

Adirondack Riviera, Part 3

Historic Willsboro Point

Story and photos by LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, Sept. 17, 2004

There are two sides to the story of the human settlement of the Adirondacks.

One side is the pioneer story of working people and entrepreneurs who dug the Adirondack mines and quarries, plowed the Adirondack fields and harvested the Adirondack timber.

The other side is the story of wealthy or well-off flatlanders who built their summer homes, or “camps,” up here in what they thought of as the “wilderness country” of the Adirondacks.

At Willsboro Point, on Lake Champlain, both these Adirondack stories come together in a way that may well be unique.

As with so many other unusual tales of the human settlement of the Adirondacks, these stories were told as part of a tour offered by Adirondack Architectural Heritage, a nonprofit preservation organization based in Keeseville. The tour focused on the estates of two old Willsboro families, the Paines and the Clarks, and ended with a brief visit to the historic Adsit cabin.

Flat Rock Camp

Peter S. Paine Jr. was our guide in the morning. The Paine family owns an extensive piece of property on the southeast corner of Willsboro Point, consisting of the 1,000 acres just north of the Boquet River that includes Flat Rock Camp, the only Adirondack Great Camp still standing on Lake Champlain.

It all started for the Paines in 1885. Several years before, Augustus G. Paine Sr. had sold the Champlain Fiber and Pulp Co., of Willsboro, an evaporator to recover and reuse the expensive chemicals used in “cooking” wood chips. Like many equipment dealers, Paine not only marketed his product but financed it as well. When Champlain Fiber went belly up, Paine’s note made him the proud owner of his very own pulp mill. A.G. Paine Sr. summoned bachelor son A.G. Jr. — better known as Gus — home from studies in England to run the plant.

As soon as young Gus got to Willsboro, he started buying land. His first purchase was an 18-acre tract on Jones Point with some 2,000 feet of Champlain lakefront, the site today of Flat Rock Camp.

The previous owner, Highram Jones, boasted around town at the time that he’d sold a worthless chunk of land for \$500 [about \$10,000 today] to a city slicker — worthless because it was covered solid with sandstone, with almost no soil, and thus couldn’t be farmed.

A.G. Jr. started building Flat Rock Camp on Jones Point around 1890, and continued building in several stages over the next two decades.

“My father was born here at the camp in 1909,” Paine said, “and it was mostly completed by then.”

The main lodge and its outlying buildings “grew like Topsy,” Paine said.

“When grandfather died in 1947, there were servants’ quarters here for 12 people,” he said. The times, however, had changed, and the family didn’t need the outbuildings and on-site support that had been necessary half a century earlier.

Some of the outbuildings were torn down, but most of them were given to mill employees, who carted them off to other locations on the Point, where they started or added to their own summer camps.

TODAY, THE road across the Paine estate to Jones Point and Flat Rock Camp runs on a bare sandstone track. On either side of the road are beds of yellow-green lichens so thick they look like fields of cauliflower. The only trees growing are the dwarf pines that have taken root in cracks on the sandstone. Extensive landscaping around the camp itself is possible only because A.G.’s wife trucked in her own soil.

The main lodge reaches like an arm across the bare rock of Jones Point, a half dozen individual cabins linked together with sturdy, vertical stone chimneys punctuating the green, shingle-covered horizontal extension. Closest to Lake Champlain are the large living room and dining room.

At top, the lake side of Flat Rock Camp.

“Typical of Adirondack camps, succeeding generations left souvenirs on the walls,” Paine pointed out as the AARCH tour group passed through Flat Rock’s living room. “If you’re in here, you have the right to put something up — but nothing ever comes down.”

The group passed into the dining room, which extends outward from the rest of the building toward the lake. Its two walls full of windows looking onto Champlain’s open water give one a feeling of being on a ship at sea, not in a North Country camp.

Passing outside to the courtyard, on the side facing away from the lake, Paine mused on what makes Flat Rock Camp special.

“For one thing, its buildings form a courtyard,” he said, gesturing around him. “And the landscape is quite extraordinary. There is an organic feel to the camp built on it. You have a sense that it begins here at your feet and just grows from there.”

FLAT ROCK is rare — perhaps unique — among Adirondack Great Camps in that, at the time construction began, the man building it lived and worked full-time right there in the community. A.G. Jr. was quite successful at turning Willsboro’s failed pulp mill around and making it productive again.

“Grandfather worked for his father for \$25 a month,” Paine said. “People in Western Pennsylvania heard about how Gus Paine had gotten this mill back up and running, and they offered him \$100 a month to come down to Lock Haven and run their mill. When his father heard about that, he went out there and bought the mill — and sent Gus to run it.”

