Bidding adieu to 'the deserted village,' Part 1

Pending Tahawus Tract subdivision will secure 210 acres for a historic district — but it probably won't preserve the Tahawus Club ghost town

by LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, March 24, 2006

ADIRONDAC — It's been three years since the Open Space Institute bought the 10,000-plus acre Tahawus Tract, in Newcomb township, from NL Industries.

If all goes according to plan, the Adirondack Park Agency will meet next month to approve the subdivision of the tract into three major pieces. About 6,800 acres will be added to the Forest Preserve. Almost 3,000 acres will be dedicated to sustainable forestry. Finally, 210 acres will be set aside for a historic district that will preserve the remnants of a 19th century, backwoods iron-mining plantation.

Most of the "ghost town" that visitors see when they come to the High Peaks trailhead at the Upper Works, however, is not currently slated for preservation. At this point, plans are being made only for the preservation of the 1834 MacNaughton Cottage and the 1854 stone blast furnace.

Today's "ghost town" buildings are mostly the remnants of the Tahawus Club colony at the old mining village site, built from the 1880s through the late 1930s. They do not have nearly the historic significance of the MacNaughton Cottage or the furnace, but "it is the modest and deteriorated architecture of the Tahawus Club that establishes the sense of place" at this important historic site, wrote architectural historian Wesley Haynes.

The Lake Placid News has published several features on the iron mines that were established on the Tahawus Tract in the 1830s by Archibald McIntyre and David Henderson, in part because numerous magazine articles, books and scholarly studies have been published on that operation.

Until we procured a copy of Haynes' 1994 documentation report on the surviving buildings at the site, however, we knew almost nothing about 90 percent of the structures comprising today's "deserted village."

In mid-March, on one of the very last days of the Adirondack winter, we sent our reporter to the site to take a look at the remnants there of the Tahawus Club — because they probably won't be around in a few more years.

Before he tells you about what he saw there, however, let's first walk through the amazing history that led to the Tahawus Club's creation.

From iron dam to deserted village

The story of today's Tahawus Club ghost town actually started, early in the autumn of 1826, on the edge of what would later become the village of Lake Placid.

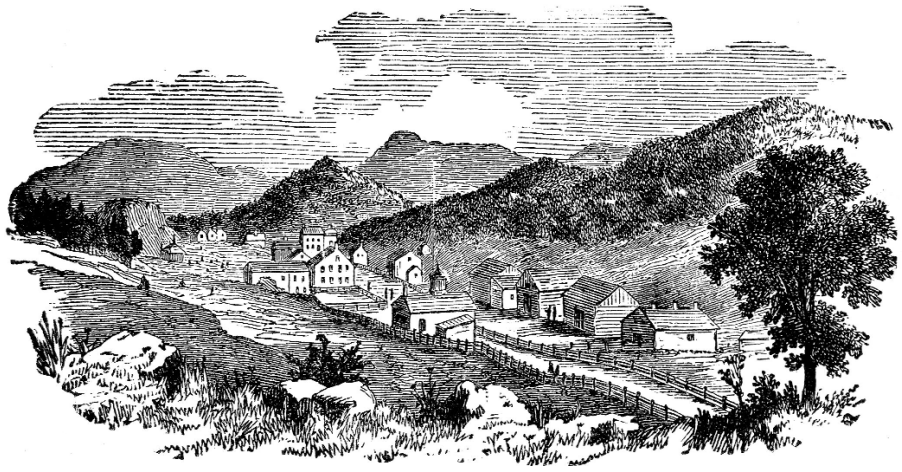
Several associates of Archibald McIntyre, founder of the Elba Iron Works that had closed shop outside Lake Placid in 1817, were poking around the old forge site when "a strapping young Indian ... made his appearance at [the old works'] gate," wrote one of the party, David Henderson, in a letter to McIntyre.

"The Indian opened his blanket and took out a small piece of Iron Ore about the size of a nut. 'You want see 'em ore, me know 'em bed, all same'," said the man, Lewis Elijah Benedict.

