

Adirondack Riviera: A visit to Westport

by Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, Aug. 13, 2004

If you've been puttering around the Adirondacks for a few years, as I have, you've probably seen your share of fraying 19th century resort towns, bypassed by one new highway or another.

You've seen the Adirondack mining-and-mill towns that lost their reason for being when Minnesota's iron-rich Messabi Range was discovered in 1887.

And you've seen the post-industrial remnants of Lake Champlain villages and the canal cities hit with the double historical whammies of the railroad and the automobile.

You know what these partial or mostly ghost towns look like.

So why, one might ask, does Westport look so good?!

That was the question I asked myself over and over on Sunday while visiting this quiet Lake Champlain burg, situated squarely in the middle of Essex County's Adirondack Riviera.

I don't have the answer to that question — but I do have some ideas about how to enjoy Westport for yourself.

After all, that's my job.

Walking tour

Probably the best way to introduce yourself to Westport is by picking up a copy of "A Walking Tour Guide to Westport, New York." This little 33-page illustrated booklet, which comes complete with a map, has been published since 1982 by the

local Chamber of Commerce and the Westport Historical Society. Recently updated it's available throughout the village for \$3.

The tour starts right in the middle of town at the Westport Library, a beautiful brown frame building

(1888) with a small turreted clock tower that looks down on the village's central green.

The green was not always there, however. It was created by a catastrophic fire that swept through central Westport in 1876, destroying Person's Lake House, an inn that sat on the land that is now the library lawn. Buildings in the downtown commercial area date from the same period, with businesses rebuilding after the fire.

The 1876 fire did not, apparently, threaten Westport's many beautiful, old homes, many of them built in the first half of the 19th century — and many of them described on the walking tour.

One thing you'll notice as you



The Westport Library, architectural centerpiece of this beautiful Lake Champlain village, built in 1888. It overlooks Westport's central park.



The 1876 D&H Railroad depot in Westport, still a daily stop on the Amtrak run between New York City and Montreal, has been restored for adaptive re-use as the Depot Theater, home of summer stage performances.

stroll by these old homes is how many of them have become small, boutique bed-and-breakfast hostels. While the once-grand Westport Inn was struck down by the same post-1940s decline that hit every other grand Adirondack hotel, from Schroon Lake to Lake Placid and beyond — the Westport Inn site has been transformed into a lakeside outdoor theater called Ballard Park — the customized B&Bs and small inns seem to have really found a niche in Westport.

The Westport Country Club, formerly the private links of the Westport Inn, appears to be going strong. Started in the late 19th century with just six holes, it expanded to nine after the turn of the century,

then to a full 18 in 1928. The clubhouse stands at the end of a long, private drive whose entrance is right in the middle of the village.

Even more central to Westport, geographically and historically, is the Westport Marina. From the village's founding, the dock area was crucial to the Westport economy. Early on, pig iron went down Lake Champlain from Westport to the canals and refineries, while finished goods for the community were unloaded on the docks. Ferries crossed the lake to Vermont, and steamboats carried tourists up and down the lake.

Today, the Westport Marina books floating tours of Lake Champlain — though the famous

Philomena D only goes out twice a season now, rather than 4 days a week — as well as renting boats and providing dock services for visiting craft. The Galley at the Westport Marina is also considered one of the village's better restaurants.

Westport culture

Just above the marina is Ballard Park, which offers an amazing array of free, live performances during the summer. Last weekend, for instance, a local Shakespeare group staged three performances of "Measure for Measure," and "A Midsummer Night's Dream" will be performed at 3 p.m. on Labor Day, Monday, Sept. 6.

Thursday evening musical performances scheduled for this month

in Ballard Park include:

- Aug. 12, “Common Ground” bluegrass;
- Aug. 19, “Alien Folklife” eclectic folk, and
- Aug. 26, “Just Local Music” from 3 to 9 p.m., with a \$6 donation going to benefit the Arts Council for the Northern Adirondacks, which has its headquarters in Westport.

Ballard Park will also be Ground Zero for this Saturday’s annual Westport Heritage Festival. Activities start at 9 a.m. with a 5-km walk/run. A History Tent will be open all day, and a house tour will guide visitors through the village from noon to 4 p.m. The kids can hitch rides on a horse-drawn carriage from 11 a.m. “till the horse gets tired.” A high tea will be served at the beautiful, stone church on Main Street, with sittings at 2:30 and 4 p.m. Live music will be offered in the afternoon by blues guitarist Joan



The oldest surviving schoolhouse in Essex County can be found outside Westport village on the Camp Dudley Road. Built in 1816, it was used for a full century.



The 1885 Floral Hall is spic and span and ready for this year’s Essex County Fair at the Westport fairgrounds.

Crane, followed by the Joe Wyant jazz sextet. The day will be capped with a picnic and sock hop starting at 6 p.m.

