

Awesome Au Sable Chasm

By LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, August 19, 2005

AU SABLE CHASM — If you want a great day trip out of Lake Placid, try Au Sable Chasm, “the Grand Canyon of the East.”

Half a billion years ago, a primeval ocean surrounded the Adirondacks, laying down 150 feet of Potsdam sandstone. When the last of the Ice Age ice sheets withdrew into the Great White North about 10,000 years ago, they left behind a small fault in the sandstone. That fault guided the Au Sable River across the face of the soft rock, cutting quickly (in geological terms) the small gorge that we see today.

Chasm’s discovery

The European discovery of Au Sable Chasm is often credited to William Gilliland, pre-Revolutionary lord of the township later named for him — Willsboro — while exploring the Champlain shore in October 1765.

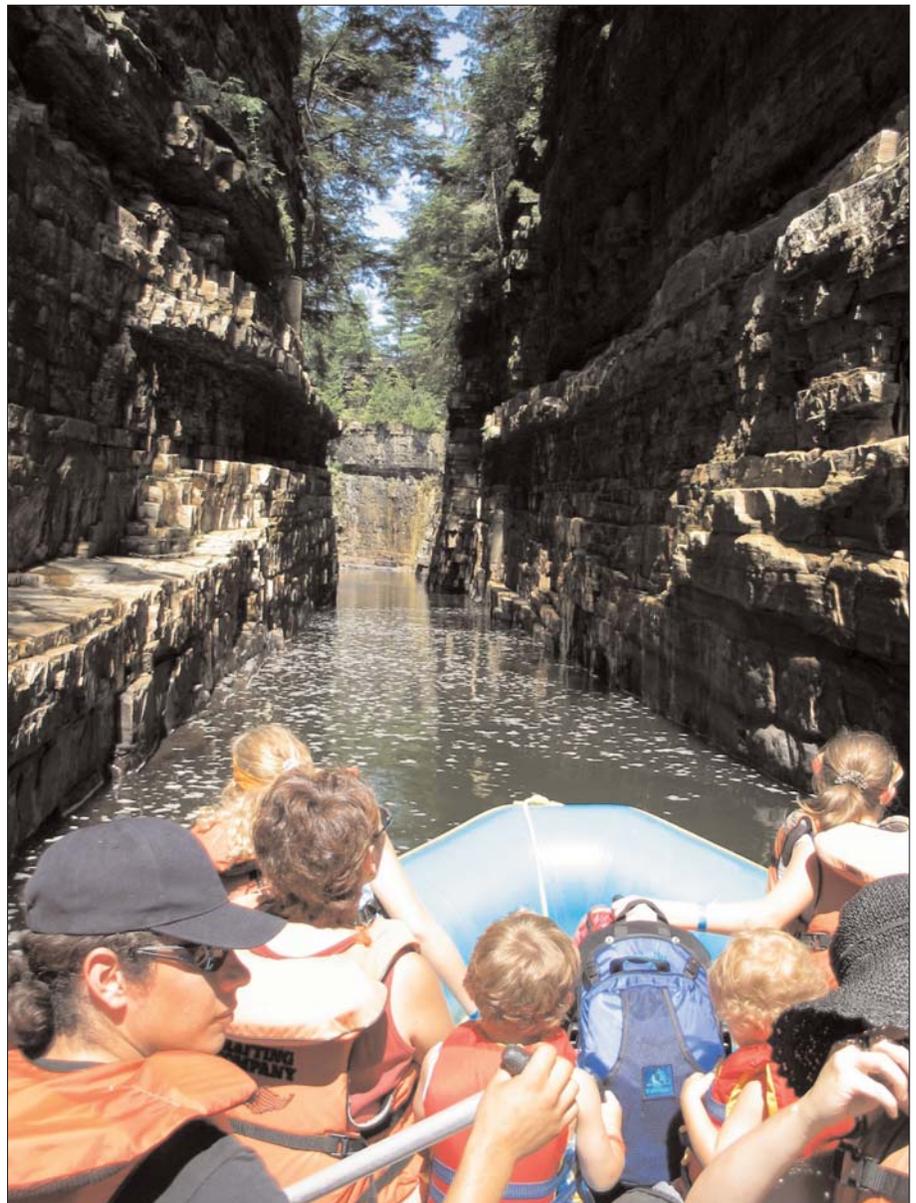
“It is a most admirable sight,” he wrote in his journal, “appearing on each side like a regular built wall, somewhat ruined, and one would think that this prodigious clift was occasioned by an earthquake, their height on each side is from 40 to 100 feet in the different places. We saw about a half mile of it, and by its appearance where we stopped it may continue very many miles further.”

