ADIRONDACK ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

NEWSLETTER VOLUME 21 NUMBER 1 WINTER 2011-2012

Checking In: Lake Placid's Midcentury Motels

By Elizabeth Warburton

Over the past several years AARCH has sought to draw greater attention to the architecture of our more recent past through our tours, lectures, web site, awards program, and Newsletter articles. For instance, Custard's Last Stand, an ice cream stand in Long Lake, received an AARCH Preservation Award in 2003 and in 2009 we had a Newsletter article about Lustron Homes, a manufactured house made between 1946 and 1950, examples of which are found in Saranac Lake and Plattsburgh. The following article about mid-century motels in Lake Placid continues this effort to explore these areas of interest.

Cradled by the Adirondack Mountains, the village of Lake Placid, New York has a long history of drawing tourists and visitors. The structures built to house vacationers tell the story of America's evolving tourism industry as well as reflecting popular styles and trends. Though the small village has several large-scale contemporary resorts, the majority of its lodging is small, traditional roadside motels built between the 1950s and the 1970s. The motels that remain from this period should be viewed as historically and architecturally important for their representation of an era of lodging that is being lost on a national scale.

In the early 1900s Lake Placid was considered a winter playground for the well-to-do, but drastic shifts in the tourism industry were developing around the same time. With the introduction of Henry Ford's Model T in 1908 and the rapid spread of automobile use shortly after, travel was forever changed. People no longer had to rely on trains, steamboats, and other modes of transportation restricted by schedules. The automobile democratized travel and allowed individual choice about routes, schedule, and speed.

By the 1920s, the practice of "autocamping", journeying and setting up camp in fields, state camp grounds or other open areas, was common throughout the country. Liberation from train and streetcar travel and the beginning of a love affair with the automobile fully shifted travel and tourism into an individual pursuit.

Autocamping led to the establishment of modest cabin colonies, offering the traveler more comfort. These grew and evolved into tourist courts. Lake Placid still has several extant examples of early cabins, as does nearby Ray Brook (Sherwood Forest Motor Inn). Examples of cabins can be found behind the more modern motel block at Wildwood on the Lake (Saranac Avenue); where cabins have been slightly expanded but still retain their small massing, rustic interiors, and proximity to the lake. The Cobble Mountain Lodge (Wilmington Road) is another example of individual cabins dating from the 1950s.

The automobile remained a central figure in American life and tourism throughout the twentieth century. Tourist courts soon included attached garages and later became a single, long block of rooms with parking nearby or directly in front of the building. This motel arrangement allowed customers to come and go without having to pass through a formal lobby, increasing the sense of freedom that travel by car instilled on people.

Thunderbird Motel in Lake Placid, showing the two-story motel model where rooms open directly to the outside and parking is just steps away. Also present is the oversized sign which would be visible from the road.

The term motel was reportedly coined as early as 1925 as a contraction of *motor* and *hotel*, revealing the important role that automobiles were playing, and would continue to play, in the tourism industry. *Tourist Court Journal*, the leading industry publication, advised that a respected architect should be retained to design or renovate tourist courts. As the new auto-tourism industry flourished, it evolved from primitive auto camps to carefully designed, well-appointed

Postcard showing Art Devlin's as an Olympic icon. Note the inclusion of the Olympic rings, which Art implemented two years before the Olympic Committee trademarked them in 1962.

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Members and Friends,

Every year brings its surprises, challenges, successes, failures and new ideas. The past year was no exception for AARCH. One surprise was from Mother Nature in the form of Tropical Storm Irene, which did great damage to historic properties all over the Adirondacks. The losses from flooding in Keene and Upper Jay were particularly devastating but we are happy to report that the National Register listed Wells Memorial Library, badly damaged by the flooding, is open again and some salvaged objects from the former Land of Makebelieve in Upper Jay are currently "drying out" in our Stone Mill in Keeseville. Add to this losses to the usual "destruction by neglect", fires (including the tragic loss of Hubbard Hall in Elizabethtown), ill-advised demolition and deferred maintenance in times of economic stress, and the importance of AARCH's mission looms larger than ever. Experience and time have told us that our preservation efforts need to be wide ranging and that we need to be agile and imaginative in our work. We continue to encourage the use of preservation easements to protect important properties and properties at risk and have recently accepted an easement on Northbrook Lodge near Paul Smiths. We hope that in the coming years other property owners will demonstrate similar forethought and generosity.