Another Westport cultural venue is the famous Depot Theater, which makes its home in the refurbished 1876 Delaware & Hudson Railroad depot on the edge of the village. Through early September, the Depot players will perform "Kiss Me Kate," Cole Porter's musical adaptation of Shakespeare's "Taming of the Shrew." The season will close with Donald Marguiles comic drama, "Collected Story," playing Sept. 9 through 12.

The fair

Across the road from the train station are the Essex County Fairgrounds, where the 156th annual county fair will kick off next Tuesday, Aug. 17, running all the way through the following weekend.

The fair dates back to 1848, when it was held outside Keeseville. Two years later it moved to Elizabethtown. To take advantage of accessibility from the "superhighway" of the day, Lake Champlain, Essex County moved the fair one more time, in 1865, to Westport, and here it has stayed ever since. The historic fairgrounds buildings were inventoried in 1985 for the New York state Department of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. The gem of the lot is the Floral Hall, a simple but beautiful structure built in 1885.

Harness racing has been a prime attraction of the fair from its inception, and this year is no exception. Because fewer and fewer horses are being trained to the harness, however, harness races are staged on fewer and fewer days of the fair each year. This year, the ponies will run only on Tuesday and Wednesday, Aug. 17 and 18, with a noon post time each day.

The big attractions of the modern Essex County Fair are the motor events: the riding lawnmower pull at 5 p.m. Tuesday, Aug. 17; the truck pull at 6 p.m. Thursday, Aug. 19; an early set of tractor pulls starting at 6 p.m. Friday, Aug. 20, and the big tractor pull at 6 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 21. The county fair concludes on Sunday, Aug. 22, with the famous demolition derbies, one starting at noon, the other at 5 p.m.

As always, there will be plenty of live music at the Essex County Fair. But where previous fairs have offered sound-alike "tribute" performers with names like Shania Twin (*not* Twain!) and the Dixie Chicklets, this year the acts are all local and all real. The headliner is Wood's Tea Company, a folk and bluegrass act out of Vermont that

will perform in the main arena at 7 p.m. Wednesday.

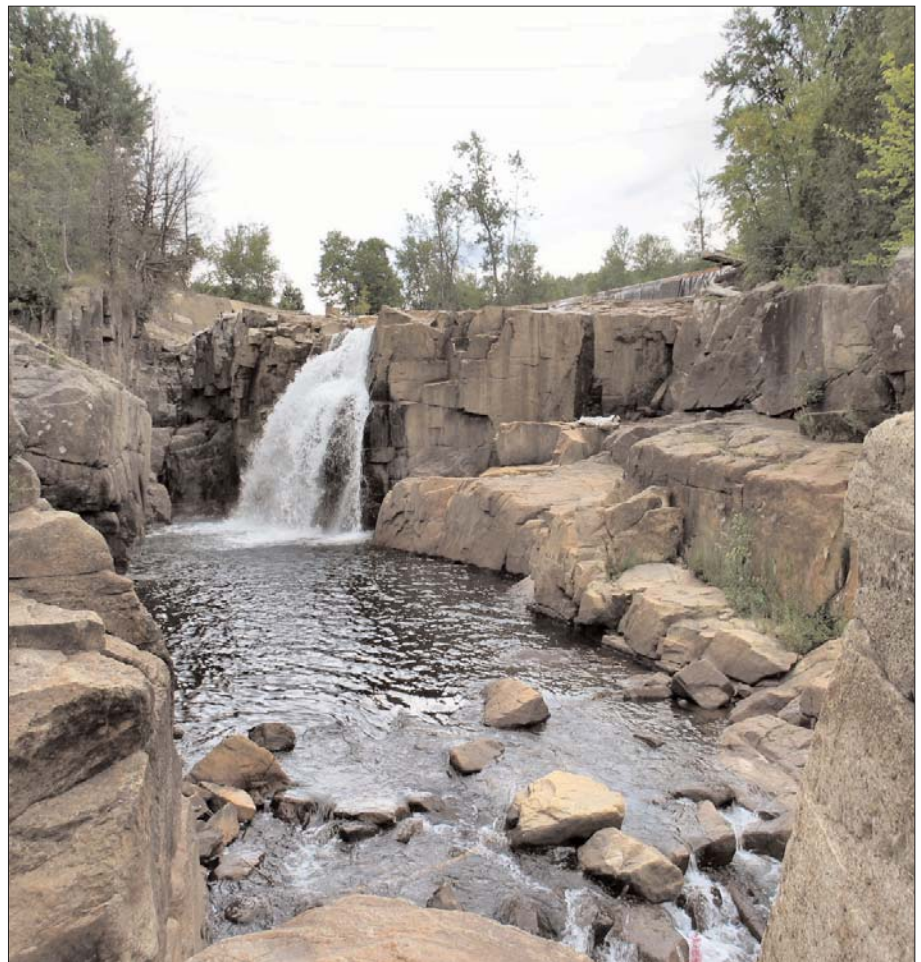
The \$8 daily admission ticket will not only get you through the gate but onto all the carnival rides.