Gilliland was not, however, the first European to venture up the Au Sable from Lake Champlain. Credit for the Chasm’s true discov-

ery must go to Captain James Tute, of Rogers Rangers. Setting out from Crown Point on an espionage mission in 1759, during the French and Indian Wars, Tute and his party of 11 men entered the Au

Sable on Aug. 28.

“Tute rowed upstream for about 3 miles until they struck the rapids, where they disembarked and reconnoitered on the south ridge to determine what lay ahead,” wrote



Rafting through the Grand Flume at Au Sable Chasm

Burt G. Loescher in “Au Sable Chasm: A Rogers’ Rangers Discovery.”

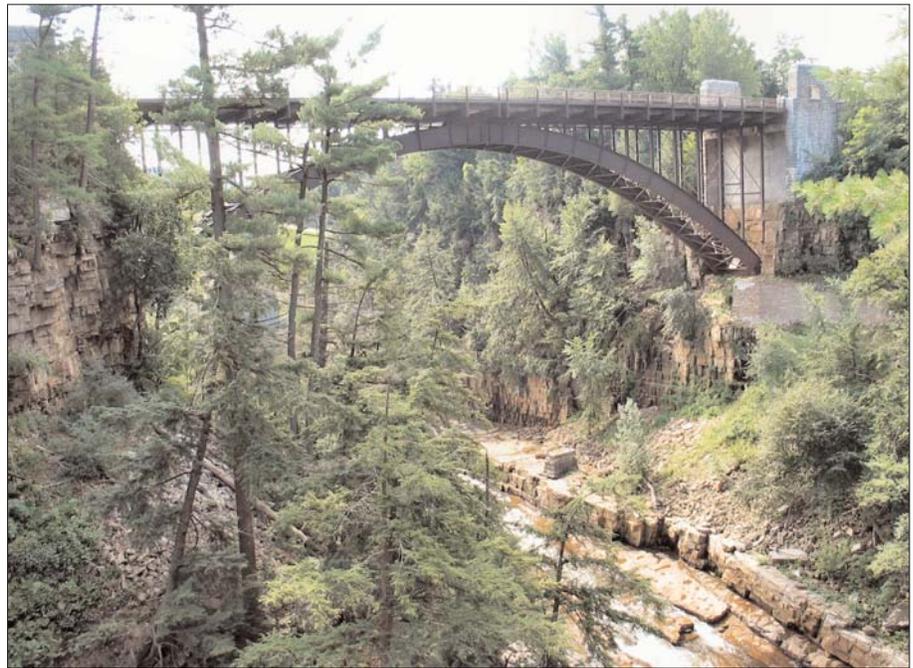
“To their amazement, they soon peered down into the breathtaking chasm at the spectacular sandstone cliffs rising to heights of 40 to 115 feet to the top of a cathedral-shaped rock. It was apparent that the 1.5-mile chasm would have to be portaged to above the incredibly beautiful waterfall.”

Settlement

After the Revolutionary War, the state of New York ran a road through the eastern stretches of the northern wilderness, a part of which was the first bridge built across the Au Sable Chasm. Called the High Bridge, it was located about a mile below the current bridge, at a place where the crossing from one 100-foot-high cliff to the other was just 30 feet. Built in 1793 of six 20-inch logs thrown across the chasm, with planks nailed over them to make a roadbed.

The High Bridge was decommissioned in 1810 when the state road’s course was altered, bringing the river crossing to the nascent hamlet of Au Sable Chasm. The hamlet’s first industry was an iron smelt, fueled with the charcoal made from the abundant timber rising from surrounding hills. The iron produced by the smelt led to a horsenail factory. Other industries that developed in the Au Sable Chasm settlement included a wrapping-paper plant, two pulp mills, a pair of starch factories, even a furniture plant, all run with the mechanical power provided by a waterfall.

