

The AARCH Top Five

A tour of endangered Adirondack historic architecture — the first in a two-part series

by Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, March 3, 2003

There are many angles from which to view the many strands of Adirondack history.

Consider this story your invitation to view that history from the perspective of the region's architecture — specifically, its *endangered* architecture — courtesy of Adirondack Architectural Heritage, the nonprofit historic-preservation organization based in Keeseville. (The group is known familiarly as AARCH, pronounced “arch.”)

We'll take a long drive around Essex County to experience five aspects of the settlement of the Adirondacks: farming, public worship, food processing, resort hospitality, and post-war automobile tourism.

These are the sites we will visit:

- The Daniel Ames farmhouse, in Ray Brook;
- Keeseville's original Baptist church;
- The William Ross grist mill, in Willsboro;
- Aiden Lair, a resort hotel in Minerva township, and
- Arto Monaco's much-loved Land of Makebelieve, in Upper Jay.

We'll cover the first three sites in this week's Lake Placid News. The last two sites will be visited in next week's paper.

Since 1994, AARCH has maintained a list of important historic and architectural landmarks that are in danger of being lost if something isn't done soon to save them. To be considered for the list, a property must meet certain criteria:

- It must be located inside the Adirondack Park's Blue Line.

- It must be historically or architecturally significant, though it need not necessarily be listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

- The continued existence and integrity of the property must be seriously threatened.

In addition, properties are often chosen because they are illustrative of important regional, state or national preservation issues, such as the widespread loss of historic bridges, or the abandonment of churches due to the declining size of many congregations.

Daniel Ames farmhouse

Our first stop will be at the Daniel Ames farmhouse, on the eastern edge of Ray Brook, a hamlet located on

state Route 86 between Lake Placid and Saranac Lake.

The house sits by the side of a pond on the north side of the road, across Route 86 from the Saranac Lake Golf Course. The lot is somewhat overgrown, and the building is badly in need of paint. Even upon close examination, it might be difficult for the untrained eye (like this reporter's) to see this house as something special — but it is.

The main wave of settlement hit North Elba township in the 1840s. Daniel Ames rode that wave into Ray Brook, buying up several Great Lots, including the two where he built his house and established his farm. We know that Ames was established there no later than 1847, because the



The Daniel Ames farmhouse, Ray Brook, built before 1847

family of William Peacock stayed with him when they came to settle after William's brother Joseph had broken ground on their new farm a few miles south.

The story-and-a-half Greek Revival-style frame house may look today like an old, abandoned wreck, but an architectural study of the historic structure conducted some 15 years ago by Mary Hotaling of Historic Saranac Lake disclosed that it was solid and well-constructed.

"The house is remarkably intact," Hotaling wrote in 1991, "probably because it is and was owned by the golf club and was the home of the resident golf professional for many years. Always financially pinched, the club did only necessary maintenance, such as replacing the roof."

The Ames farm was purchased by the golf club in 1920. Six years later, the club hired a pro named Richard A. "Hike" Tyrell, who lived in the Ames farmhouse for the next 58 years, from 1926 to 1984. Since "Hike" left, the house has been vacant.

Today, the Saranac Lake Golf Club uses the Ames house for stor-



Keeseville's original Baptist church building (1825), now located on Liberty Street

age, but not much else. AARCH considers it to be endangered because of its deteriorating condition.

Original Baptist church, Keeseville

Our next stop is Keeseville's first Baptist church, located in the village's historic district. To get there from the Ames house, head east on Route 86 through Lake Placid and Wilmington to Jay. Turn left on state Route 9N, which will take you through Au Sable Forks and Clintonville before it runs into the heart of Keeseville. At the Main Street traffic light, turn left up the hill, then make the first left, then another quick left onto Liberty Street.

There, on the right as you turn, you will see the steepleless old Baptist church building, believed to be the second oldest surviving church building in the Adirondacks.

The Keeseville Baptist congregation first came together in 1793, according to the Rev. Stephen Taylor, a descendant of the church's first deacon, William Taylor. The church gathered in parishioners' homes for several years before making arrangements to meet in an early school-

house standing on the hill where the old Keeseville Central School building now stands — and where, incidentally, AARCH has its office.