Side Trip #1: Camp Dudley Road

The Westport walking tour recommends a couple of side trips, both well worth the taking if you have the time and inclination.

The first side trip is down Camp Dudley Road, which turns off Route 9N a couple of miles south of the village. The entire road is one long historic district, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

You'll see one of the reasons for considering this area historically significant about halfway down the road, on your right-hand side. There, sitting by its lonesome beneath a



The Wadham falls.

huge, old tree is a tiny, square, stone building, a chimney rising from its central peak. Around it is an empty field; in the distance behind it rise the Adirondack foothills.

For a full century, this handsome little building, made of native limestone, was a one-room schoolhouse. Built in 1816 and used all the way through 1916, it is the oldest standing schoolhouse in Essex County, though not the first one built.

Farther down the road is Barber Lane, turning off to the left, at the end of which is the Barber's Point lighthouse, a twin to the Valcour Island lighthouse. Built in 1873, the lighted tower above the stone light-keeper's house was decommissioned in 1936, when it was sold for a pri-

vate residence.

If you drive down Barber Lane, remember that the light is still a private residence; take a look from your vehicle, maybe even a snapshot or two, but please don't go wandering across the owner's lawn.

Farther still down Camp Dudley Road is the YMCA camp itself, one of the oldest — if not the oldest — children's summer camps in the United States. Opened in 1884, the well-maintained grounds have grown and the number of its beautiful buildings has steadily increased over the years. Check in at the camp office before strolling the grounds.

Side Trip #2: Wadhams

Going back into the village of

Westport, the other side trip described in the walking tour booklet takes you to the hamlet of Wadhams, less than 4 miles north on Route 22.

The central feature of the hamlet today, as it was two centuries ago, is the Wadhams falls, through which the Boquet River roars. The power from those falls drove a sawmill 100 years ago. An artificial channel cut deep into the living rock of the riverbed maximized the mechanical force available for a gristmill, opened in 1802. In 1904, a hydroelectric plant was built in Wadhams, with water from above the falls transported down a huge, above-ground pipe into a powerhouse perched above the river just downstream.



Wadhams' century-old hydroelectric powerhouse, its foundations carved into the living rock of the Boquet River's granite bed.

Wadhams was a lively little industrial hamlet in the 19th century. In the years following the Civil War, it had a population of 1,300.

Today, Wadhams is a sparsely inhabited, almost-ghost town with a population of about 100. The gristmill, the sawmill, the old iron forge — all of the riverside industry is gone, all but the powerhouse. Matthew W. Foley, a glassblower from Vermont, bought it in the fall of 1976.

The furnaces used for blowing glass take a tremendous amount of energy, which is why Foley started looking for a reliable source of hydroelectric power during the energy crisis of the 1970s.

“Before we came here, we were using 1,000 gallons of propane every three weeks,” Foley said.

Once rehabilitated — the plant had been out of commission for about 8 years when Foley bought it — the hydroelectric turbines in the Wadhams powerhouse were capable of generating up to 525 kilowatts. Foley only needed about 25 kw to run his furnace, so he started selling the excess power on the open market. Today, that’s how he makes his living, both from the Wadhams powerhouse and from another one he built in 1993 at the St. Regis Falls dam.

Aside from Foley’s powerhouse, the only other live concerns in Wadhams are the library, nestled into a corner by the falls formerly occupied by the old sawmill; the Congregationalist church, which merged with the Methodist congregation from the end of Church Street in 1940; and a new coffee and bake shop housed in the hamlet’s former feed store.

Merrick’s Bread and Coffee opened a couple of years ago in the old Agway building. Using organic flour milled in Westport, the Merrick family makes bread and other baked

goods in their wood-fired oven, selling espresso on the side and serving pizza several nights a week. It’s kind of an odd business to be found in a community where more people can be counted in the graveyard than walking on the streets — but it’s a pleasant oddity, and a refreshing stop after poking around the falls, the old powerhouse and the former Methodist church, recently purchased for conversion into a summer home by a Brooklyn couple.

More info on the Web

- westportny.com — The Westport Chamber of Commerce site, with links to most of the village’s boutique inns and B&Bs, restaurants and shopping.
- depottheatre.org — What’s playing, and when, at the Depot Theater.
- essexcountyfair.org — Complete information on the Essex County Fair.
- campdudley.org — The YMCA camp’s own Web site.



A discarded mechanical power wheel, a remnant of Wadhams’ industrial past, sits in an empty lot next to the hamlet’s waterfalls.