Later, the Paul Smiths Electric Company built a hydroelectric plant at Au Sable Chasm, whose



Many people associate Au Sable Chasm with this highway bridge, built in 1934, the last of the many bridges erected to span the gorge.

turbines were housed in a Swiss chalet-style concrete building. The plant is still in operation; its outflow known as Rainbow Falls.

Later bridges

Beginning with the 1810 bridge, a series of wooden bridges were erected at Au Sable Chasm below the falls. In 1890, the state finally put up a one-lane iron bridge, factory-built, which stands there still.

A railroad bridge built a few hundred yards downstream of the hamlet was eventually removed. In 1934, it was replaced with the current bridge of stone and steel that spans the Chasm today.

“I think this is a particularly beautiful piece of engineering. It respects and responds to its site,” said architectural historian Steven Engelhart, author of “Crossing the River: Historic Bridges of the Au Sable River.”

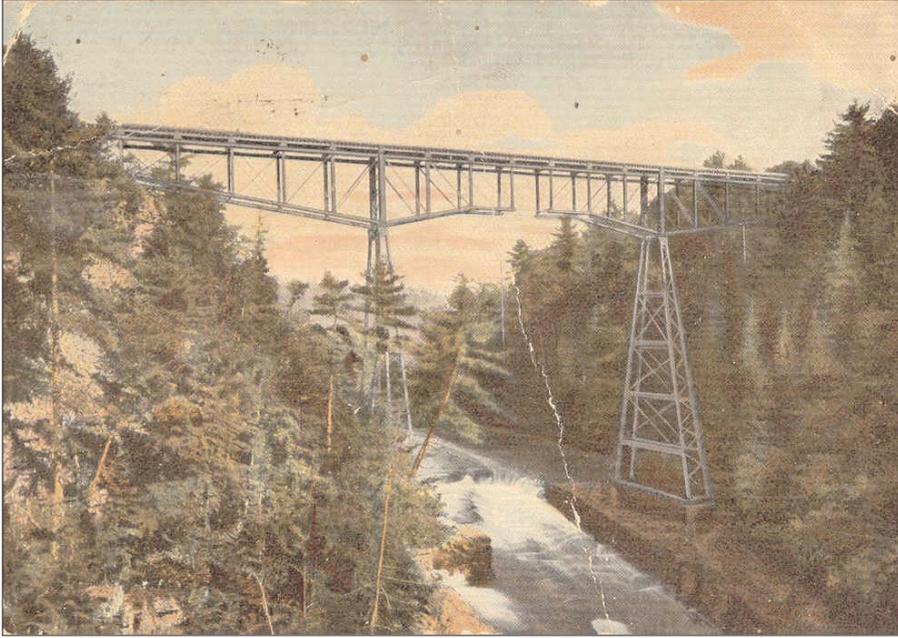
“Its central feature is a 222-foot steel arch leaping across the

chasm, as dramatic in its way as the chasm itself. On either end, this span is approached over concrete arches covered in local sandstone and granite. The design blends with and complements its natural environment.”

The tourist attraction

Au Sable Chasm first opened as a commercial attraction in 1870. In its heyday, before the 1967 advent of the Adirondack Northway, the Chasm was part of a string of Adirondack tourism attractions along Route 9. At its peak, the Chasm drew a quarter million guests each year; in recent years, that number has dwindled to 50,000.

Disaster struck Au Sable Chasm in 1996, in the form of two catastrophic floods. The first flood hit in January, when temperatures rose from 20 degrees Fahrenheit to 75 degrees in just 12 hours. The second flood, came with the November rains. In both floods,



An earlier railroad bridge, picture in this century-old postcard, once crossed the chasm at about the same location.

high water rose from 70 to 100 feet above normal. Trails along the Chasm floor and wall, torn from their moorings by the January flood, were restored for the summer season, but after the second flood, most trails were moved to the gorge's rim, where you'll find them today.