A.G. Paine Jr. moved his permanent residence from Willsboro to Lock Haven in 1890. Later he moved again, this time to New York City, where the New York and Pennsylvania Paper Company had its headquarters.

Though Gus built a substantial townhouse on East 69th Street in Manhattan, his grandson has written, “he continued to use Flat Rock as his summer residence and always considered Willsboro as his real home. ... Four of his five sons ended up owning houses or camps on or near the Paine family estate.”

The Paines have been more to Willsboro than just the owners of the

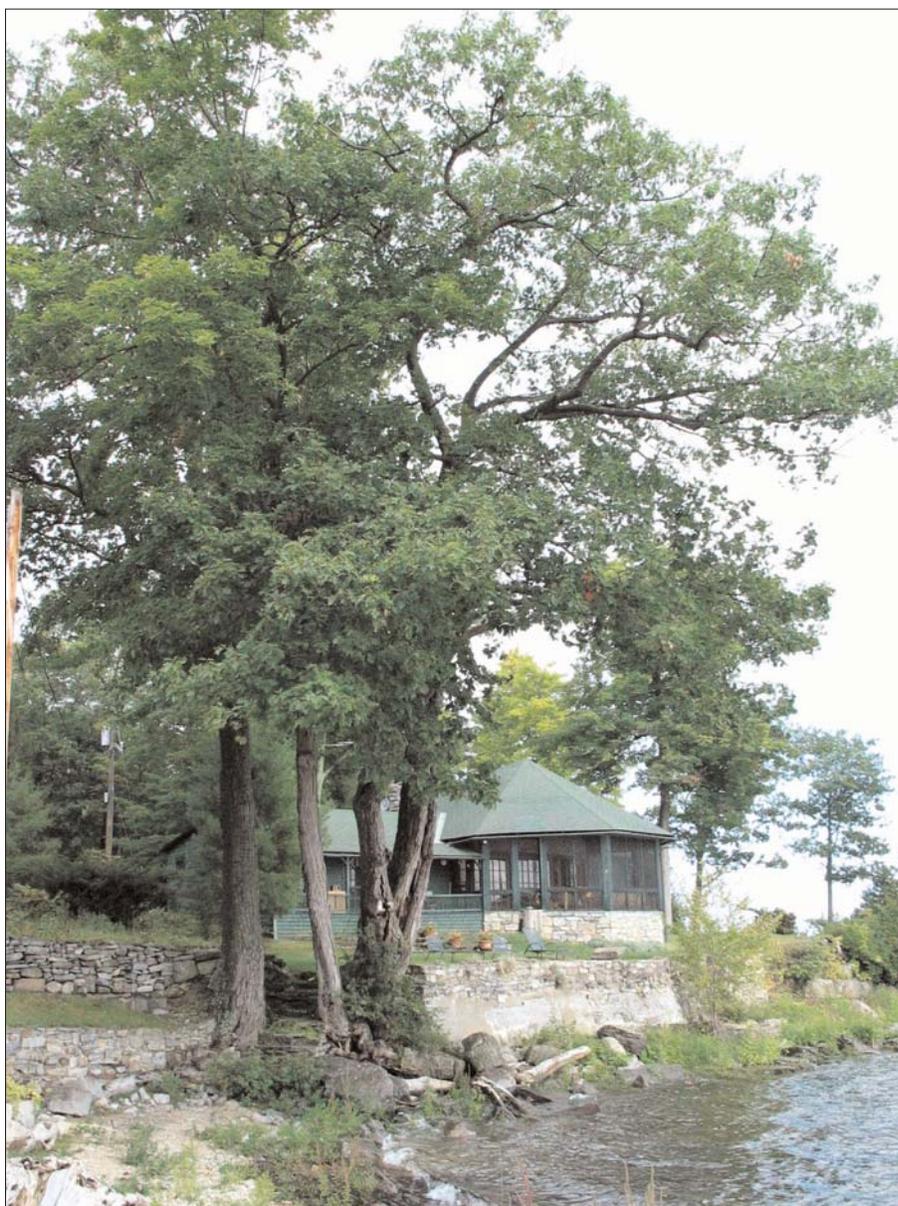
paper mill, which closed in the mid-1960s. The private golf course they built in 1914 was opened to the public in 1920. Gus’s second wife, Francisca, was one of the founders of the Essex County Garden Club. In the 1920s Gus founded the local bank, Champlain National Bank, which today is headed by Chairman Peter S. Paine Jr. And in 1930 Gus built the Paine Memorial Free Library in the heart of Willsboro, an institution that still thrives.

