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Doing History in the Adirondacks: Interpreting the Park, the People, and the Landscape

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

DOING HISTORY IN THE ADIRONDACKS:
INTERPRETING THE PARK, THE PEOPLE, AND THE LANDSCAPE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
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BY

MARIA F. REYNOLDS

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I open the gate at Sagamore’s entrance, the smell of pine and the rushing outlet stream
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To RJR
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ABSTRACT

Occupying a large portion of Northern New York State, the Adirondack Park includes six million acres of public and private land that compromise over 85% of all wilderness lands east of the Mississippi. Unique in many ways, the Adirondack Park remains a model for sustainable living and wilderness land management. This dissertation explores the way history is used to both complicate and enrich the relationship between humans and nature in the Adirondack Park. By analyzing historic preservation, cultural landscape management, material culture, and museums this project examines the way that Park history has been told through exhibits, public programs, tours, and commemorations. Chapters explore great camp preservation, the retention of cultural artifacts on state owned wilderness lands, the connection of the Adirondack rustic style to the land, and the increasing environmental focus of regional museums. Together these chapters provide an assessment of public history sites and exhibits in the park that reveals the close yet tenuous relationship between the people and the land. By looking at the presentation and history of interpretation of history in the Adirondack Park, I argue for the importance of an interpretation that incorporates natural and cultural elements. The future of the wilderness character of the park depends on the support of residents and tourists and, therefore, it is especially important for more individuals to understand the Park’s history through both a natural and a human lens.
INTRODUCTION

UNDERSTANDING A STORIED LANDSCAPE

This project was born out of a love for the Adirondacks; a love that first began while canoeing the endless lakes of the park as a teenager and grew while living and working in the park as a tour guide to thousands of visitors at Great Camp Sagamore. Like many who visit the museums and historic sites in the park today, I too realized that there was a lot more to the park’s story than the numerous lakes and high peaks. After spending time in the park, I began to see that wilderness was not simply a few scenic vistas ready for hikers and romantics; instead, a new definition of wilderness emerged that encapsulated the natural features of the region as well as the culture and history. Yet this discovery also revealed a long legacy of conflicting narratives and many debates that have persisted over the years. The peaceful simplicity of the woods actually masked layers of competing priorities and ideas about the best use of the land. Both natural and historic preservation have always been important to society, but in the Adirondacks these two aims are often in conflict. For example, it seemed very important to support the preservation of the state forests surrounding Sagamore, but the preservation of Sagamore’s historic infrastructures seemed just as crucial. Why did these two have to be mutually exclusive? Seeing competing definitions of wilderness play out in historic preservation battles, land use conflicts, and public history institutions in the park revealed
a fascinating side of Adirondack history that begged for explanation. Just as the lakes had seized my spirit, the park’s stories had captured my mind.

**Storyscapes**

The Adirondacks is a place of many stories and many identities. Stories and storyscapes can be a useful way to explore history in order to connect both people and place. Preservation historian Ned Kaufman used these concepts to frame his 2009 work *Place, Race and Story: Essays on the Past and Future of Historic Preservation*. He uses the term ‘storyscapes’ to more fully uncover social value and sense of place instead of limiting the understanding of a place to documented events and physical details. He writes, “stories at once live inside people and places…the meaning of a place lies neither wholly in its forms and materials nor wholly in the minds of the people who use it, but arises out of the interaction of the two.”¹ Thinking of places in terms of story allows a broader understanding of the value and importance of a place that surpasses solely its aesthetic, architectural, or environmental value. The Adirondack Park is a useful region to consider storyscapes because not only do the people, the land, and the built environment all contribute to a fuller understanding of the park, they shape competing yet not necessarily contradictory stories that are manifested from the same location.

Despite countless ads and tourist brochures touting the Adirondack region as a place for play, relaxation, and adventure, the experience of the Adirondacks cannot be so easily described with a few cheerful words. Visiting the Adirondacks may involve a wilderness experience - camping in the woods or climbing a high peak. Many have this

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exact experience and to them the Adirondacks represent an escape to clear the mind, breathe the fresh air, and commune with nature. In fact, these romantic notions are part of the reason why the park was created in the first place and why it has remained so popular. The first travelogues about the Adirondacks appealed to city folk seeking a vacation from life in the city. The Adirondack wilderness was a romantic landscape and those bent on experiencing the physical and spiritual uplift of wilderness had every reason to support the protection of this land from unchecked industrial and commercial development.

Yet within this history of wilderness in the Adirondacks lies another story; one that still involves wilderness, but which embodies a different conception of wilderness. In the late nineteenth century the urban elite began to sponsor the construction of large camps using materials from nearby forests. The architectural style of these structures copied nature and local craftsmen used the twigs, bark, and logs found in the wilderness to shape beautiful and fanciful furnishings. Known today as the great camps, many of these luxury retreats remain part of the landscape and their existence reveals a landscape that is more complicated than conceptions of a pure and pristine wilderness. Modern tourists are heirs to the great camp tradition of shaping the landscape to fit their recreational desires and hotels, resorts, and restaurants built in the rustic style of the great camps continue to attract visitors to the region. Even though many tourists do come to the park just to camp, hike, and paddle, they would be missing out on fully understanding and enjoying the landscape without visiting a great camp or a historical museum that help reveal the history and the forces at work within the forests.
Another storyscape, not obvious to the casual visitor, also has been layered over
the Adirondack Park. Before the camp owners and recreational visitors came to the park,
Indians roamed the forests and people lived in the woods. To many, the forests were a
working landscape and many loggers and miners made a living throughout the
Adirondacks. The Adirondacks were home, but the extractive working landscape
lessoned, however, as the region became a bastion for wilderness preservation. Yet for
many individuals the Adirondack Park remains home and for these residents there is
nothing romantic about a home where underemployment and the lack of industry makes
it difficult to pay the bills. Romantic soliloquies about wilderness seem trite to local
residents with more immediate concerns about basic needs. Their vernacular story still
involves a close relationship to the land, but this relationship is quite different from that
of preservationists and wealthy urbanites.

The narrative thread emerging from historic sites, museums, and historic
preservation battles represents each of these stories in different ways, but all three stories
converge to create the Adirondack narrative. The way that each of these stories has been
interpreted through the public history of the park reveals the manner in which many
visitors as well as part time and full time residents conceptualize the park. This
dissertation will explore each of these sites of interpretation as a way to more fully
understand the social relationships and conflicts that define the park. This study focuses
on how these conflicting narratives are dealt with at historic sites and how debates about
historic interpretation frame the competition between parallel visions of a shared
landscape. Whether we see a preserved landscape, a working landscape, a historic
cultural landscape, or a combination of all three, the history of the Adirondack Park as it
is interpreted for the public provides a way to understand the culture and the ways history is imagined and reinterpreted in light of current needs.

