underneath its concrete pad has been washed away by successive floods, making problematic the recent proposals for some kind of memorial on the site.

Main Street between Beach and Kent streets — Leaving the Arch Bridge, we headed east on Main Street past Front Street. At the end,

on the left, is a little mansard-roofed print shop and, next to it, an impressive, two-story, Second Empire brick home. These were once part of the Keeseville Mineral Spring, an attraction built in 1871 to draw folks seeking “a cure for what ailed them.” In 1919, a Plattsburgh bottler began marketing Keeseville’s mineral water under the brand name “Dietaid.”

Front Street — A fire that started at the Prescott furniture factory

wiped out Keeseville’s Front Street in 1868. Most of the buildings standing there now were built immediately after the fire, and the decorative cornices at the top of each building reflect the aesthetic sensibilities of that era.

Clinton Street churches — At the end of the commercial block on Front Street stand two of Keeseville’s old churches. To the left, up Clinton Street a short way, is the rural Gothic church built by

the Episcopal congregation. The body of the building was erected in 1853, but the belfry was added in 1877.

At the corner of Clinton and Front streets is the “new” Methodist Episcopal church building — “new,” because it replaced an 1831 building that burned in the catastrophic fire of 1868.

The Swinging Bridge — Going down Clinton Street toward the Au Sable River, we came to the second



Au Sable Horse Nail Company headquarters, 1747 Main, ca. 1852.

of Keeseville's historic bridges, the Swinging Bridge. This pedestrian suspension bridge dates back to 1842, replacing an earlier version that had collapsed into the river. A corps of militiamen had marched across the earlier bridge in cadence, creating a swing pulse that snapped one of the bridge's suspending cables. Forty people were on the bridge when it fell; 13 were lost in the river below.

Today, the Swinging Bridge still swings. Standing in the middle, one feels every breath of wind, every step taken by every other pedestrian making his way across the bridge. The schoolchildren on Engelhart's tour last week, however, were far more interested in an old easy chair that had washed down the river, lodging on the rocky, shallow rapids below.

Riverside Tavern — Back on the west side of the Au Sable River, to the left one sees a well-preserved 19th century coach house, the for-

mer Stagecoach Inn, at 95 Au Sable St. Built around 1835, it stands on what was then the primary coach road through Keeseville.

Keeseville's first Baptist church — To reach their final stop, last week's history tourists climbed the old iron stairs to Pleasant Street, then headed up Liberty Street toward the twin steeples of St. John's.

There on the left, empty and worn from the years, stands the former church building that used to sit on the St. John's site. It is Keeseville's original Baptist church, built in 1825, bought out by the village's French Catholic congregation and moved across the street when construction began on the impressive new Roman church in 1903.

Believed to be the second oldest surviving church building in the Adirondacks, the Keeseville Baptist church building stands

v a c a n t today, sans steeple but structurally s o u n d ,

according to Engelhart — and it's for sale!

"You can buy this church for \$15,000," Engelhart said. "It needs some tender, loving care, but it could make someone a great home."

For more info — Two booklets on Keeseville history are available from Friends of the North Country, a nonprofit development assistance agency with headquarters just off the Swinging Bridge:

- "A Thoroughly Wide Awake Little Village," by Virginia Westbrook, is a great illustrated guide for your walking tour through historic Keeseville.

- "Crossing the River: Historic Bridges of the Au Sable River," by Steven Engelhart, documents the 17 historic bridges that, together, were listed on the National Register of Historic Places as a result of Engelhart's research.

For copies of either book, call Friends of the North Country at (518) 834-9606.

For more information about Adirondack Architectural Heritage, call (518) 834-9328, or visit its Web site at www.aarch.org.



At left, Keeseville's first Baptist church, built in 1825, on its original site — the place where St. John's Catholic Church was built in 1903. At right, the Baptist church building today, thought to be the second-oldest surviving church building in the Adirondacks.