THE RELATIVES of A.G. Jr.’s first wife, Maude Potts Paine, joined in building up the Willsboro Point estate. Around the turn of the 20th century Maude’s

cousin, Polly Potts Bull and her husband George, starting building the property’s second Great Camp, this one right on the mouth of the Boquet River and consequently called Boquet Lodge. It was a low, rambling, Shingle Style building that, like Flat Rock, “grew like Topsy.”

In the 1920s Boquet Lodge was acquired from the Bulls by Gus’s oldest son and namesake, A.G. III, better known as Gibson.

Gibson Paine died “very prematurely,” surviving family members say, in the 1930s. All his children lived in Arizona. Given the great distance — and the Great Depression — they decided to have the camp torn down.



The Snore House



Scragwood

“Boquet Lodge was started 8 or 10 years after Flat Rock,” Paine said. “It was deliberately burned [to demolish it].”

Asked if he was sad that he had never seen it, Paine admitted, “To tell you the truth, I don’t know if we could take care of TWO albatrosses.”

Three buildings remain from the burned camp: a two-story coach house (the coachman lived in the second-story apartment), a boathouse and dock, and a lovely little cottage on a beautiful lakeshore lot, called “the Snore House.”

“Typical of Great Camps, visitors would come to Boquet Lodge to stay for two or three weeks at a time,” Paine said. “One relative snored unmercifully — and for him, they built his own cabin 150 yards away.”

The original section of the Snore House — a small, simple frame cabin on the structure’s west end — was built around 1910. The portion of the building that really gives the structure its character, however, is the east end, built in the early 1950s by famed Great Camp architect William Distin.

“He [Distin] didn’t want to put the circular porch on that way, but mother insisted,” Paine said — and a good thing, too. Most observers consider the screened porch overlooking the lake, with its cupola-like peaked roof, to be its most attractive feature.

The nearby boathouse and dock “have been around for over 100 years,” Paine said. “This year, for the first time, ice seriously damaged the dock.”

‘**GRANDFATHER** was called ‘Eagle Eye’,” Paine said. “Nothing got by him.”

Today, the land upon which Flat Rock stands is owned by Eagle Eye Partnership, while the buildings are the property of Flat Rock Partners. Each partnership is controlled by different groups of family members.

“It forces the family to realize that they’ve got to work together,” Paine explained, “and the partnerships were designed to make it very difficult to view the property as a real-estate investment.”

The blanket of protection that has been cast over the Paine estate is not merely economic. Environmental attorney Peter S. Paine Jr., a former APA commissioner closely linked to the Adirondack Land Trust, helped his family place a conservation easement on the entire estate, “sterilizing” existing developments along the Boquet River and limiting further building along the family’s 3 miles of Lake Champlain shoreline.

“Only two more buildings can be placed there, and only in areas that already have power lines and roads,” Paine said.

The Clark family

After spending the morning on the Paine estate, the Willsboro Point tour moved on to Ligonier Point, about 3.5 miles north, where brothers Lewis and Solomon Clark and their wives, Elizabeth and Rhoda Adsit — yes, the two brothers were married to two sisters — worked a dairy farm and limestone quarry in the 19th century.

Scragwood, the home of Solomon and Rhoda Clark, is extremely well-preserved thanks to the efforts of the Hale family, which purchased most of Ligonier Point as a camp in 1951. Combined with a wide array of family documents and the remains of the nearby Clark limestone quarries, Scragwood is like a time capsule of 19th century life and industry on Willsboro Point.

Old Elm, the home and dairy farm of Lewis and Elizabeth Clark, preserves another kind of story: the growth of a family enterprise, and the decay of the family’s estate around two elderly, maiden sisters, the last survivors of their line.

Bruce and Darcey Hale, owners of both Scragwood and Old Elm, and Morris Glenn, an Essex historian working with the Hales to document the Clark family’s life and work on Ligonier Point, led the tour.

Like the Paine properties seen in the morning, Darcey Hale said that Scragwood and Old Elm both “grew like



Old Elm, seen from the south: Original one-and-a-half story frame house, center; left, back of stone icehouse; right, "new" two-story stone house.

Topsy," starting with a small central structure built in the early 19th century to which was added extension after extension. Separate staircases climb from Scragwood's ground floor to the dormered attic bedrooms in each section of the house, with tiny crawlway doors linking the segments upstairs.

The Hales have built a porch accented with distinctly Adirondack twig-work across one end of the house.