The historic divide between nature and culture is beginning to lessen. Ultimately, what we see emerging from sites of interpretation in the park is the move towards an interpretation that encompasses both natural and cultural history in a way that is beginning to impact legislation. Cultural landscapes, ruins, and great camp interpretation are at the forefront of these changes, but these definitions have crept into more mainstream historical experiences including museums and tours. All of the divergent and convergent narratives and stories in the Adirondacks will continue to co-exist both in peace and in conflict as contradictory strands of the region’s historical memory are driven by a variety of players.

**The Adirondack Park**

![Figure 1 – New York State map showing the location of the Adirondack Park, NYS Department of Environmental Conservation](image)

Occupying a large portion of Northern New York State, the Adirondack Park includes six million acres of public and private land that make up over 85% of all
wilderness lands east of the Mississippi River. Unique in many ways, the Adirondack Park serves as a model for sustainable living and wilderness land management. Yet, since the establishment of the park, there have been countless debates about how to best utilize or preserve the land and its distinctive character. The Adirondack Park is one of few locations where humans and nature as well as public and private lands attempt to co-exist side by side within a designated park space. As a result, various stakeholders, including year round residents, summer residents, environmentalists, tourists, and lawmakers all possess conflicting opinions about the best way to preserve or utilize the land. In what has become a class-based conflict, the struggle between preserving the land while also maintaining economically viable communities has become a prominent concern in the Adirondack Park.

When the general public first became aware of the Adirondack region, it was considered barren, but it soon became a region characterized for its beauty and recreational opportunities. Long before the Adirondack region became a popular destination, Iroquois and Algonquin Indians traveled throughout the region and hunted the land. While the West was becoming more settled, the Adirondack Mountains remained an unclaimed wilderness in the backyard of many developed urban centers in the northeast. This proximity and expanding railroad lines created an opportunity for recreational exploitation of the region. A famous 1864 New York Times editorial proclaimed, “Within an easy day’s ride from our great city…is a tract of country fit to make a Central Park of the world.”² This editorial argued that the Adirondack region was

a place to experience the scenic beauty of nature, but it was also a place in need of protection before nature was eliminated by “progress.”

While an increasing number of recreational visitors began to vacation in the region, unchecked logging and mining continued in a manner that raised concerns about the future of the region and the impact of these industries on watersheds. By 1855 three tanneries and twenty-three sawmills operated in Hamilton County alone. These ideas were debated in the legislature and it was not a surprise when the state passed legislation to create the Forest Preserve in 1885 and the Adirondack State Park in 1892. The park, which includes both state forest preserve and private lands, was originally 2.8 million acres, but it has expanded over time to encompass over 6 million acres of land. Today, the state owns about 2.7 million acres of Forest Preserve or 43% of the land, while the remaining 3 million plus acres is privately owned. There are no cities within the park, but 103 towns and villages are home to approximately 130,000 full time residents. Another 200,000 seasonal residents live in the park part time and every year an estimated seven to ten million tourists visit the park.4

The popular Adirondack vacation first became fashionable in the nineteenth century and it did not take long for the development of railroad lines and the construction of grand hotels in order to accommodate the countless individuals visiting the park. Wealthy urbanites built large camps on thousand acre private preserves and formed elite hunting and fishing clubs. Many of these wealthy urbanites employed local guides and

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depended on them to lead successful hunting and fishing trips and create a true wilderness experience. In the eyes of romantic tourists, guides assumed an almost mythical stature and their stories, mannerisms, and speech appeared to be a remnant from the past. Yet there was an awareness of difference and many sportsmen condescendingly looked down on the local woodsmen for their lack of education and refinement. At the same time, many guides resented the impact of sportsmen on the depletion of the deer population and the enforcement of hunting seasons.

The tensions that sometimes accompanied these relationships marked the beginning of an insider/outsider divide in the park and the beginning of many class based resentments that have continued to haunt the park. Many local residents found work building and staffing camps for wealthy families, and while they may have resented the

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5 Terrie, *Contested Terrain*, 53.

way wealthy outsiders had begun to inundate their home communities, they often
depended on outsiders for income. As the mining and timber industries began to decline,
this dependence became even more and more pronounced until today when tourism
sustains nearly 20% of all jobs in the Adirondacks. The historical memory of both local
guides and eager wilderness vacationers continues to shape the park and the perspective
of many who see a reflection of the present in the past.

The struggle to maintain economically viable communities for the people who
live in the Adirondacks while also preserving the wilderness character of the park has
been at the root of many conflicts and disagreements. By the late 1960s many were
concerned about the park’s future if development on private land continued unregulated.

The governor appointed the Temporary Study Commission on the Future of the
Adirondacks which soon determined that “unguided development on the 3,500,000 acres
of private land will destroy the character of the entire Park if immediate action is not
taken.” As a result, the state created the Adirondack Park Agency (APA) and
determined that it would develop the State Land Master Plan that the Department of
Environmental Conservation (DEC) was tasked with enforcing. In 1973, the newly
formed APA released the Private Land Plan, which created zoning regulations for private

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7 “Tourism Impact in the Adirondacks,” Adirondack Base Camp (blog), September 9, 2008,
http://www.adirondackbasecamp.com/2008/09/tourism-impact-adirondacks. In New York State, the
Adirondack region has the highest percentage of tourism-related jobs. In Hamilton County, the number
goes up to 40%.

8 The Adirondack Park was largely undeveloped in comparison to the rest of the state, but a series
of theme parks had just been built in the park and many feared that the Adirondacks would soon resemble
parts of Vermont that had transformed from open space into dense clusters of vacation homes. See Terrie,
Contested Terrain, 164-167.

9 Temporary Study Commission on the Future of the Adirondacks, The Future of the Adirondack
Park, Volume I, 6.
land, but it also raised the ire of year round residents of the park who felt that their interests had been ignored. Local residents strongly resented the measure because of the control it gave outsiders who appeared to value a narrow definition of nature over the livelihoods of year round residents. Yet the legislature moved forward with the plan because developers posed a legitimate threat with plans to subdivide land and build thousands of homes inside the park.

Coinciding with the second wave of the environmental movement occurring on a national scale, environmental consciousness within the park grew and environmentalists in the Adirondacks continued to express concern about development within the park. The State Land Master Plan written in 1971 made several suggestions regarding land use and road closings, but in many cases the Department of Environmental Conservation did not take action for nearly twenty years. Local rally cries for home rule only intensified with the release of a 1990 report by The Commission on the Adirondacks in the Twenty-First Century that indicated 245 recommendations to improve the Private Land Plan and secure the future of the park.

Tensions in the park reached a boiling point in a way that had not happened since Orrando Dexter, heir to the American News Company and owner of a large Adirondack

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10 One example of the anger caused by the Private Land Plan occurred at a public meeting in Indian Lake when a businessman from Long Lake attended wearing an Indian headdress, toting a spear, and proclaiming that this was, “the first government financed land grab since the Cherokees were forced to walk across the mountains.” See Terrie, Contested Terrain, 69.