A particularly challenging area, one that we are paying much closer attention to, is the preservation and revitalization of the Main Streets of our Adirondack communities. This is where private and public interests really need to cooperate in order to succeed. To get the ball rolling, municipal government sometimes needs outside help in envisioning and planning revitalization efforts that make the most of the historic Main Street buildings and their potential and there certainly are ways for AARCH to provide this help. Our work to revitalize the former Ausable Horse Nail Company complex in Keeseville is an example of how the restoration of a few key historic village buildings can spur broader community revitalization – provided this is packaged with a larger initiative that considers the economics, opportunities and strengths of the entire "Main Street Community". As part of this effort, we have helped to form and nurture a local Keeseville Revitalization group and we expect that this experience will translate into our working with other communities in similar ways.

Over the years our educational programming has adjusted to shifting membership interests, new opportunities, and meeting new preservation challenges. The tour programs continue to be well attended and well received and we are constantly finding ways to explore new places to visit. Last year's tour to the Thousand Island region was our first attempt at a two-day tour and our furthest foray outside of the Park. Given the success of this outing, we expect to expand these types of tours in the years ahead. This winter we've offered three "Winter Open House Weekends" at Camp Santanoni and these have been very popular (200 people in February) . We also expect to offer several new "hands-on" workshops this year to give people a chance to learn useful preservation techniques and to get their hands dirty. If you haven't visited our web site recently, be sure to check out its several new features, including an interactive map and a much expanded resources section.

Please also contact us if you are aware of a good stewardship example that might merit one of our awards. Our Annual Preservation Awards program recognizes many of the exemplary private and public preservation efforts across the region. Last year's luncheon at Garnet Hill Lodge in North River highlighted the wonderful motivation, dedication and eloquence of some of our fellow Park residents and their work.

We look forward to seeing many of you in the year ahead—on skis at Santanoni (March 17 and 18) and elsewhere across the region on a tour, at one of our special event or in other ways as we go about our work.

Most importantly, be well and have a great year.

Willem Monster
President

NYSDEC Commissioner Joe Martens and AARCH Executive Director Steven Engelhart enjoy a beautiful winter day at Camp Santanoni in February.

CHECKING IN: LAKE PLACID'S MIDCENTURY MOTELS

Current sign for Wildwood on the Lake plays off traditional techniques of presentation and positioning.
(Photo, Liz Warburton)

buildings. Estimates show that the number of motels peaked around 1960 with approximately 60,000 nationwide.

Following the national trend, Lake Placid experienced a midcentury motel building boom with the majority of Lake Placid's motels constructed during the 1950s and 1960s. Perhaps the most significant example of these is the Art Devlin's Olympic Motor Inn on Main Street, named for its proprietor who was an Olympic ski jumper and World War II veteran. This inn expanded throughout the 1960s and in its current form is significant for its connection to Devlin, the explicit influence of the Olympics on Lake Placid's motel industry, and the design of the main office.

Vintage promotional photo of Wildwood on the Lake showing a well-appointed guest room.

Other extant examples of midcentury motels in Lake Placid include the Town House Lodge, Placid Bay Inn, Thunderbird Motor Inn and Maple Leaf Inn, all of which embody many of the defining features of a motel: long low structures laid out parallel or perpendicular to the road in straight lines, V-shapes, and crescents to attract maximum attention; neon lighting; and well-appointed rooms.

Another important characteristic of these establishments were the signs. They were consistently large, easy to read, often lit with neon lights, and placed very near the road so as to catch the eye of passing motorists. Many of these remain in Lake Placid as well, such as the one at Wildwood on the Lake, the design of which hasn't changed in decades.

Howard Johnson's Restaurant on Saranac Ave. in Lake Placid as it appeared in the 1950s.

