

Architectural emblems of Adirondack heritage

By LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, November 23, 2001

Are the mountains that surround us inherently beautiful, or is it only our experience of their rugged beauty that makes them so?

Many visitors see the wild beauty of the Adirondacks through the lens of early photographers like Seneca Ray Stoddard, men and women who imprinted their vision of the wooded North Country wilderness and its equally wild 19th century settlements on silver oxide for future generations to enjoy.

Stoddard's stunning works of art remind us that what we think of as "beauty" — even natural beauty — is an utterly human experience.

There are other works of art that speak to us of the human aesthetic experience in the Adirondacks, artifacts that have endured from the beginning of the Adirondack settlement, artifacts of the North Country settlements themselves: the architecture of the Adirondacks.

JOHN BROWN'S FARM, LAKE PLACID

The reputation of the Adirondacks as a wilderness resort area was not firmly established until the 1890s. Until then, the development of settlements in the North Country followed the same patterns as those of frontier communities all across America.

Peterboro philanthropist and abolitionist Gerrit Smith, who owned a wide spread of land in what would later become North Elba township, near the future village of Lake Placid, had offered parcels of land to free African Americans who wished to settle and develop farms. Their community was named Timbucto after the fabled Moroccan center of trade and learning.

In 1849 an Ohio tanner, surveyor and farmer, John Brown, moved his family to the area so that he could aid the Timbucto settlers, surveying their lands and helping them build their homes and plant their crops.

Brown's hatred of slavery drew him to armed guerrilla actions, first in Kansas, then in a raid on a federal armory in Harper's Ferry, Va. He was captured, tried and hung in Virginia late in 1859, and his body was returned for burial to his North Elba homestead.

Brown's 244-acre farm, including his original farmhouse, is maintained as a New York state historical site on John Brown Road off Route 73 at the North Elba Show Grounds just outside Lake Placid. Brown's home, a simple, two-story frame structure, was restored in the 1950s to resemble its appearance when the Brown family lived there a century earlier.

Though the grounds are open all year, visitors can see the inside of John Brown's home only between May and October. For information call (518) 523-3900.

WHITEFACE HIGHWAY, WILMINGTON

A dozen miles down Route 86 from Lake Placid, and another several miles up the road that climbs the flank of Whiteface Mountain from the hamlet of Wilmington, visitors will come to a chalet-style tollhouse nestled next to a small mountain pond. The structure stands at the entrance to one of the Adirondacks' most famous — or, in the minds of some, infamous — architectural enterprises: the Whiteface Veterans Highway.

First envisioned over 100 years ago, a highway up Whiteface Mountain was promoted with real vigor only after the conclusion of World War I, shortly following completion of a paved road up Pike's Peak in Colorado.

Building a road up Whiteface Mountain through the state forest preserve required amendment of the "forever wild" clause in New York's 1894 constitution. The drive to bring the Whiteface Highway amendment to the state's voters split the membership of the Adirondack Mountain Club and was opposed by leading conservationists, but it won support from a highly influential group of Empire State voters: the network of American Legion members all across New York.

A poem dedicated to the highway project, written by Baptist minister Milford Cheney, appeared in the Feb. 18, 1927, issue of the Lake Placid News, the year of the referendum on the road:

"There's a long, long trail up Whiteface
Into the clouds in the sky
Where a light will stand a'burning
For the soldier by and by.
There's a long, long night of waiting
Until our dream road comes true,
Till the day we drive up Whiteface,
Up that winding road with you."

The project, once approved, was dedicated to the memory of those who gave their lives in World War I. It includes a remarkable 8.5-mile highway built along steep mountain slopes, a castle-like building near the peak of Whiteface, an elevator that carries visitors through a 426-foot tunnel cut into living rock to the summit building, and a weather observatory.

The 1930s-era highway project, built for about \$1.25 million (about \$13 million in today's dollars), has been nominated for a place on the National Historic Registry by the Whiteface Preservation and Resource Association, which maintains a visitors interpretive center in the highway's tollhouse.

"I think roads are something whose significance is easy to miss," said Steve Engelhart, executive director of Adirondack Architectural Heritage, noting that what Whiteface motorists come to see is the view from the Veterans Highway, not the highway itself — in fact, the less obtrusive the road is, the better it serves as a medium for the visitor's experience of what's beyond its macadam surface and stone retaining walls, Engelhart said.

"It was really an amazing feat of engineering to put this road up the mountain," Engelhart continued, "and there's a certain aesthetic to the road, to the retaining walls, that sort of thing, that's of the era. Even the very idea that there should be an aesthetic element to a road-building project was a reflection of the time."

The highway is open to vehicles from May through October, though cross-country skiers often climb the road in the winter.

WELLSCROFT AND WELLS LIBRARY, UPPER JAY

If visitors follow Route 86 from Wilmington to Jay hamlet, make a right on Route 9N, and follow this windy road a few short miles along the banks of the Au Sable River, they will come to a graveyard on the outskirts of Upper Jay. On the far side of the

cemetery is a gold and green coat of arms next to an open driveway, the word “Wellscroft” engraved upon it.