11 In 1972 a developer from Arizona purchased 24,000 acres of land in the park with the intent to subdivide the land, build 10,000 homes, multiple golf courses, artificial lakes, and ski slopes. The timing of this purchase was fortuitous for the APA because this kind of project was not what most New Yorkers wanted to see in the Adirondack Park and the Private Land Plan easily passed in the legislature. See Schneider, 299.

preserve was shot and killed after prohibiting all hunting and fishing on his land in 1903. Hatred for the APA reached boiling point when many locals hurled eggs, manure, and even tried to burn down the agency’s headquarters. After the DEC lined up several boulders to close the Crane Pond road near Schroon Lake, NY in compliance with the State Land Master Plan, locals came and removed the boulders in order to continue to use the road to get to a popular fishing spot. They painted the stone with the words “Stones of Shame” and used them in demonstrations against state regulations. In September 1990 members of radical environmental group Earth First! set up tents to block off access to the road in protest of the removal of the boulders and the lack of enforcement by the DEC. The conflict escalated and received national attention when Warrensburg Town Supervisor Maynard Baker punched a member of Earth First! in the face. While some who continued to contend that the law requires the road to be closed, the DEC’s response was one of inaction.

Throughout this conflict, local Adirondackers showed that they were adept at utilizing the past to make sense of the present. During the local rallies in Ticonderoga, a city with a rich Revolutionary War history, locals indicted “King Cuomo” for denying their inalienable rights. Protesters even dressed as Revolutionary War soldiers for effect.


14 Schneider, 300.


The connection was made between the outside rule of King George III over the American colonies and the outside rule of the state over local Adirondackers. This incident illustrates just how important history can be to current conflicts as a tool to make a statement about current injustices. The underlying conflicts between insiders and outsiders in the park that escalated in the 1990s did not end with this standoff. These tensions bubble to the surface whenever there is a debate about the development of open space or the need to stimulate the local economy. Even though there are many fewer anti-APA signs throughout the park today, debates about the future of the park continue full of fervor and full of worry about the park’s future.

**Significance of the Project**

Just as local Adirondackers used history to stake their claim in the “home rule” battles of the 1990s, this dissertation uses representations of the park’s history at historic sites, museums, and preservation battles to understand the role of wilderness in the park. The romantic story of wilderness has been passed down through legislation and consistently reinforced throughout the years by land management plans as well as vacationers and visitors to the region. Yet a closer look at the history in the park reveals the existence of other stories that view wilderness in a different light. Workers created a vernacular culture that depended on the land for physical and economic survival. The storied landscape of the park that survives today reveals the human presence on wilderness lands including countless surviving great camps. This project is important not only because it showcases these three important stories, but also because it uses the

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17 Felicia Faye McMahon, “Forging ‘The Adirondacker’” *Western Folklore* 50 (July 1991): 290. This refers to Governor Mario Cuomo who was governor of New York State from 1983-1994.
public history of the park to do so. As a result, this project has built on the groundwork laid by historians who have debated the meaning of wilderness, Adirondack scholars, and public historians who have explored the impact of landscapes and museums on community identity.

**Wilderness / Environmental**

Many scholars have explored changing attitudes towards wilderness as well as changing definitions of wilderness. A good place to start is Roderick Nash’s *Wilderness and the American Mind*, a mainstay in wilderness scholarship since its publication in 1967. Nash was one of the first historians to examine wilderness and those who value it as a means to interpret American character and culture. He has traced American attitudes towards wilderness beginning with the early nineteenth century fear of wilderness then exploring the mid-nineteenth century desire to conquer the land, and finally, tracing the emergence of the idea of wilderness as a precious commodity. This narrative, while important to the history of the wilderness idea, has continued to separate the human world and the natural world and has positioned wilderness as something apart from humanity that needs protection. Additionally, federal and state wilderness legislation was based on this fictive notion that wilderness is a natural area that has not been altered by human designs.

This definition of wilderness held for many years until William Cronon ignited a fierce debate in 1995 with an article originally published in the *New York Times*. Cronon and other environmental historians had demonstrated that prehistoric and historic human

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18The term public history is being used here to describe the interpretation of the past through exhibits, films, tours, historic site management, historic preservation and other public programs.
impacts had shaped many of the lands categorized as wilderness and that wilderness was very much a social construct. With “The Trouble With Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” Cronon wanted to nurture a new conceptualization of wilderness that allowed for all of the human activity that has shaped wilderness to be included and not excluded from the definition of wilderness. He writes about the need to,

> Abandon the dualism that sees the tree in the garden as artificial—completely fallen and unnatural—and the tree in the wilderness as natural—completely pristine and wild…Our challenge is to stop thinking of such things according to a set of bipolar moral scales in which the human and non-human, the unnatural and the natural, the fallen and the unfallen, serve as our conceptual map for understanding and valuing the world. 19

Cronon advocates for a definition of wilderness that would include both nature and culture. His work put in place a full-scale redefinition of wilderness that has made a lasting impact among scholars, but that is only beginning to creep into public awareness.

The attitudes towards and definition of wilderness seen in this project are not static and while many Adirondackers still romanticize wilderness, there is a sense that William Cronon’s more inclusive definition is beginning to have an impact. For example, land management plans have been changed to accept historic ruins and fire towers to remain in wilderness landscapes. The landscapes of the Adirondacks are full of stories that do not fit the official romantic definition of wilderness that has guided the park’s preservation. These stories showcase the way natural and cultural preservation can fit together and move forward the wilderness narrative.

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Public History

Other historians have looked at the ways historical interpretation at sites of public history has been renegotiated to give new meaning in different contexts. This project owes a debt to public historians who have demonstrated how to use museum exhibits as sources or preservation battles as evidence of a larger cultural constant. Works including Kenneth Foote’s *Shadowed Ground: America’s Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy* and Edward Linenthal’s *Sacred Ground: Americans and their Battlefields* provide insights to the way certain sites are remembered and commemorated amidst turmoil surrounding their meaning. Both works describe examples of sites with multiple stories in conflict. At Little Bighorn narratives about a historic battle became a point of conflict between Indians and European-Americans attempting to reformulate their contemporary relationship. Likewise, the link between historical memory and the present is important for understanding the conflicts between seasonal and year round residents in the Adirondacks. These conflicts have historical roots and examining the way history has been interpreted will uncover a new dimension of these relationships.

It is important to consider the idea of interpretation, which drives this project. Different museums may focus on very different aspects of an era and these exhibits showcase the locality’s interpretation of the history and of what is important. Using Freeman Tilden’s definition of interpretation, this project understands that interpretation is “an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the

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21 Linenthal, 141-143.
use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.”22 While all history involves interpretation, the act of interpretation associated with the creation of exhibits and other media is different because it is dependent on the medium as well as the perceived audience. Public historians who are both professional and untrained work to create a narrative that will impact how the public views history. Utilizing the interpretation of Adirondack history as a lens allows the researcher to delve into important regional issues involving memory, official versus vernacular culture23, and the manifestation of conflicts in public life. Interpretation is key to this project and others such as Tilden have established its importance as an analytical tool and have laid the groundwork for this project.