"This is not what we found here," admitted Darcey Hale, talking about the decision to replace a more modern porch added to the house in the 20th century, "but the design was taken from a photo of a nearby building on the property, so it's as authentic as we could make it."

The one-and-a-half story frame home extended until it finally touched the office of Solomon Clark, and the two became a single joined structure.

Bruce Hale said that he didn't realize the office had once been a separate building until one day his son found in the office a closet previously unknown to the Hales.

"The walls inside that closet were exterior walls," Bruce remembered, "and that gave us the answer to one more question about Scragwood."

THE HOUSE — interior and exterior — have been kept in much the same condition as they were when Solomon and Rhoda Clark lived there. Family documents found on site have helped the Hales restore the house.

"One of the most unusual things about this family [the Clarks] is that they never threw away anything," said Morris Glenn. "Every time the Hales open a closet, they find something."

Twin documentary gemstones found among the Clark family treasures are the diaries of Solomon and Rhoda. Solomon kept 62 volumes of personal records between 1849 and 1883, while Rhoda's 27 volumes run from 1852 to 1902.

"Sometimes we even find separate accounts of the same events in their diaries," Glenn said. "They give us a rich, multi-layered look at life in those times here."

"Bruce and I feel that we are the caretakers," said Darcey Hale, "and we intend to keep it [Scragwood] just as it was for the coming generations."

The first aid to documenting Scragwood was a complete inventory of the property that was made by the Clark family in 1949, just before it was sold to Bruce Hale's father, Henry Erwin Hale.

"That helped us identify photos and

things we couldn't identify otherwise," Darcey said.

"It's a work in progress, though," she added. "If you come back a few years from now, you'll see the next step."

The latest restoration is the Clark's 19th century flower garden, the plan for which was found in a tool shed on the property.

"The number of places this intact, with this amount of documentation, of this importance to the community, I can count on one hand," said Steve Engelhart, AARCH executive director, who'd arranged last month's tour.

The nearby limestone quarry on Ligonier Point supplied the "bluestone" used on the Brooklyn Bridge, Keeseville's Arch Bridge, and the Lake Champlain lighthouses at Cumberland Head, Valcour and Barber's Point. Mostly, though, it was used for building foundations. When hydraulic concrete was developed in the 1890s, most of the business for the Lake Champlain Bluestone Company disappeared.

Even before that, however, the local economy had started shifting away from farming and industry to accommodate the influx of summer campers. From the 1880s until 1951, Scragwood and Ligonier Point were used by the extended Clark family primarily as a summer vacation place.

The quarries themselves, however, were bought in the 1920s by Brooks Paine, the third son of Willsboro Point neighbor Gus Paine.

OLD ELM, the house and dairy farm of Lewis and Elizabeth Clark, stands across the Point Road from the long Scragwood driveway.

The first structure to be erected at Old Elm was a two-story frame house, built in the 1830s. Again, that historic core "grew like Topsy," added to over and over. The most prominent part of the complex at Old Elm is probably the last one built: the impressive two-story stone house that fronts on the Point Road. The stone house is linked to the old, central frame structure and a portion of the dairy, which extends to the rear toward the site of the farm's old barn and other working buildings.

Today, Old Elm is in bad, bad shape. "We've cleaned up enough of the

stone part for you to go through,” Darcey Hale told the AARCH tour group, “but parts of the frame house can’t be entered. Our objective thus far has been stabilization.

“You’ll see what started as a really lovely house that has fallen upon really hard times.”

While the family preserved Solomon Clark’s estate as a summer camp, Lewis Clark’s thriving 19th century dairy farm ended as the decrepit summer home of two maiden sisters.

“They lived in Brooklyn during the winter,” Darcey Hale said, “and each May they’d come motoring up in their old car and stay through October.”

The sisters, Ellen and Margaret Noble, died in their 80s “about 6, 7 years ago,” Darcey thought.

The old house must have been falling apart around the maiden sisters for years. Wallpaper peeling from the walls was put back up with thumbtacks — dozens, maybe hundreds of tacks forming odd, paisley-like patterns on the faded paper.

The sisters had made only the barest attempts to modernize Old Elm as the 20th century progressed. Just one electric light was installed in the house, a bare bulb in the kitchen; the two used oil lanterns to light most of the rambling homestead. Extension cords ran from the single outlet on the kitchen ceiling all around the house, like an orange-stranded spider web. Plumbing extended across ceilings, up staircases and down interior walls. An outdoor spigot opened off a pipe rising from the floor in an upstairs bedroom, next to the cabinet containing a chamberpot.

The reaction of the tour group at seeing the ruins of Old Elm was uniformly melancholy.