The village's longstanding tourist industry adapted to the new auto-tourism, providing comfortable and affordable accommodations for families. Though hotels and larger motor court operations such as the Golden Arrow Lakeside Resort began to cater to groups, the operation of smaller roadside motels continues to contribute to the village character and economy.

The 1950s and 1960s were also a time when new forms of "carchitecture" developed, namely roadside, drive-in restaurants such as A&W and Howard Johnson's. The Lake Placid area boasts one of three remaining operational Howard Johnson's restaurants, though after multiple renovations the original 1950s design, known for its signature orange tile roof, has all but been lost.

Auto-travelers also patronized a variety of other roadside attractions that developed alongside the motel industry. Early sites popular in Lake Placid were Old MacDonald's Farm (1950s) and the Sterling Alaska Fur and Game Farms/ Land of 1000 Animals (1921-c.1980). Just down the road in Wilmington is Santa's Workshop (1949), a theme park that was one of the first of its kind in the country and continues to operate today. Also in the region: Ausable Chasm (1870) near Keeseville; Frontier Town (1952-2004) in North Hudson; the Land of Makebelieve (1954-1979) in Upper Jay; and Enchanted Forest (1956) in Old Forge.

Because Lake Placid and its immediate surrounding area still contains a variety of motels and roadside attractions that are largely intact and functional, care should be paid to their maintenance and preservation. Most buildings in Lake Placid do not yet meet the 50-year age criteria mandated for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, but as they draw close to this threshold National Register listing should be considered as a way of honoring and preserving them.

In addition to exploring the possibility of formal historic recognition for some Lake Placid's motels, their architecture and history can be used as a marketing tool. Accentuating interesting motel architecture and including motel histories on websites and advertising with the Lake Placid Visitor's Bureau is another way of recognizing and celebrating the historic and architectural character of these buildings. By planning for the preservation of roadside architecture, we can ensure that the next fifty years are as vibrant as the first.

Elizabeth Warburton completed her Master's degree in Historic Preservation at the University of Vermont in December 2011. AARCH sponsored her research on the development of auto tourism and the 20th century motels in Lake Placid.

PROPERTIES LISTED ON THE NATIONAL AND STATE REGISTERS OF HISTORIC PLACES IN 2011

National Register

- Wells Memorial Library, Upper Jay, Essex County
- Crandall Marine Railway, Ticonderoga, Essex County
- Heyworth-Mason Building, Peru, Clinton County

New York State Register

- Knollwood, Wanakena, St. Lawrence County

Blue Mountain Lake: The Adirondack Museum was one of two recipients of a collection of memorabilia, art, toys, papers, and other ephemera related to the work of Upper Jay artist, toymaker, and theme park designer Arto Monaco. The Strong Museum of Play in Rochester was the other recipient. The collections were donated to these institutions by the Arto Monaco Historical Society.

◊ AARCH was instrumental in arranging the donation of an historic roadside vegetable stand located in Keeseville to the Adirondack Museum. Located on NYS Route 9, the farmstand served the Santor family's vegetable operation for nearly five decades. The farmstand was donated to the museum by local businessman George Moore and will be used by the museum to interpret the economic and cultural importance of small roadside farms.

Town of Brighton Town Hall

Brighton: The Brighton Town Hall, designed and built by Ben Muncil (Topridge, Northbrook Lodge, and White Pine Camp) in 1914 has recently been restored and rehabilitated. The architect for the project was Crawford & Stearns, Architects (Syracuse) and it was funded, in large part, by grants from the New York State Environmental Protection Fund, New York State Council on the Arts, and other state and private sources.

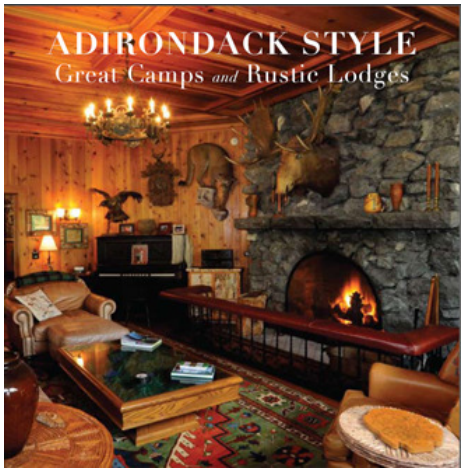
◊ In May, for the second time in six months, there were no bids received at a public auction for Camp Gabriels. The property was originally developed as the Sanitorium Gabriels (1897-1965), was used by Paul Smiths College (1965-1980), and then as a minimum-security prison (1982-2009). The 92-acre property with its 48 buildings has sat dormant since the New York State Department of Correctional Services closed it in July 2009. It was listed with a recommended price of $950,000. The property has several historic buildings including a chapel, a former cure cottage, and several dormitory buildings. The state is continuing to market the property.