**Adirondack Historians**

Philip Terrie has been the leading Adirondack historian since the publication of *Forever Wild: A Cultural History of Wilderness in the Adirondack Park* in 1985.24 He added layers to the political story told by Frank Graham, Jr. in *The Adirondack Park: A Political History* and provided much more analysis and nuance than Alfred Lee Donaldson’s 1921 two volume comprehensive history of the park, *A History of the***

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23 Official versus vernacular often plays out in conflicts between insiders and outsiders. In relation to historical memory, official is that which has been mandated and remembered institutionally through holidays, government sanctioned celebrations, or monuments. It often relates to the need of the state or in this case of the region to mythologize itself in a manner that builds a community supportive of the sanctioned state or regional identity. Vernacular, meanwhile, indicates the cultural mores and traditions established in local communities by ordinary citizens that bind individuals in those communities to each other.

Adirondacks. In *Forever Wild*, Terrie traces the history of wilderness thought in the park and admits that his basic premise is to provide “a study of how people have responded to the idea of wilderness in the Adirondacks.” Terrie wants to show how attitudes towards wilderness changed over the years, but his work is somewhat incomplete because he does not include the attitudes or perspective of local residents.

Terrie fills this gap with his second book published in 1997 which is entitled *Contested Terrain: A New History of Nature and People in the Adirondacks*. As much as Terrie’s first work focused on the elite, *Contested Terrain* follows the vernacular story of the park. The book looks at continuing conflicts over the land and gives a voice to both locals who work the land for a living and those who see the region primarily as a place of leisure. Throughout the book he explores how the land has been utilized since the early nineteenth century as well as what land uses are possible and desirable in the constitutionally protected state owned forest preserve in the park. Terrie continues to give local residents a voice as he moves through the creation of the park to more contemporary land use conflicts.

This dissertation builds on the cultural history in Terrie’s two Adirondack monographs and the players in the region that he established. Yet some of the situations analyzed in this work, such as debates about fire tower preservation, complicate the insider/outsider dynamic and class based struggle that Terrie illustrated. Terrie’s books are the most important Adirondack histories published to date.

The Adirondack Park has both a natural and a human history. If we can look for new strategies for telling the region’s stories, moving from narratives that polarize and exclude to ones of harmonious relations between people and nature, then the

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Adirondacks can indeed provide the first chapter in a new story for the whole world.²⁶ Yet the examination of the contemporary interpretation and public presentation of history detailed in this project complicates relationships within the park in ways Terrie does not anticipate. This project embraces and uncovers some of those new strategies that Terrie hopes to find. Stories about local museums and land management debates detailed in this project do reflect the idea that the region’s natural and human history should go hand in hand. They illustrate a growing movement towards an acceptance of both nature and culture in a way that is not adversarial, but complementary.

The goal of this work is not to write a new history of the Adirondacks, but instead to analyze how that history is shaped and presented to the public as part of an on-going dialogue between past and present, outsiders, local residents, and professional managers. Most Adirondack histories end either with the creation of the park or with the conclusion of the heated conflict in the 1990s, but what this work illustrates is that history and history making is an on-going process. What Adirondack historians have not done is consider the way history continues to impact the present and the future. For most historical narratives there is a distinct end point, but this work illustrates how history making and story telling continues and how the fluidity of the past and the present are negotiated and remembered by historians and those who consume history. Historians have not yet explored the interpretation of Adirondack history at public history institutions or analyzed how these places can help to understand the conflict within the

²⁶ Philip G. Terrie, *Contested Terrain*, xxiii.
It is vital to understand how historical memory has shaped different people in the park in order to see the roots of past and present conflicts. Regional and local museums as well as structures chosen for preservation represent the historical memories of many voices including full time residents, part time residents, and visitors. When it comes to issues like fire tower preservation, many people have an opinion and many have a stake in the outcome, which means that Adirondackers are engaging with their history and determining what is important. History is not static in the Adirondack Park and by looking at the way history has been interpreted and presented to the public, this work takes a closer look at the history making process.

**Outline of the Project**

In order to understand the region’s competing storyscapes it is important to understand how the idea of wilderness became so crucial to the park. The first chapter explains the primacy of the romantic view of wilderness to the creation of the park and the continuation of “forever wild.” It was through the debate about logging on state forest preserve land that conflicting ideas of wilderness were considered and, in the end, the ban on logging indicated the primacy of the view that wilderness was meant to remain untouched. Through legislation, the state mandated a wilderness ethic, which has remained largely in place. This chapter establishes the idea of the spiritual and romantic wilderness that underscored the reasons why the region became so popular.

The idea of wilderness as an untouched, pristine landscape sets the stage for the next narrative the Adirondacks as a storied landscape. In addition to the forested land in

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27 See Elizabeth Folwell and Amy Godine, *Adirondack Odysseys: Exploring Museums and Historic Places From the Mohawk to the St. Lawrence* (Lee, MA: Berkshire House Publishers, 1997). This publication includes details about most of the historic sites and historical societies in the park, but it serves as more of a travel guide than an analytic work.
the park, countless individuals lived within park boundaries and left their mark on the landscape. Many of these individuals worked for wealthy urbanities building the grand camps that ushered in a new architectural style, the rustic, while also vaulting the Adirondacks into the national consciousness as a recreational and vacation destination. Because the great camps are architecturally significant, they are known nationally as a symbol of the park and are popular with visitors. Preservation battles surrounding these camps have stirred up historic preservation values that have run against the State Land Master Plan and proper uses of the land as determined by the state. These preservation battles reveal competing priorities and show how different Adirondack narratives come into conflict. Chapter two explores the great camps as a nineteenth century phenomenon, but more importantly as historic sites that illustrate the close relationship between nature and culture. Many camps have been destroyed, but those that are now open to the public illustrate an important Adirondack story. Great camps, especially Great Camp Sagamore, have become new centers for environmental and historical learning. Interpretation at these sites has begun to utilize some of the new wilderness scholarship to unpack the ironies of these luxurious havens in the middle of nowhere. Great Camps add a layer to the historic landscape of the Adirondack Park and reveal the pressure from locals and others to retain this storied landscape in spite of pressure from environmental groups.

Chapter three continues to explore Adirondack storied landscapes, but moves beyond buildings to examine conflicts surrounding ruins and fire towers. Here we explore the conflict between historic and environmental preservation and the way ruins and fire towers are beginning to close the gap between the two. Many landscapes in the Adirondacks are considered wilderness, but the wilderness in the Adirondack Park has
been impacted by humans. Land management plans are just beginning to accept that the two do not occupy separate spheres. Important to this chapter are William Cronon’s ideas that wilderness should not be separate from man, that “the wilderness dualism tends to cast any use as ab-use, and thereby denies us a middle ground in which responsible use and non-use might attain some kind of balanced, sustainable relationship.”