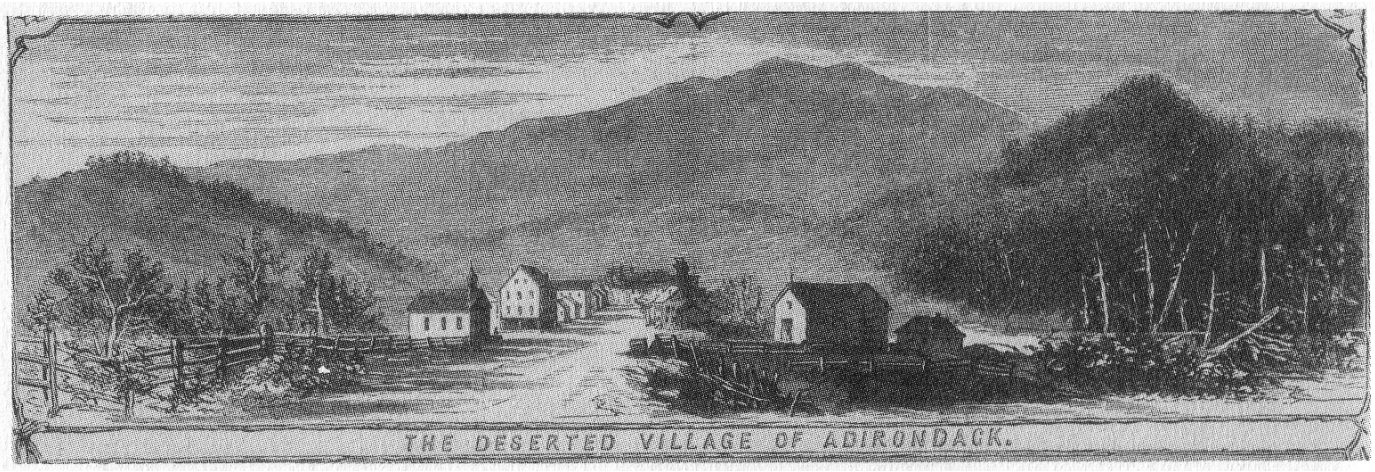
Benedict led the party through the Indian Pass to the headwaters of the Hudson River in Newcomb township, where an outcropping of very high-grade iron ore formed a natural dam across the stream.

By 1832, a small community had been established there, with forges built to extract iron from the hard-rock magnetite ore. First called McIntyre, after the primary owner, it was renamed Adirondac (no "k") in 1848 by the U.S. Postal Service when a post office was finally opened there.

Two perennial problems plagued the Adirondack Iron & Steel Manufacturing Co., as McIntyre's venture was called: the extreme remoteness of the site, making it prohibitively expensive to ship the company's prod-



An engraving of the deserted village of Adirondac, from a drawing made in 1859 by Benson J. Lossing, just one year after mining operations had been shut down for good, published in E.R. Wallace's 1887 "Descriptive Guide to the Adirondacks."



Woodcut by Theodore R. Davis, published in the Nov. 21, 1868 issue of Harper's Weekly.

uct to market, and the admixture of titanium with the iron in the raw ore.

In 1845, works manager David Henderson was accidentally killed by his own pistol while looking for ways to harness more water power for the iron works.

In 1856, a flood washed away half of McIntyre's setup, 11 miles downstream from Adirondac.

When McIntyre, age 86, died two years later, in 1858, the works suddenly closed down, never to be revived.

Writer Benson J. Lossing visited the site just one year later, in 1859, sketching it for later publication in his travel book, "The Hudson." Lossing was the first to call Adirondac "the deserted village," an allusion to a then very well-known poem of the same name, written in 1770 by British writer Oliver Goldsmith.

Travel writers exploit 'ghost town'

For many years thereafter, whenever a regional travel writer would describe his visit to Adirondac, he would always follow the hamlet's name with "the deserted village." That is the reputation which, through all the years — and through several metamorphoses — has stuck with the site.