Chesterfield: In the spring of 2011 the Town of Chesterfield Heritage Center opened to the public. Located in the Estes House next to Ausable Chasm, the building houses the North Star Underground Railroad Museum on the first floor and on the second are the offices for the North Country Underground Railroad Historical Association.

◊ The *Friends of Poke-O-Moonshine*, a grass roots organization dedicated to preserving the fire tower on Poke-O-Moonshine Mountain and to interpreting the natural and cultural history of the mountain, is once again operating under the 501(c)3 auspices of AARCH, which helped to create the organization in 1997 and to further its work over many years. Recent projects of the *Friends* include improving a secondary trail up the backside of the mountain, staffing the tower with seasonal interpreters, and hosting various workshops and outings.

Fort Ann: Camp Little Notch had operated as a girl's camp in Fort Ann since 1939 and many former campers and employees were dismayed when the Girl Scouts closed the camp's doors in 2008. In response, a group of supporters formed the *Friends of Camp Little Notch.* After several years of successful planning and fundraising, they will open Camp Little Notch as a private nonprofit this summer, offering a variety of programs and activities for girls aged 7-17. Please visit www.camplittlenotch.org and www.friendsofcln.org for more information.

Keeseville: AARCH has been actively working with the community in the "Revitalize Keeseville" effort throughout the fall and winter. Monthly meetings have been very well attended and the group has already been able to attract a farmer's market to the village for the coming year, is working on a community website and kiosk, and is developing a "buy local" campaign.



◊ AARCH had the pleasure over the past few years of being part of developing *Adirondack Style: Great Camps and Rustic Lodges.* Published by Rizzoli in 2011, it includes photographs by f-stop Fitzgerald and Richard McCaffrey, text by Lynn Woods and Jane Mackintosh, and an introduction by Howie Kirschenbaum. It is widely available in local bookstores.

New York Central Railroad Corridor: A spirited debate is underway over the future use of the former New York Central, Adirondack Division, railroad corridor between Remsen and Lake

NEWS AND NOTES

WANTED: NEW OWNERS FOR THESE HISTORIC PROPERTIES

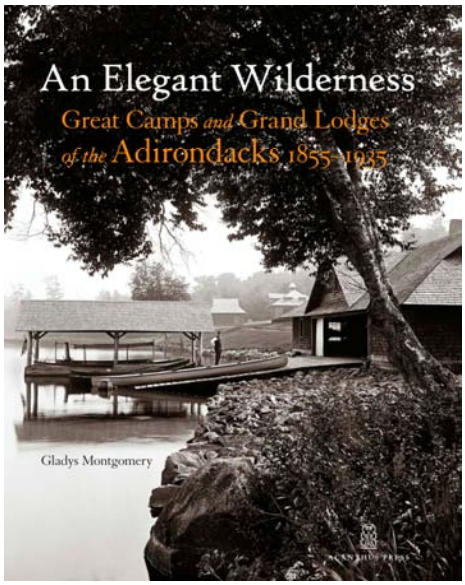
This new section will become a regular feature in AARCH *Newsletters* and on our web site. Our intent is not to act as an advertiser for real estate, but to bring attention to special historic properties that we are particularly concerned about because their fate is uncertain. If you know of a property that is for sale or facing an unknown future, please let us know.