"About this time, the subject of building a church was agitated," wrote Taylor. "A meeting was called of Baptists, Presbyterians and Methodists, and there it was agreed that each denomination should circulate a subscription paper [pledge sheet], and that denomination which had the largest amount subscribed should build the house, and the others would wait for a more favorable time. When the subscriptions were brought in, it was found that the Baptists were ahead of both the others."

Taylor added that, "when the building was completed, it was the only church edifice in the county [Clinton County] outside of Plattsburgh."

Building was started in 1825 and completed in 1828 with a dedication ceremony.

The Baptist church was not built on the site where it stands today, however. Its original location was the spot where the beautiful, double-steeped St. John the Baptist Church



COURTESY ANDERSON FALLS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The old Baptist church on its original site, prior to 1903, before it was moved to make way for the construction of St. John the Baptist, Keeseville's twin-steeped French-Catholic church.

has stood since 1903. Keeseville's French-Catholic community had acquired the old frame structure in 1853, moving it to its present site in 1901 to make way for the new sanctuary's construction. The old church building was remodeled inside and used for years as the parish hall for St. John's.

Sometime after World War II, the church sold St. John's Hall for commercial use. It served as an appliance store for several years before being divided up inside and converted into apartments.

Today, the building stands vacant and unmaintained, as it has for about five years. Behind it is Keeseville's "Old Burying Ground," a remnant of the former Baptist congregation; according to a tombstone inventory, most of the burials there took place between 1825 and 1851. The owner of the church building has listed it for sale as low as \$15,000.

AARCH considers Keeseville's original Baptist church building to be endangered because it has been vacant for so many years and needs someone to care for it.

Ross Grist Mill, Willsboro

The next stop on our "Endangered Tour" is the Ross grist mill, in Willsboro. To get there from the Keeseville historic district, go down Liberty Street to Route 9N and turn right. Go underneath the Northway (I-87) to the southbound entrance ramp and head for the next exit, Exit 33. Take state Route 22 about 8.5 miles into Willsboro and across the Boquet River to School Street. Turn left, and just a little ways downstream you will see the mill on the left.

It's a big, two-story stone building with a slate roof. From a little distance, it looks remarkably sound — but the closer you get, the more you will see the disastrous toll that time and neglect have taken on this building. The roof is falling in; the windows are gone; the interior floors

have fallen into the basement; the rear wall, facing the river, is starting to separate from the rest of the building. This is a beautiful, historic building that is very near to complete collapse — and it's a shame.

William D. Ross, who built the first grist mill on this site in 1810, was a leading local industrialist and landowner. A grandson of Willsboro founder William Gilliland, Ross also operated an iron rolling mill, a horse-nail factory, a woolen mill in the hamlet of Boquet, and an "ashery" for making potash, a key ingredient in early fertilizers.

When the grist mill burned in 1842, Ross built it up again, renaming it the Phoenix Mills after the mythical bird. The grist mill continued grinding grain into flour well into the 1930s.

The Ross mill has been on the market for some time, but it has not been priced to sell. The owners are asking \$335,000, even though the building is only assessed by the town for \$11,000.

Members of the local preservation organization, the Willsboro Heritage Society, say that the idea of pressing

for the building's condemnation as an "attractive nuisance" has been discussed. Condemnation would allow the town to take the building by eminent domain.

Willsboro Supervisor Robert Ashline says, however, that the town government itself is very definitely *not* contemplating the condemnation of the Ross grist mill.

"We are exploring the possibility of buying the building," Ashline said, although he acknowledged that the town has not yet started negotiations with the owners.

"We are getting an appraisal first; then, we'll talk to them."

Let's hope that conversation begins before it's too late for this particular piece of Adirondack architectural history.

NEXT WEEK we'll finish our tour of AARCH's Top Five endangered Adirondack architectural sites with visits to Aiden Lair, a legendary Adirondack lodge in Minerva township, and the Land of Makebelieve, the theme park built just for kids in Upper Jay by the late and much-beloved toymaker Arto Monaco.



Willsboro's Ross Grist Mill, first built in 1810, then rebuilt in 1843 following a fire.