In the Adirondacks, through the reconsideration and adaptation of land management plans, the state is beginning to accept some portions of an idea of wilderness that moves closer to the understanding advocated by William Cronon. Fire tower interpretation and summit stewards provide the public a direct way to understand a wilderness where fire towers enhance and do not detract from wilderness. Especially in the case of fire towers, a unique partnership between local friends groups and the state shows an important example of cooperation in a region often rife with conflict.

While the great camps are emblematic of the region, what stands out more than the camps themselves is the rustic style of their design. The regional identity of the Adirondacks has been formed and shaped through the rustic style commonly seen in architecture, but also in furniture. Additionally, the Adirondack chair is perhaps the most iconic and most well known image connected to the region. Chapter four examines rustic furniture both when it decorated great camps in the late nineteenth century and again during the 1970s rustic revival. Rustic furniture illustrates the relationship between the elite and the working class in the park. Local artisans were commissioned to create unique pieces for camp owners who desired natural looking furniture adapted from the simple vernacular log furniture built out of necessity by locals. The new style that

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28 Cronon, 85.
emerged was far from simple and camps were full of pieces with immense detail and ornamentation. This chapter illustrates how rustic furniture includes elements of local and regional identity. While local individuals continue a strong legacy of craftsmanship, the rustic style also represents and bolsters the regional identity of the Adirondacks.

The regional identity established in chapter four plays an important role in the following chapter, which explores the regional museums in the Adirondack Park. Looking primarily at the Adirondack Museum in Blue Mountain Lake, this chapter explores the history of the museum and the stories it has told since it opened in 1957. The pattern of exhibits and public programs at the Adirondack Museum and at the newly opened museum The Wild Center - Natural History Museum of the Adirondack reveals a move towards an environmental view of the park. At times, the Adirondack Museum omits stories that do not contribute to the rustic regional identity, but these stories are found at other museums through the park. Immediately following the regional museum chapter, Chapter Five, explores the multiple and varied local museums throughout the park. While the regional museums often neglect the vernacular story, most local museums do not link the town’s story to the regional one. Local museums display stories that are relevant and important to the local community and if there is a weak regional identity in the area, the fact that the town is physically located inside the Adirondack Park will not play a role. Environmental issues are rarely discussed at local museums, and instead topics such as work, settlers, and local businesses are the focus of most exhibits and artifacts. Many different stories converge in Adirondack museums and, even though these museums are remembering different histories, the different narratives are not mutually exclusive – they create the Adirondack identity.
This work is the result of many visits to the Adirondack Park and has its origins in my time as the public tour supervisor position at Great Camp Sagamore. Travel throughout the park has informed much of this work by exploring exhibit text, speaking with countless local historians, and even recording several oral histories with individuals involved with presenting history to the public. One thing is clear, despite the conflict resulting from disagreements about how to best utilize the land: permanent, temporary, and honorary Adirondackers love the region. Even though they may place different meanings on the landscape or remember different histories, their connection to the land is strong and unbreakable. The way history is presented to the public has not only helped to form these conflicting and diverging storyscapes, it has served to renegotiate relationships and create a place where history can both develop and complicate the story.
CHAPTER ONE

NATURE’S ASCENDANCY:

THE ROMANTIC WILDERNESS OF THE ADIRONDACK PARK

On April Fool’s Day, 1869, Adventures in the Wilderness; or, Camp-Life in the Adirondacks was released to the masses.¹ Written by Boston minister William H.H. Murray, this book soon became a best seller and it had an undeniable impact on the Adirondack region. Murray promoted outdoor recreation and, in turn, the idea that wilderness should be enjoyed by all. This book played a generative role in the large number of tourists that began to flood the region each summer after it was published. Murray framed wilderness in a romantic way, which attracted many urbanites who

¹ William H.H. Murray, Adventures in the Wilderness: or, Camp Life in the Adirondacks (Boston: Lee and Shepherd, 1869).
wanted to experience nature and take a break from city life. He popularized the wilderness vacation and set up a narrative about the region that continually attracted urban visitors to the Adirondacks. Ultimately, Murray faced much criticism after swarms of campers dubbed “Murray’s Fools” by the *Boston Daily Advertiser* hit the woods woefully under prepared, but he defended his work and the wilderness in no uncertain terms.\(^2\) According to Murray,

> Innumerable articles were written to the press, and editorials published, denying that there was any such extent of woods in the State, any such number of lakes, any such phenomenal connectional of waterways, any such possibilities of pleasure and health as the little book portrayed. But the facts of geography and the truth of nature were in it and …today there is no spot better known or more loved by those who visit them than the far-famed Adirondacks.\(^3\)

Murray may not have outwardly advocated for preservation, but the way he framed the wilderness helped to popularize romantic notions that prize wilderness for physical and spiritual health.

William Henry Harrison Murray or “Adirondack” Murray as he was later known was just one factor in the transformation of the region from a relatively unexplored spot on the map to a beloved destination for city folk seeking a wilderness experience. He crafted a story that helped initiate a romantic appreciation for the land as well as a desire for its preservation and protection. Following the publication of his book, the region became a destination for not only those who loved the romantic wilderness, but also to sportsmen who appreciated the fine hunting and fishing land in the area. Yet it is

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important to remember that when “Murray’s fools” and wealthy sportsmen began to come to the region, they were not entering virgin territory. The region was already home to a growing logging and mining industry that threatened the very spirit that attracted romantics and sportsmen to the region. It was not until these outsiders began to become familiar with and cherish the area, however, that a preservation sentiment began to take root. Preservationists were ultimately successful and the creation of the Adirondack Forest Preserve in 1885 and the subsequent creation of the Adirondack Park in 1892 were lauded as great victories. When the first legislation passed in 1885, the designation was justified in largely utilitarian terms; by the 1890s, however, romantic notions about wilderness dominated the language of preservation, a reflection of the way attitudes toward nature had grown since that fateful April 1st when “Murray’s fools” first became aware of the region’s appeal.