Cobble Mountain Lodge, Elizabethtown: This was the summer home of renowned architect Thomas Lamb, who is best known for designing lavishly decorated "movie palaces" for Loew's, Fox, and the Keith-Albee chains of vaudeville and movie theaters in the 1910s and 1920s. The 30 -acre riverside property includes a main lodge with ten bedrooms and imaginatively decorated interiors; a caretaker's house; and two other cottages. The price on this National Register eligible property has recently been reduced to $399,000 and is offered through Sotheby's International Realty, Lake Placid at (518) 523-2550.

Rembrandt Hall, Keeseville: This 1851 Gothic Revival, brick cottage was commissioned for the daughter of the American painter Rembrandt Peale. It was reportedly built by Keeseville native Isaac Perry (1822-1904), who went on to become New York's "State Architect" and was responsible for designing dozens of state armories and other institutions. The building, now divided into six apartments, still has many distinctive historic features including a freestanding spiral staircase. It is listed on the National Register and is being offered for sale through Grace Realty, Rouses Point at (518) 314-1384.

Placid. On one side of the issue are proponents of continued rail service and complimentary recreational uses, and on the other side of the issue are advocates for removing the tracks and using the corridor exclusively for recreational purposes. AARCH has taken the position that the rails are an important and contributing component to this National Register listed property, still have great economic value and potential, and should be retained and used if at all possible.

Piercefield: In mid-October the fire tower (1918) and observer's cabin on Mt. Arab were extensively vandalized by two teenagers, resulting in more than $6,000 in damage to windows, doors, furnishings, signs, and the outhouse. "Vandalism of this magnitude to a place into which, over the course of many years, we have invested your donations, countless hours of volunteer labor, and a great deal of heart and soul … makes absolutely no sense at all," the group's leaders said in a news release. Richard Bentley, the chairman of the *Friends of Mount Arab*, said the cost of repairs will jeopardize the group's ability to fund programs next year, including the summit guide intern and regular trail, tower and cabin maintenance. Tax-deductible donations to help repair the Mt. Arab fire tower can be sent to: Friends of Mt. Arab, P.O. Box 185, Piercefield, NY 12973.

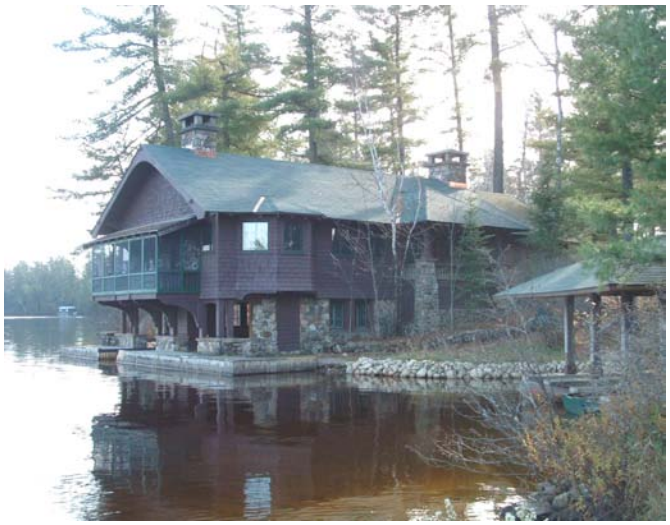


Plattsburgh: The fate of the Old Stone Barracks (1843) at the former Plattsburgh Air Force Base is still uncertain. Community interest and pressure helped to dissuade the owner from undertaking a large new construction project for the property but now the building is on the market again. The *Friends of the Old Stone Barracks*, with support from AARCH, is working to find a sympathetic new owner and to help develop plans for the best possible public/ private use of the building.

Region wide: In June, the Adirondack Museum published *An Elegant Wilderness: Great Camps and Grand Lodges of the Adirondacks* by Gladys Montgomery. This book, richly illustrated with photographs largely from the museum's collections, explores and casts new light on both the well-known and less-known camps in the region. The book is widely available in regional bookstores.

Upper Jay: Tropical Storm Irene, which ravaged the Northeast and was especially devastating in the Ausable River Valley and came down particularly hard on the towns of Jay and Keene, where the flooding caused extensive water and mud damage to over 100 homes and businesses including the historic Wells Memorial Library. After many hours of volunteer time and successful local fundraising, the library has now been reopened. Unfortunately, a happy ending wasn't in store for what remained of a beloved local landmark: Arto Monaco's Land of Makebelieve. There the iconic fairy-tale Castle, western village of Cactus Flats, and almost all of its other surviving buildings (the park closed in 1979) were completely wiped out by flood waters.