Even in 1846, Adirondac was described by visitor Joel Headley as "the loneliest place a hammer ever struck in. Forty miles to a post office or a mill — flour eight dollars a barrel, and common tea a dollar a pound in these woods, in the very heart of the Empire State!"

Richard Henry Dana Jr., writing in 1871 for the Atlantic Monthly of his 1849 visit, said that Adirondac was "as wild a spot for a manufacturing village as can well be imagined — in the heart of the mountains, with a difficult communication to the southward, and none at all in any other direction — a mere clearing in a forest that stretches all the way to Canada."

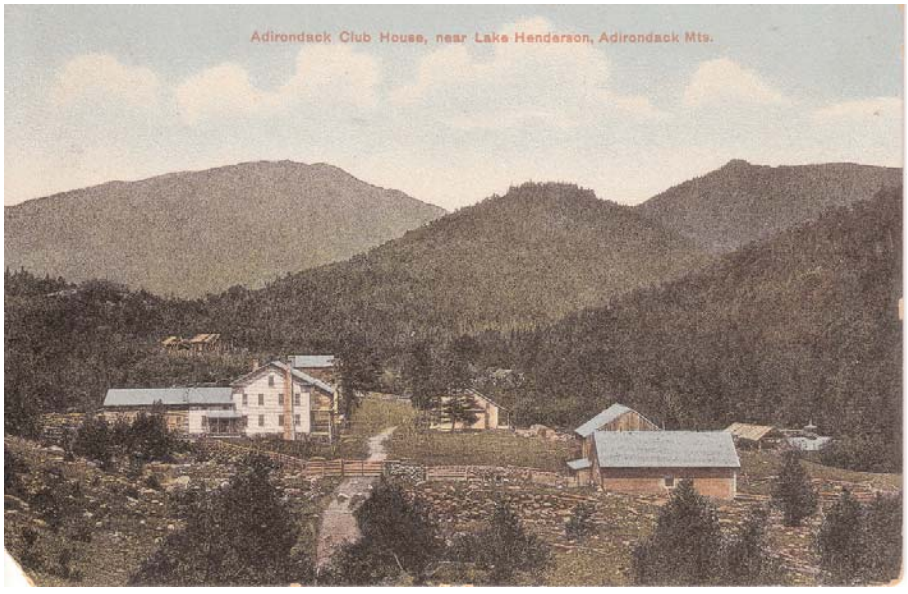
It took some time, however, before the mining village closed in 1858 became known as a place of true desolation.

In 1859, the year after the iron works shut down, Benson Lossing described his excursion to the site: "At the house of Mr. [Robert] Hunter, the only inhabitant of the deserted village, we dined. The little deserted village of Adirondack, or M'Intyre, appeared cheerful to us weary wanderers, although smoke was to be seen from only a solitary chimney."

Naturalist John Burroughs came through seven years later, in 1866. Like Lossing, he boarded with the Hunter family.

"Hunter was hired by the company at a dollar a day to live here and see that things were not wantonly destroyed," Burroughs wrote, "but allowed to go to decay properly and decently."

Burroughs described Adirondac as an abandoned settlement, but one that had not yet started its steep decline to



An 1886 postcard, possibly by Edward Bierstadt. (Courtesy Chris & Nancy Beattie)

disintegration.

"After nightfall we went out and walked up and down the grass-grown streets," he wrote. "It was a curious and melancholy spectacle. The remoteness and surrounding wildness rendered the scene doubly impressive.

"There were about thirty buildings in all, most of them small frame houses with a door and two windows opening into a small yard in front and a garden in the rear, such as are usually occupied by the laborers in a country manufacturing district.

"The schoolhouse was still used," Burroughs continued. "Every day one of the [Hunter] daughters assembles her smaller brothers and sisters there and keeps school. The district library contained nearly one hundred readable books which were well thumbed."

Two years later, in 1868, Alfred B. Street likewise found the abandoned hamlet to be still in surprisingly good condition.

"On each side [of the street] stood the houses, so perfect, except here and there a broken pane, I almost saw people at the windows, or on the porches," Street wrote. "One week of repairing would make them comfortable dwellings again."