In addition to introducing countless individuals to the charms of the Adirondack region, “Adirondack” Murray was responsible for adding a new factor to the public perception of the Adirondack wilderness. According to Adirondack historian Philip Terrie, after Murray “one of the most important elements in the public perception of wilderness was the possibility of sudden, unalterable change, the threat of loss.” Murray may have popularized the wilderness, but by doing so he actually paved the way for changes that diminished the wilderness character of the region. An ever growing number of urbanites roamed the once lonely mountain slopes. The well-heeled of their number actually began to purchase large tracts of land in the region to create their own “vest-

pocket” wilderness preserve. Of course, these encroachments on nature paled in comparison to the perception that the lumber and mining industries were in the eyes of the urbanites “ruining” the landscape. The Hudson River originates in the Adirondacks and this river and its tributaries were vital for shipping and navigation as well as greatly impacting New York City’s municipal water supply. As long as the lumber and mining industries were stripping away the Adirondack forests, the loss of watersheds remained a very real threat.5

Sportsmen who owned private preserves and recreationalists like those who read Murray’s book supported preservation for non-utilitarian means and they comprised a growing number of individuals who appreciated the park for its aesthetics. Often influenced by artwork such as Winslow Homer’s “Two Guides,” many placed an importance on returning to a simpler time and retaining the primitive forests. Hudson River school paintings presented a mythical element of wilderness that promoted the sublime elements of wilderness.6 Rev. Murray and these artists showed wilderness as a romantic counterbalance to the rigors of city life and this is why they wanted to preserve the land for future generations. Supporters wanted to preserve the country’s remaining grand landscapes and pushed the state to in effect “buy scenery” as had been the case at Niagara Falls in 1883.7 While wilderness lovers sought to protect the Adirondacks for

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5 The dense roots of the forest hold the soil in place and prevent erosion, which in turn allows water to naturally collect. Without the trees in place there would be a risk of dangerous cycles of flooding and drought.


psychic and aesthetic reasons, they were adept enough to realize that it would be most useful to use science to construct an argument. Luckily for them, the protection of watersheds in the Adirondacks soon became a hot button issue throughout the state.

The worry about watersheds in the Adirondack region can be partially attributed to George Perkins Marsh’s 1864 work, *Man and Nature; or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action*, which had an important impact on attitudes towards nature and its destruction. Marsh wrote explicitly about the importance of forests to the viability of productive watersheds and he supported their protection for this reason. He predicted a grim situation in the future and wrote, “The earth is fast becoming an unfit home for it noblest inhabitant, and another era of equal human crime…would reduce it to such a condition of impoverished productiveness, of shatter surface, of climatic excess.”

8 Marsh issued a call to arms for contemporary citizens to become good stewards of the land for future citizens. Before Marsh’s work, the response to uncontrolled logging was largely based on aesthetic concerns, but armed with Marsh’s dire warnings of environmental catastrophe, the threat of unchecked logging on Adirondack watersheds loomed large and real.

After the New York Assembly created a State Park Commission in 1872 to explore the viability of creating a park to preserve the state’s northern timbered regions, the watershed argument continued to gain traction in the press. Even though there may have been other reasons behind the desire to preserve the Adirondack forests, the

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8 George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature; or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1864), 44. Even though Marsh wrote mostly about the now barren lands around the Mediterranean, many New Yorkers read his book and his logic became the basis of the movement to preserve the Adirondack forests. See Terrie, *Forever Wild*, 184.
watershed argument was considered the strongest to gain broad support and convince the notoriously self-interested lawmakers to pass legislation. It garnered the support of business interests who depended on these waterways for business and feared potential disruptions. A *New York Times* editorial proclaimed support for a park because of “the importance of preserving the shelter which secures the purity and volume of the streams and springs forming the feeders of so large a proportion of the water supply of the State.” Even the sporting periodical *Forest and Stream*, which was more likely to have a stake in the recreational aspects of the region, deemed the destruction of watersheds the primary reason to support protection. The publication included an editorial that insisted, “The reasons why the forests should be preserved are not sentimental, but very practical. If the Adirondacks are cleared the Hudson River will dry up; in fact, with the gradual cutting away of timber lands, it has been gradually drying up for years.”

By the 1880s the Erie Canal and the Hudson River were experiencing declining water levels and this raised the concerns of many New Yorkers who had previously read about the Adirondacks with only a passing interest. The state legislature was under pressure from business interests as well, and in 1883 the legislature voted to withdraw future sales of state owned lands in the region. The state became a buyer instead of a seller of Adirondack lands and appointed a committee to develop a proposal for the forest

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9 Terrie, *Forever Wild*, 94-95


12 “Save the Adirondacks,” *Forest and Stream*, 21 (December 13, 1883): 381.

13 Nash, 118.
preserve. In 1885 the legislature passed the Forest Preserve Law, which also mandated that all lands in the forest preserve were public and could not be sold or leased to any person or corporation. This was a great victory, but for many it was not enough because the law protected the land and not the timber. Supporters of scientific forestry advocated for watershed protection and fully believed that it was compatible with responsible sustainable logging, but, in the following years, stories of ruthless cut and run lumbermen continued to circulate. It was preservationists who refused to distinguish between the sustainable logging and destructive logging, which eventually resulted in the ethos that led to the exclusion of any logging in the Adirondack Forest Preserve.

By the 1890s the lumber industry was known as greedy, ruthless, and implicit in the destruction of nature, actions which threatened both commerce and recreation. An eleven part series of articles published in the *New York Times* in 1889 focused on irresponsible lumbermen and the inability of the Forest Commission to control their activities. Headlines ripped the lumber industry proclaiming, “Despoiling the Forests—Shameful Work Going on in Adirondacks—Everything Being Ruined by the Rapacious Lumberman.” The motive behind this series revealed a desire to protect the primeval values of the land and this became much more a priority than determining the best way to profit from the natural resources within the state forest preserve. It soon became clear that the 1885 legislation was not going to be sufficient to ensure watershed protection and, in 1892, the legislature voted to establish a park. A blue line was drawn on the map enclosing the 2.8 million acres of public and private land that comprised the Adirondack

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Much like the 1885 legislation, the creation of the park in 1892 did not prohibit logging in the forest preserve and the state remained committed to the practice of scientific forestry. There were those who continued to find all logging destructive and it was through this dispute about logging in the park that competing ideas of wilderness were debated. The debate foreshadowed debates between preservationists and conservationists that would take place in a few decades culminated by the decision to dam the Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park. In the Adirondacks, however, the conflict between the two sides was not as clearly defined and the triumph of preservationists was also seen as a reluctance to turn over control of the forest preserve whether it be to lumber barons or scientific foresters. Yet, as conservation and arguments supporting scientific forestry were growing stronger elsewhere, it was preservation that prevailed in the Adirondacks. At the New York State Constitutional Convention of 1894, the topic was up for debate when New York City attorney and delegate David McClure proposed a provision protecting the timber. It was adopted as Article VII, Section 7 of the New York State Constitution and it read: “The lands of the State, now owned and

15 At this time the state intended to eventually acquire the private land inside the park through purchases or because the owners defaulted the land because of unpaid taxes. This, of course, never happened because the state did not create a plan to acquire the lands or devote funds to the idea. See Terrie, *Forever Wild*, 102.


17 Terrie, *Forever Wild*, 104. At the time, New York State held a constitution convention approximately every twenty years.
hereafter acquired, constituting the forest preserve, as now fixed by law, shall be forever kept as wild forest lands. They shall not be leased, sold, or exchanged, nor shall the timber thereon be sold, removed, or destroyed.”¹⁸ Commonly known as the “Forever Wild” clause, this addition to the state constitution is perhaps the most important and most often quoted line from Adirondack preservation legislation. It ensured the constitutional protection of the land and everything on it and established the central narrative about what the park was and what it would be in the future.