AARCH HOLDS PRESERVATION EASEMENT ON NORTHBROOK LODGE



The Boathouse at Northbrook Lodge. (AARCH Photo)

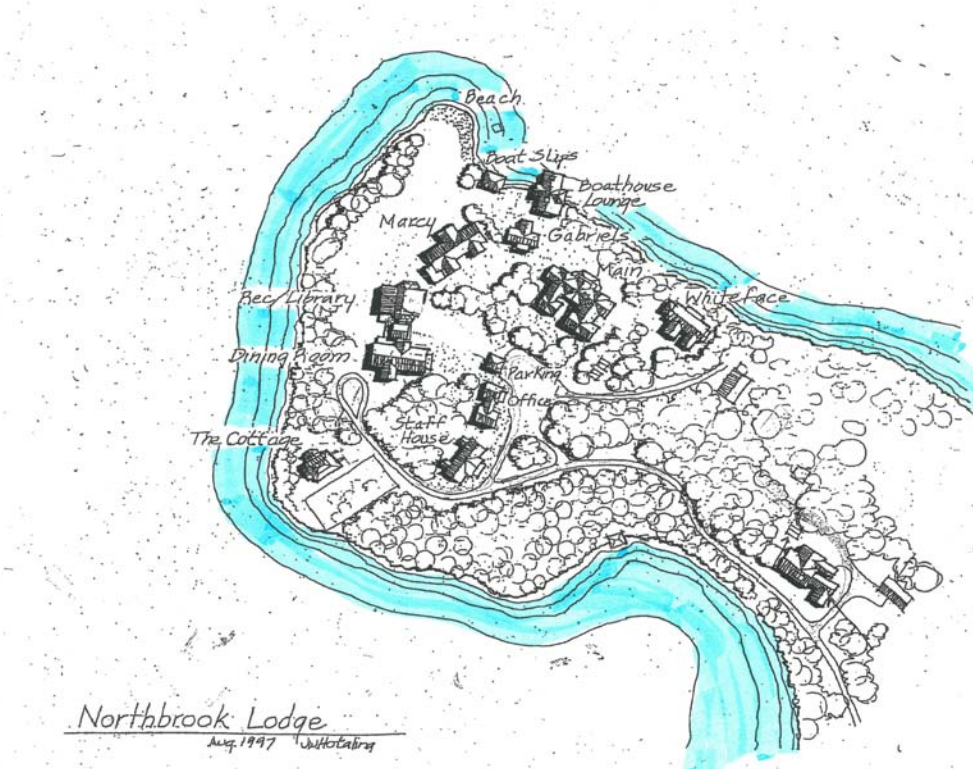
In early January, AARCH entered into a conservation and preservation easement with Laura-Jean Schwartau that will protect, in perpetuity, the Northbrook Lodge property on Osgood Pond. This is the fifth easement that AARCH holds. Northbrook Lodge was originally built as a summer camp for Wilfred McDougald, a doctor and member of the Canadian parliament from Montreal. The Swanson/Schwartau family bought the 10-acre property in 1952 and operated it as a resort until 2010. The camp's dozen buildings were designed and built by the contractor Benjamin Muncil (1867-1930) of Keese's Mills, who also built nearby White Pine Camp, the Brighton Town Hall, and many of the buildings at Camp Topridge.

In explaining her desire to protect Northbrook Lodge, Laura-Jean Schwartau explained: "The property has been in my family since 1952 and we knew its historic and architectural value. We have always been conservation oriented and saw an easement as a way to protect both the wonderful historic buildings here and their open space setting. We'd seen other special properties like this inappropriately carved up into smaller pieces and were disappointed to see the Wawbeek on Upper Saranac Lake lost a few years ago. So we wanted to be proactive and were delighted to find that AARCH could help make the protection of the property possible. Although our goal was primarily to protect the buildings and the site, we thought that an easement might bring some property tax relief and perhaps other financial benefits, as well."