The experience

From the parking lot off Route 9, it's a quick hop into the Au Sable Chasm gift shop and cafeteria, where you'll pay for your tickets to the attraction. Before beginning your trek into the Chasm itself, there are two short trails you may want to take.

The first will lead you upstream, where you can see Rainbow Falls and the old powerhouse chalet. No longer, however, can you cross the old iron bridge into the pretty, well-preserved hamlet of Au Sable Chasm; the bridge was closed in July 2004 by state highway engineers.

To take the second short walk,

head back to the gift shop and continue downstream beneath an arch of the main highway bridge. The trail ends at a point where iron staircases once took visitors to a trail on the Chasm floor. Today, the top of the old staircase is the best place to look across the Chasm at Elephant's Head, one of the attraction's most widely known geological formations. When you're finished there, head back upstream to the main bridge and head across the gorge, where the real walk begins.

Once you get across the bridge, you'll actually have two trails from which to choose. One is the Rim Walk, beautiful but relatively tame. That trail, lined with numerous naturalist interpretive signs, ends at the Grand Flume Bridge across the Chasm, thought to be at or near the site of the original 1793 High Bridge.

The second trail, should you take it, will lead you down into the Inner Sanctum of Au Sable Chasm, where you'll see — from the

inside — what all the “oohs” and “aahs” are about.

The end of the Inner Sanctum trail is Table Rock, the launch pad for the Chasm's raft, kayak and inner tube trips down the river, through the Grand Flume, around Whirlpool Basin and out. Once you're finished, a bus will take you back to the parking lot.

If you go

- *Directions* — From Lake Placid, take Route 86 through Wilmington to Jay. Turn left at the Jay Green onto Route 9N; in Keeseville, merge onto Route 9.

- *Open, hours* — From the end of May through June, the Chasm is open from 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. From July through Labor Day, it stays open until 5 p.m. Closing time goes back to 4 p.m. from Labor Day through Columbus Day weekend.

- *Ticket prices* — Adults (18 and over), \$16; seniors (55 and over) and teens (12 through 17), \$14; children (5 through 11), \$9; under 5, free.

- *Essex, Clinton, Franklin county residents' discount* — With proof of residency, locals get in to the Chasm for just \$7 (free for those under 5).

- *Lamplight tours* — For the last couple of years, Au Sable Chasm has offered lamplight tours of the gorge for \$18.57 each (no local discount). Reservations are required; call 866-RV-CHASM. Allow 2 hours for this tour. Lanterns are provided. The tour begins at dusk on Friday and Saturday nights.

- *Be prepared* — Operators say that visitors should plan on spending at least 2 hours to go through Au Sable Chasm — more, if you ride the river through the Flume.

Keep in mind that your visit will include a lot of walking; if you have difficulty climbing or descending stairs, this may not be the trip for you. If you're going to tube the Flume, wear swimwear and appropriate footwear, and leave your valuables in a locker at the Chasm gift shop.

- *Web site* — For more on Au Sable Chasm, visit the attraction's Web site at AuSableChasm.com.

More about the Chasm: Ghost of a bridge

The old High Bridge over the Au Sable Chasm crossed between cliffs that rose 100 feet above the rocky riverbed below — hence, no doubt, the name. Built in 1793 with a base of six thick logs, each 20 inches across, it was closed in 1810 when the state road moved its river crossing to the young hamlet of Au Sable Chasm, a little more than a mile upstream.

Within 10 years after the bridge was abandoned — by 1820, at the latest — only one of the High Bridge's six log "stringers" remained.

According to the record, daredevil Stephen Stearn crossed that stringer in his stocking feet, holding a boot in each hand for balance.

Another tale, possibly apocryphal, tells of an area preacher coming home to Keeseville after spending several years "away" in the mission field. When he'd left, the High Bridge had been the accepted river crossing — and when he entered the final stretch for home that dark Adirondack night, the High Bridge was the way the preacher's horse still knew best.