Native son and daughter Wallis Craig Smith and Jean Wadham Wells built Wellscroft, a Queen Anne-style Tudor mansion, in 1903. Though pig iron had been the first major industrial product of the Adirondacks, it was Lake Superior iron wealth that funded the construction of Wellscroft. Charles Wells was fishing in Minnesota when he first spotted the iron ore outcroppings that later became the fabulous Messabi Range mines. He endowed a trust fund for his daughter that provided the couple with a sizable income until the Depression.

The Smiths’ 15-bedroom, 17,000-square-foot lodge passed through several hands, sitting vacant and vulnerable to vandalism for a number of years, before being purchased by Randy and Linda Stanley in April 1999. The couples’ faithful renovation of the historic mansion won them a Stewardship Award this year from Adirondack Architectural Heritage. The house has also been nominated for a place on the National Register of Historic Places.

Visitors can not only tour Wellscroft — they can stay there. The Stanleys operate the manor house as a bed and breakfast, with rooms running from \$109 a night. Call Linda Stanley at (518) 946-2547 for information or reservations.

Just down the road from Wellscroft in Upper Jay, a small cottage-size structure sits on the banks of the Au Sable River just above the hamlet’s central bridge and a three-story gray warehouse building, formerly a Ford construction plant. Wells Memorial Library, built in 1907, is designed in the same style (and perhaps by the same architect) as Wellscroft — and no wonder, since the library was a gift to the community of the lodge’s owners.

A brand new addition to the library has just been completed, built in a way so that its architecture blends seamlessly with that of the original structure.

Wells Memorial Library is open on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday from noon to 5 p.m., and on Saturday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. For information call librarian Carole McDowell at (518) 946-2644 or trustee Ellen Metcalf at 946-7423.

GRAVES MANSION, AU SABLE FORKS

Turning around at the Wells Memorial Library and heading north on Route 9N, travelers will pass again through Jay hamlet about halfway to Au Sable Forks. Once in that hamlet, built at the confluence of the east and west branches of the Au Sable River (hence the name), a left-hand turn on Church Street will take you to the Graves Mansion, an impressive architectural artifact as well as an emblem of the settlement’s industrious past and de-industrialized present.

The three-story, 15,000-square-foot Second Empire home sits on a 9.8-acre wooded lot across from the Au Sable Forks Primary School at the corner of Church and College streets.

Ground was first broken at the mansion in the 1870s. Built at a cost of \$75,000 — or about \$1.25 million today — the 32-room edifice has 20 bedrooms, nine baths and nine fireplaces, each one unique.

The mansion was built by Henry Graves, a clerk from Plattsburgh who married into the family of James Rogers Sr., brother of John Rogers. The siblings owned the J&J Rogers Co., whose early iron foundry, succeeded by its paper and pulp mills after the

area's pig iron industry went bust, served as the center of economic life in this 19th century Adirondack industrial village.

Graves married Kate Rogers in 1861. Ten years later he was named to the board of J&J Rogers, assuming the vice presidency in 1877. Two years later, upon the death of his wife's uncle, Graves became company president. He began building his mansion during that period, financing the project with embezzled funds.

An 1890 audit uncovered Graves' crime. Rather than turn him out into the street, the Rogers family assumed the debt for his grandiose mansion and allowed him and his wife to live out their lives in the simple but spacious servants' quarters in the rear of the building. He died there on July 1, 1917, at the age of 91.

For nearly 20 years, the empty mansion was thought by local youngsters to be haunted. Then in 1937 it was bought by a local insurance broker, who restored it to its former grandeur.

In the meantime, the industrial fortunes of Au Sable Forks took a turn for the worse. The softwood trees that fed the Rogers paper and pulp mills grew scarce in the early 1950s. In 1955 the Rogers Co. was sold, and in 1958 the pulp mill closed down. The paper mill continued operations until 1971, according to a study by the Friends of the North Country, when it closed largely due to restrictive environmental protection measures. With the closing of the mill, the mill town of Au Sable Forks began its decline.

The Graves Mansion, a once-ground house in a once-thriving settlement, also went into decline. Sold several times since the early 1980s to several owners with great intentions but little capital, the structure was purchased last fall by Tommy and Nancy Cross, a hometown couple with a thriving Plattsburgh business and plans to make the mansion their home.

THE AU SABLE BRIDGES AND AARCH

In addition to the many buildings that stand as architectural emblems of the Adirondack settlement heritage, there are dozens of bridges large and small that cross both branches of the Au Sable River, some meant to carry vehicles, some foot traffic, some made of iron, some of stone, some covered in wood, but all serving to bring people together.

Richard Sanders Allen, a bridge historian, once said "there are few watercourses in America, comparable in length to the Au Sable, over which so many early bridge types remain." Among these are an 1843 stone arch bridge, the 1857 Jay covered bridge, an 1888 pedestrian suspension bridge, a variety of metal truss bridges, several stone-faced, reinforced concrete bridges and the 222-foot-long steel arch bridge that leaps across Au Sable Chasm. All of these bridges were placed on the National Register in 1999.

Adirondack Architectural Heritage, or AARCH, offered a tour this year of 13 significant bridges over the Au Sable, along with 32 other architectural tours of the area. The bridge tour, led by AARCH Executive Director Engelhart, was based on his book, "Crossing the River: Historic Bridges of the Au Sable River."

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 the Keeseville Civic Center at 1790 Main St., its telephone number is (518) 834-9328, and its Web site address is www.aarch.org.