AARCH's executive director Steven Engelhart said of the easement: "We are delighted that Laura-Jean has chosen to protect the distinctive architecture of Northbrook Lodge through this conservation and preservation easement. The Schwartau family has for many years generously allowed AARCH to bring groups to tour the property and through these outings we have come to marvel at just how fine a work of architecture this is."

Author and founding AARCH board president Howie Kirschenbaum is particularly effusive about the 'great room" in the boathouse, a big, split-level, open room with a bar above, tables below, and twin alcoves with card tables. A door to one side of a fireplace leads to a cozy porch looking out on Osgood Pond. "This room is, I think, a Muncil masterpiece, in every respect. The truss system foreshadows what would come, on a much larger scale, at Topridge a few years later", Kirschenbaum said. "Muncil was excellent at creating these large open spaces without posts in the middle. I think this is one of the greatest 'great rooms' in the Adirondacks."

Now, thanks to the forethought and generosity of Laura-Jean Schwartau one of the finest camp complexes in the Adirondacks is protected forever.



Map of Northbrook Lodge property. Map by James W. Hotaling.

PRESERVATION EASEMENTS

WHAT IS A PRESERVATION EASEMENT?

An AARCH easement protects the distinctive architecture of The Castle in Keene from inappropriate changes. (AARCH photo)

A preservation easement is a voluntary legal agreement between a property owner and a tax-exempt, charitable organization or government entity, and can be used as a means of protecting a structure from inappropriate alterations and additions. Besides the satisfaction of knowing that a building is being protected, granting a preservation easement can lead to substantial savings for the owner of a historic property, including qualifying for an income tax reduction under the charitable contribution clause. Easements that lower the market value of a property can also reduce estate, gift, and capital gains taxes.

The easement ensures the preservation of a historic property in perpetuity. Under the terms of a historic preservation easement, the property owner grants a portion of, or interest in, their property rights to a qualified organization whose mission includes historic preservation. The intent of the easement is to prevent anyone from demolishing the building or altering it in any way that may diminish its historic character. Preservation easements usually apply only to the facades of buildings, although the interiors of buildings with historic features may also be covered. Easements may also prohibit alterations to the surrounding grounds that would detract from the exterior appearance of the building and may limit development of open land.

AARCH'S OTHER PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION EASEMENTS ARE:

Hemlock Ledge, Tupper Lake
Noblewood Gatehouse, Willsboro
Lynde-Pease Homestead, Willsboro
The Castle, Keene

BECOME A MEMBER

YES! I want to be part of AARCH's important work. Enclosed is my tax deductible membership contribution.

_____ Student $15 (with current ID) _____ Individual $35 _____Family $50 _____ Organization or Business $50

_____ Sponsor $100 _____Patron $250 _____Benefactor $500 Other $_____ *Friends of Camp Santanoni* $ _____

_____ My company has a matching gift program. I will send the form to AARCH.

_____ My check is enclosed, payable to "Adirondack Architectural Heritage" or "AARCH."

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SAVE THE DATES 2012

Please keep the following dates in mind for our 2012 season:

- **June** - Annual Meeting at the Ausable Club, St. Huberts, Keene Valley. Stay tuned for date and time
- **Saturday, August 4** - Benefit Event at Camp Winnetaska, Upper St. Regis Lake
- **Monday, August 27** - Golf Benefit at Saranac Inn Golf Club, Saranac Inn
- **Monday, September 24** - Annual Awards Luncheon at the Farmhouse Restaurant at the Top of the World Golf Resort, Lake George

About Adirondack Architectural Heritage

Adirondack Architectural Heritage is the nonprofit, historic preservation organization for the Adirondack Park with an educational mission to promote better public understanding, appreciation, and stewardship of the region's architecture and communities. We fulfill the mission by sponsoring tours and workshops, giving public slide presentations, offering technical assistance, and supporting local governments, organizations, and individuals in their preservation efforts.

AARCH is a membership organization with 1000 members. Members receive a biannual newsletter, discounts on AARCH sponsored events and publications, and are invited to attend out annual meeting.

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