Stoddard puts the 'ghost' in 'ghost town'

Perhaps the best-known traveler's description of deserted Adirondac was Seneca Ray Stoddard's. His account was primarily derived from a visit made in 1873, and substantial portions of it were published unchanged in his illustrated regional guidebooks through 1919, long after the "deserted village" had been revived as a private summer community.

In 1870, however, three years before his best-known visit to Adirondac, Stoddard had made another trip to the village. That earlier visit was briefly alluded to in his 1873 account, but was not fully described there.

It was not until many years later, after Stoddard had begun publishing his Northern Monthly magazine in 1905, that the story of his 1870 visit to Adirondac was written up, wrapped around a ghost story. The Elizabethtown Post & Gazette of Nov. 7, 1907, offered its readers a much-condensed version of that story, entitled "The Forsaken Village."

"The story on which the legend founded," the Post columnist wrote, "runs that a New York businessman in the Adirondacks for rest and recreation, when wandering afield one day, chanced across the moss-covered remains of the little village abandoned years before. Entering one house better than the rest, he found it perfectly furnished, as its occupants had left it years before.

"A little further down the street he came across the office of the company by whom the mines had been operated. Even the ledgers had been left in the safe, the doors of which were open. In this he occupied himself until he realized that the night was upon him. Deciding to make the best of the situation, he returned to the house he had first entered and, taking possession of one of the silent bedrooms, threw back the musty bed covers and made himself as comfortable as possible for the night."

A ghost, "the founder of the village," appeared to the man in the story that night, searching for a letter written to the ghost's daughter by the lover he had sent away. The next morning, "moved by the pitiful tale," the visitor hunted around the house, eventually finding the letter.

"That night he placed it on the center table in the house where he had passed the night before. Again his midnight caller came, and the sleeper was awakened by a great cry of joy. When he finally reached the table where the letter had been, it was gone," the Post & Gazette story ended.

Stoddard concluded the guidebook account of his 1873 visit to Adirondac with a vague allusion to the incident:

"Well do I remember the night when they [the Hunter family] sent us to sleep in one of the deserted houses having the reputation of being haunted. We did imagine that we heard curious sounds during the night," Stoddard

LEFT — The Adirondack Club, photographed in 1888 by Seneca Ray Stoddard. (Credit: "Photograph #81.800s courtesy of Adirondack Research Room, Saranac Lake Free Library") RIGHT — Looking north up the Adirondac road earlier this month.

wrote, “but whether uneasy spirits or some poor dog that we had robbed of his nest we could not tell.”

Only in the very first account of that visit, however, was this final sentence included:

“This is reminiscent, however, and occurred three years previous to the time when in 1873 the professor [Stoddard’s traveling companion] and myself tramped that way and beyond.”

‘An air of solitude and desolation’

It seems that 1873 was the point at which the old mining village turned a corner. No longer could it be described as a temporarily vacant, but essentially sound, settlement; it had become an authentic ruin.

“It is a strange feeling which one experiences as he comes suddenly, after days of tramping through unbroken wilderness, upon this desolate hamlet,” wrote an anonymous reporter for the Plattsburgh Republican in 1873. “The forges will soon be overgrown with vegetation, and the water-wheels converted into masses of rotten wood.

“You enter shops and are startled by the strange echo of your footsteps, which seem to threaten the intruder with disaster for disturbing their long repose.

“The wide and hansom [sic] street is covered with a thick mat of green turf, while the houses have a muffled, funereal air. ... The little church [which did double duty as the schoolhouse] still stands, but its back is bent with age, and it will soon fall beneath its own weight. ...

“Over the whole scene there reigns an air of solitude and desolation which the tourist is glad to leave behind,” the Plattsburgh paper concluded.

Stoddard’s guidebook, “The Adirondacks Illustrated,” described the settlement as “the ruined village, where a scene of utter desolation met our view [and] the grass-grown street led away into shadow.

“On either side once stood neat cottages and pleasant homes, now stained and blackened by time. Broken windows, doors unhinged, falling roofs, rotting sills and crumbling foundations, pointed to the ruin that must surely come.