When the amendment passed, however, most observers saw it as a temporary fix because the state had been unable to manage the lands properly. Many believed that once the state was in need of timber, it would reverse the prohibition and drop the amendment from future constitutions.¹⁹ Yet Article VII, Section 7 was never overturned and this amendment has continued to protect the Adirondack Forest Preserve in the 21st century.

One reason that this narrative remained the central narrative of the park was because many of the wealthy landowners in the Park supported the logging ban. Even though it would have made sense from a business standpoint to take full economic advantage of these public resources, they did not want to lose the wilderness character that surrounded their camps and private hunting preserves. The desire to protect wilderness for wilderness’ sake was something that became more commonly expressed once the threat to the watersheds had passed. This definition of wilderness was incompatible with

¹⁸ Article VII, Section 7, of the New York State Constitution, approved November 1894, went into effect January 1, 1895. This means that any changes to the state owned portions of the park cannot be done by the legislature or any outside agency. In order to make changes the protection of this land, an amendment to the constitution must pass through two successive sessions of the legislature and then pass a statewide public vote. Since the Constitutional Convention of 1938 Article VII, Section 7 has been known as Section XIV.

¹⁹ Terrie, Forever Wild, 106.
logging in any form and soon any human manipulation of the landscape was seen as antithetical to wilderness. Preservationists have often used science to frame these types of arguments in more concrete terms in order gain increased support. While that was the case in the Adirondacks, in spite of the reasons that the amendment passed, the fact remained that the official policy now promoted, valued, and protected wilderness.

The complete ban on logging in the Forest Preserve was still a topic debated by the time New York State called the next Constitutional Convention in 1915. Many things were different by 1915, including the state of the land within the forest preserve. The region was no longer under threat of imminent loss of watersheds or any other catastrophes. Scientific forestry had become common practice throughout the country and it was the widespread belief that harvesting selected trees would not damage the landscape. Yet the attitudes at the convention favored untrammeled nature over the unpredictability of possible exploitation no matter how conservative or wise. Preservation no longer hid behind the guise of its utilitarian benefits.

Additionally, an environmental lobby, the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks (APA), formed and worked very hard to fight against threats to the forest preserve.20 Members were mostly wealthy landowners or members of prestigious hunting clubs in the Adirondacks. In the beginning, it may have seemed that their support of the forest preserve was part of an effort to end the forest fires that were often started in the debris left behind by loggers, but it soon became clear that a true preservationist ethos had emerged that valued the sanctity of nature. Even though the

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personal fortunes of many APA members depended on an exploitative mentality, many “came to identify naked commercialism as the enemy of nature and of [their] personal, spiritual relationship with that small piece of nature.”

Ultimately, there have been challenges to the forest preserve over the years, but none have seriously threatened the “forever wild” status of the forest preserve lands. By the early twentieth century, wilderness moved people in way it did not in the nineteenth century and the wilderness narrative continued to speak to the increasing number of people who came to the park. “Forever Wild” became a popular catchphrase within the park and the rallying cry whenever opponents attempted to amend the constitution.

Yet opponents to “forever wild” never disappeared and the ability to maintain the wilderness character of the park has proven difficult given the nature of the park, which includes both public and private lands. Even though forestry was prohibited at the state level, the logging of private land within the park continued. The narrative of the lumber industry in the Adirondacks has been one of decline, but advocates of scientific forestry continue to provide a counter narrative for all who will listen. This alternative story told in the language of science and business efficiency has continued to exist alongside the romantic ideals set forth in the forest preserve. It is often debated when communities struggling with unemployment and lack of funds look for solutions to generate revenue. In order to raise public awareness of this counter narrative, the Northeastern Loggers Association has made their argument easily accessible to the public at the Forest

21 Ibid., 271. Most APA members were wealthy men who owned large camps in the Adirondacks or who were members of private hunting clubs. Of the organization’s twenty-eight trustees in 1912 only one, Dr. Edward Trudeau, lived in the Adirondack Park. Members included Alfred Vanderbilt, William Rockefeller, J. Pierpont Morgan, Harry Whitney, and many others who made their fortune through the capitalist system. See Terrie, “Forever Wild Forever,” 258-259.
Industries Exhibit Hall in Old Forge, NY. Conveniently located down the street from the popular attraction Enchanted Forest Water Safari, the “exhibit hall” appeals to the sensibilities of recreationalists with a utilitarian mindset. Prominently displayed near the entrance is a cross section of a tree with a label that reads, “This tree was 329 years old and 40 inches in diameter when it was cut. Under intensive forest management a tree this size can be grown in 80 years.”

By framing scientific forestry as common sense, the Northeastern Logger’s Association looks to appeal to residents who yearn for more economic opportunities and visitors seeking better and more fulfilling recreational experiences. Two prominent dioramas labeled “Forest Recreation: All of these Activities are Prohibited in the Forest Preserve” and “Wildlife Management: ‘Chainsaws are a Deer’s Best Friend,’” aim to argue that with the utilization of scientific forestry, the current forest preserve could be more appealing to recreationists and wildlife. They argue that the forest management they propose would lead to a more lush forest and a more beautiful setting. The loggers have realized that in order to garner support they also need to utilize the language and the idea of romantic wilderness, but in this case they used these ideas in an attempt to gain support for controlled logging. In a list comparing the advantages and disadvantages between forest preserves and intelligently managed forests, one notable bullet point says that forest preserves “provide dreary monotonous scenery eventually comprised only of

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22 Forest Industries Exhibit Hall, Old Forge, NY. Visited September 8, 2010.
species like beech and hemlock that can reproduce themselves in dense shade.”

The Northeastern Logger’s Association attempts to align logging with beautiful scenery thereby appropriating one of the wilderness supporter’s strongest arguments and demonstrating that logging is not in conflict with love of nature. Certainly these exhibits provide the public with an alternative story and another voice that differs from the dominant narrative.

In the end, it was the ideal of a spiritual and romantic wilderness that was enshrined in the state constitution. It was the very same wilderness that “Adirondack” Murray beckoned the masses to visit in 1869. In the state’s legislation, the romantic wilderness beat out the utilitarian wilderness and these primeval and sublime qualities of wilderness that were promoted during park authorization have continued to influence life and identity within the park. The image of wilderness as an untouched primitive

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landscape has continued to impact state legislation and decision making about land use and possible amendments to the constitution. These ideas about wilderness promulgated by the romantics have remained strong, but it is not the only story that exists in the Adirondacks. Certainly the ideas promulgated by the timber industry are another, and after taking a closer look at the park, many more different stories emerge from the wilderness that move beyond a singularly romantic vision of it. The image of wilderness in the Adirondacks is in flux today as it has been ever since the time of Adirondack Murray and, while it is important to remember the ideas behind the park’s preservation, the stories told about this remote and beautiful part of New York state have changed over time. The narratives that flow from the Great camps of the Gilded Age elite, the hiking trails and campgrounds of vacationers, the museums and visitor centers of professional public historians, and the communities of long-time Adirondack residents present stories that both complicate and enhance the romantic vision.