“It makes me sad,” sighed one guest as she looked around the dining room.

“We’ve really been wondering what to do with this,” said Bruce Hale. “For example, on the outside of the frame structure, we could scrape and paint and restore it to its appearance in the 19th century — but the result would be that Old Elm would tell a different story than it tells today.

“The other option for the frame exterior would be to apply a sealant to preserve it as it is now.

“In deciding what to do about preser-

vation and restoration,” Hale added, “as important as what to do is, what *not* to do.”

THE FINAL stop on last month’s AARCH tour of historic Willsboro Point was a visit to one of the very earliest homes in the area, the Adsit log cabin, built in the early 1790s by Samuel and Phebe Adsit. Today it stands in its original location, just off the northern end of the Point Road.

“Heavy lime and sand chinking filled in the spaces between the logs to keep the weather out,” explains the Web page created by the Willsboro Historical Society about the Adsit cabin. “The broad gable roof was covered with hand-hewn shakes laid over wide pine boards. A large fireplace in the south gable end of the building (not the original structure, but added) would have been ample to heat and use for the preparation of meals. The original fireplace outline can be seen in the floor, and would have been made of brick or local stone.”

The Adsit cabin survived, while others disintegrated, primarily because it became encased within a larger building that “grew like Topsy” around it with successive additions.

In 1927 the building lot was purchased by Dr. Earl Van DerWerker, who planned to tear down the “old shacks” on the property and build a new summer

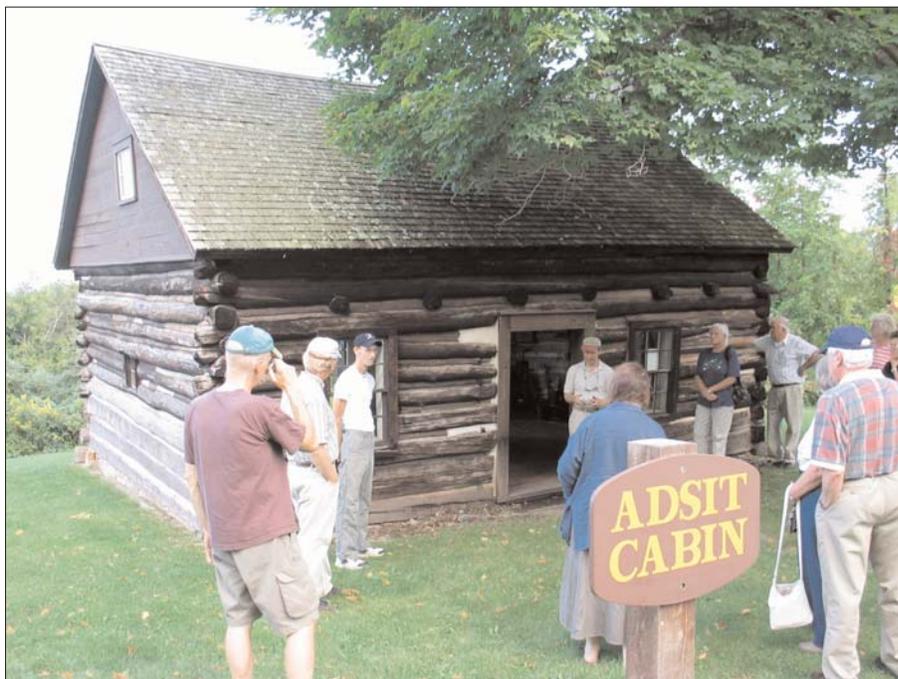
camp. In the middle of demolishing the main house, sided with asphalt shingles, workmen started seeing remnants of a cabin inside. Van DerWerker called an immediate halt to the demolition; after further inspection, he directed the work to continue by hand. Layer by layer, piece by piece, the later additions were peeled off the Adsit cabin until the original structure was revealed, remarkably intact, within.

The cabin changed hands again several times before coming into the possession of the town of Willsboro, which embarked on a \$70,000 restoration project in the 1980s to bring the cabin up to its current condition. The interior is furnished with period artifacts donated by Adsit family descendants.

Thus ended the day’s tour of Willsboro Point sites, each telling a different version of the story of the human settlement of the Adirondacks: part home and workplace, part summer retreat.

For more information

- Adirondack Architectural Heritage has offices at 1759 Main St. in Keeseville, telephone (518) 834-9328, with a Web site at www.aarch.org.
- The town of Willsboro’s Web site can be found at www.willsborony.com. Follow the links for information about the Willsboro Historical Society.



The Adsit Cabin on Willsboro Point, the final stop on the AARCH tour.