The Debevoise Cottage, built ca. 1900

“Near the center of the village was a large house said at one time to have accommodated one hundred boarders, now grim and silent.

“Near-by at the left stood the pretty school house [and church]. The steps, worn by many little feet, had rotted and fallen, the windows were almost paneless, the walls cracked and rent asunder where the foundation had dropped away, and the doors yawned wide, seeming to say not ‘welcome’ but ‘go’,” wrote Stoddard.

Creation of the clubs

Adirondac’s previous caretaker, Robert Hunter, had left the hamlet between Stoddard’s first and second visits after Hunter’s wife, Sarah, died in 1872. Her tombstone stands in the Adirondac cemetery between the village and nearby Henderson Lake.

Hunter’s successor, “the independent Californian” John Moore, was the last custodian of Adirondac before it became the headquarters of a series of new sportsman’s clubs, founded by the descendants of Archibald McIntyre.

The first such club, called the Preston Ponds Club, was a tentative venture created in February 1876. A fisherman’s club, based in the ponds just north of Adirondac, it was quickly succeeded by the Adirondack Club in January 1877, which based itself in the old mining settlement.

The following year, Adirondack Club member Francis Weeks took on the job of repairing the sturdy, two-story frame house built in 1834 by the McIntyre company for use by the mine’s owners and supervisors. Then known as the Hunter House, it later was occupied by McIntyre grandson James MacNaughton, whose name has been associated with it ever since. Today, the MacNaughton Cottage is the only extant dwelling left over from the McIntyre iron plantation.

As Adirondack Club members moved in to the former mining settlement, they took over surviving mine-era buildings before tearing them down and, in many cases, building new cottages on the old foundations.

The Adirondack Club had only a 20-year lease on the McIntyre property. When that lease expired in 1898, the terms of the new lease required a reorganization of the club, which renamed itself using the popular faux-Indian name for Mount Marcy, a major por-

tion of which the McIntyre company owned.

Thus was born, on Nov. 26, 1898, the Tahawus Club.

NEXT WEEK, we will walk you through the 16 structures still standing at the site of Archibald McIntyre's 19th century iron settlement.

Two former residents of the deserted village will also tell you a little bit about what it was like for them as they grew up there. One of them spent her childhood summers at the Tahawus Club before World War II.

The other former resident lived there after the village had been appropriated as workers' housing for the National Lead Company's nearby titanium mine, following World War II. He left for college before the tiny settlement was closed down by NL in 1963 when, in the words of another former resident, the mining company "got out of the landlord business."

After that, the workers' hamlet again became an abandoned village — though a completely *different* abandoned village than the one written about by 19th century travel writers.

Getting there

To get to the deserted village from Lake Placid, you will drive on state Route 73 through Keene and Keene Valley to Northway (I-87) Exit 30, then jog south to Exit 29 (North Hudson).

From Exit 29, it's a 17.5-mile drive westward on the Boreas/Blue Ridge Road, heading toward Newcomb, before you reach county Route 25 (Tahawus Road), where you will turn right.

Zero your trip meter as you make that turn, then watch the mileage so you don't lose your way.