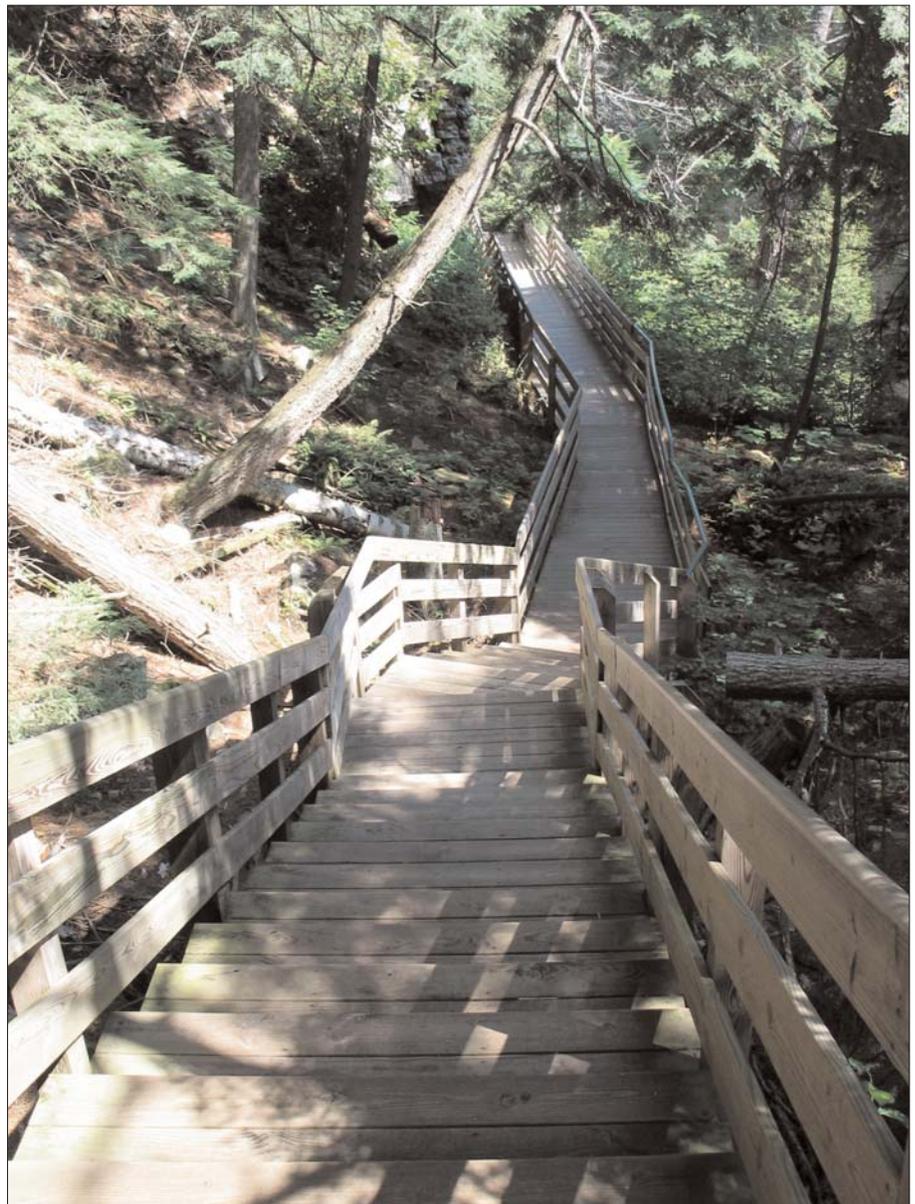
One version of the story has it that, so trusty was the preacher's

steed, the parson had fallen asleep in the saddle and didn't realize his predicament until he was halfway across the single remaining beam of the old High Bridge. From that point on, all he could do was pray until he reached the other side.

A second version says that the minister did not know of his danger until he reached home, described his journey and was told that the bridge had been closed so

long that only one stringer remained — the stringer across which his horse must have surely picked his way.

"The next morning, when he reviewed by the light of day the threadlike pathway over which he had gone," a placard at the Chasm reads, "his knees smote together, and he uttered a prayer of thanksgiving for deliverance from a horrible death."



A sturdy wooden boardwalk provides for a smooth journey along the rim of Au Sable Chasm, while also protecting the terrain from the hordes of visitors drawn to the natural attraction each year.