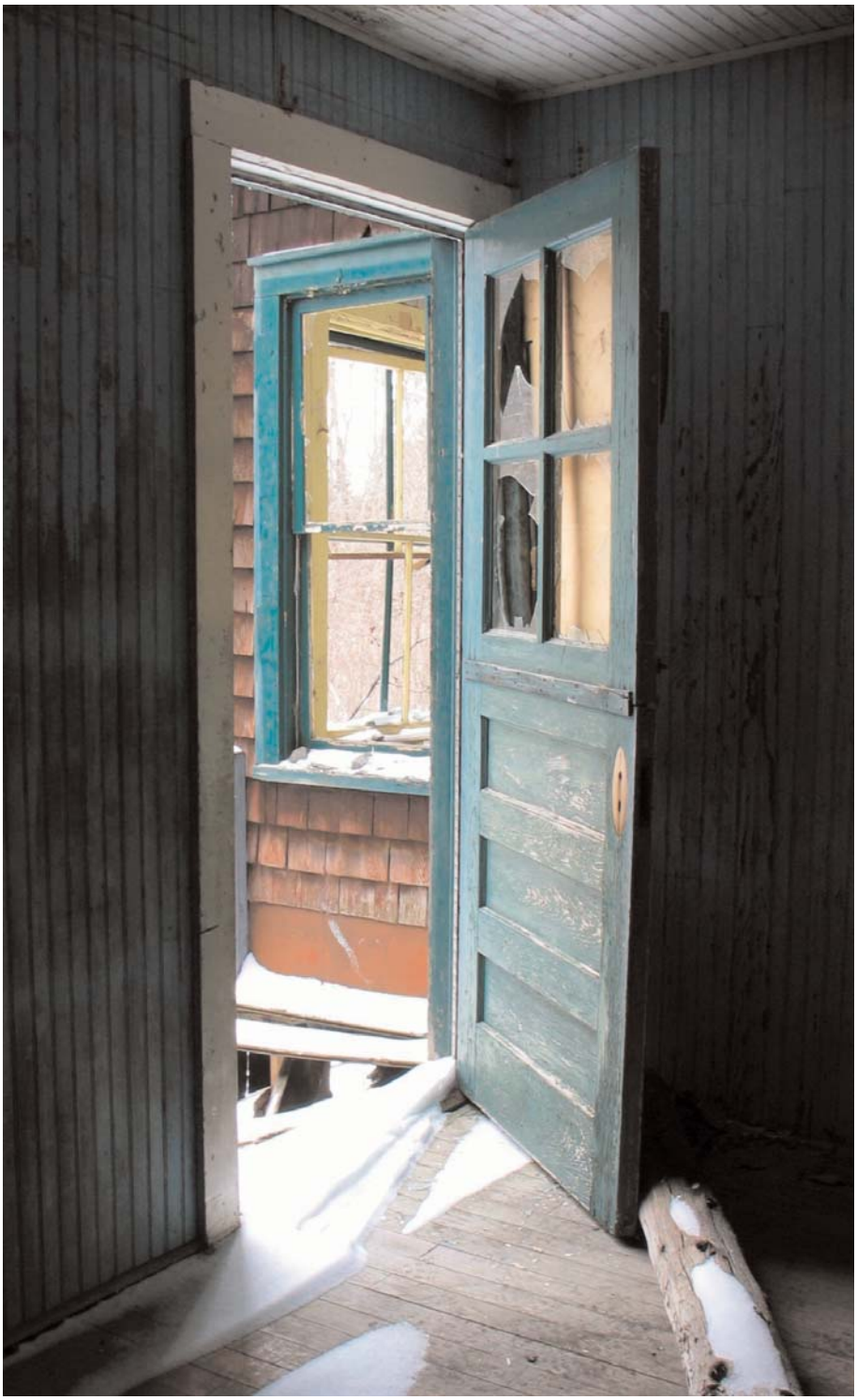
You'll pass the Lower Works Road on the right at 0.4 miles (Route 25 curves left). The Lower Works is the site to which the Tahawus Club moved in 1947 after its former headquarters was taken over by National Lead.

At 6.3 miles, county Route 25 branches off to the left toward the Upper Works. Make sure you make that left turn; don't keep going straight onto county Route 76, or you'll end up at the gate to the abandoned National Lead titanium mill.

The "New Furnace," an 1854 blast furnace from the McIntyre era, rises on the right side of the road at 9.1 miles, looking like a small Mayan pyramid that somehow got lost in the North Country woods.

The 1834 MacNaughton Cottage, the only building surviving from the Adirondac iron-mining days, stands on the right at the beginning of the ghost village, at 9.7 miles.

At the end of Route 25 is the parking lot for the southern trailhead to the High Peaks, at 9.9 miles.



Interior of Mrs. Taylor's Cottage, also known as Lazy Lodge, built ca. 1890