24 Over 2,000 amendments regarding the use or purchase of forest preserve land have been introduced in the legislature, but only twenty-eight have made it to the ballot and only twenty have passed.
CHAPTER TWO

WHITE ELEPHANTS NO MORE:
THE PRESERVATION AND REUSE OF ADIRONDACK GREAT CAMPS

When William West Durant sold the last of Adirondack Empire in 1904, he left the region broke, defeated, and further in debt to his many creditors. The once successful Durant overspent his resources and mismanaged the large estate left by his railroad executive father. He had spent the previous years expanding Adirondack railways and building large camps that catered to the tastes of the region’s wealthiest visitors. These camps, later known as great camps, were large compounds owned by wealthy urbanites and used for vacationing in a remote natural setting. Many camp owners were the same individuals who had supported wilderness preservation. Durant’s financial problems foreshadowed some of the same problems his camps would face during the second half of the twentieth century when uncertain camp succession threatened their very existence.

Building these camps turned out to be a financial drain for Durant and keeping up with large maintenance costs would signify the end for future owners. These rustic camps spared no expense; the rustic architecture and seeming simplicity merely masked amenities and technology good enough for even the finest New York City home. Yet the very camps that broke him financially made William West Durant one of the most influential characters in Adirondack history. After spending his later life working for former employees, Durant could have had no idea the extent of the architectural and
cultural legacy he would leave behind. He would have had no idea that over one hundred years later Raquette Lake, NY annually celebrates Durant Days and he certainly would not have conceived the way his name is continually emphasized to the nearly 15,000 annual visitors to Sagamore, the great camp he built in 1897.

Durant was just one of several great camp builders, but he built what most consider to be the first great camp. Camp Pine Knot on the shores of Raquette Lake was built over a period of thirteen years beginning in 1877. According to early Adirondack historian Alfred Lee Donaldson, “Before it was built there was nothing like it; since then, despite infinite variations, there has been nothing essentially different from it.”¹ When Durant and his contemporaries built these camps, they were purchased and commissioned by prominent families including the Morgans, Garvans, Rockefellers, and Vanderbilts. The legacy of these camps is varied. Once seen as solely a playground for the rich, the definition of great camps has expanded to consider the camps also as the workplaces of many skilled craftsmen and the homes of many hard working year round residents. More recently, these camps have been the focus of fierce preservation battles and, in the present-day, they serve as historic sites and venues that attract visitors to the Adirondacks. A true understanding of the meaning and legacy of great camps to the Adirondack Park includes both their original use and the current adaptive reuses. Despite a pervading perception that great camps were only bastions for the rich, camps that currently provide public access move beyond lifestyles of the rich and famous and interpret other important parts of great camp history including local Adirondack artisans, class divisions, historic preservation, and changing attitudes toward nature. Camps today

illustrate the storied landscape of the park and present the multiple stories of vacationers, summer residents, and those who call the park home. Great camp interpretation represents a practical example of the way history is used to complicate and yet enhance our understanding of changing relationships between humans and nature in the Adirondack Park.

**What is a Great Camp?**

**Entrance into Public Discourse**

The term ‘great camp’ is a recent one and was not part of public discourse until nearly a century after the construction of Camp Pine Knot. In June 1978 the Preservation League of New York released a document entitled “Research Report on The Great Camps of the Adirondacks.”\(^2\) This report, which examined the current status of these camps, was likely the first public use of the term ‘great camp’ to distinguish the large Adirondack camp from other types of architecture within the Park. Additionally, in 1978 architectural historian Harvey Kaiser began research for his 1982 work, *Great Camps of the Adirondacks*\(^3\), which unequivocally embraced the term ‘great camp’ and brought it to a larger audience.

The term ‘great camp’ was not without detractors, but it has become a common part of the Adirondack lexicon for the past quarter of a century. Craig Gilborn, former director of the Adirondack Museum and author of the 1998 work *Adirondack Camps: Homes Away from Home, 1850-1950* expressed his objections to the term ‘great camp.’

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\(^3\) Harvey H. Kaiser, *Great Camps of the Adirondacks* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1982).
In his work, he utilized terms such as decorous camp, trophy camp, and prodigy camp believing that the term ‘great’ “is self validating, and so, being incapable of discriminating one great camp from another, shuts off analysis before it can get started.”

At the same time, however, he realized that ‘great camp’ had already infiltrated the vocabulary of architectural historians and was useful as a common point for the public and legislators to begin discussion about the importance of historic preservation. Gilborn believed that, at the very least, an appearance of a single category of camps was useful for camp preservation advocates and certainly a great camp was worth saving.

**Defining a ‘Great Camp’**

There are many types of camps and resorts in the Adirondacks and a great camp is just one example of the variety of structures. Adirondack historians have not always agreed on what constitutes a great camp, but for the purposes of this project, the definition will come from Wesley’s Haynes’ *Adirondack Camp Theme Study* for the National Register of Historic Places. Haynes writes, “The Adirondack camp is characterized by highly organized, multiple building compounds with built features that were constructed using stylized adaptations of regional forms and natural materials.”

Haynes recognized that ‘great camp’ had become a more recent term to describe these large camps built between 1877 and 1949, but he used the term Adirondack camp

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because this was the widely recognized term used from the 1890s through the twentieth century.

According to Haynes, three major characteristics constitute the Adirondack camp and differentiate it from other types of American resort architecture. Firstly, the camp has a compound plan and utilizes different buildings for different functions. This forced visitors to experience the outdoors when moving about the camp and freed individuals from the constraints imposed by the interior circulation typical of a home. Yet the layout of the camp necessitated a closer relationship with nature than the home and the urban spaces where most camp owners lived. The second characteristic is the integration of the buildings with the natural elements of the site. Builders would take into account scenic views as well as the location of water and tree filled lands. This building arrangement valued the natural features of the landscape and tried to preserve beautiful vistas similar to those that camp owners would have viewed in the work of painters from the Hudson River School. The final characteristic of great camps is a rustic aesthetic. The camps used building materials indigenous to the local area and utilized these materials in a rough or semi natural state to achieve the rustic look. Rusticity was both a structural and decorative force behind the construction of these camps.  

Great camp owners were wealthy families who utilized the camp for six to eight weeks per year. Wilderness camps became very popular by the beginning of the twentieth century as cities were becoming more crowded and dirty. After the Adirondacks became known for the tuberculosis fresh air cure, many Americans were

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6 See Haynes, 14-19.
inspired to vacation in the mountains and hoped to travel to the area for a summer respite from the unclean air and haze industry had brought to city life. A desire for the strenuous life also arose from the lack of “masculine” activities in the cities and worry about the feminization of men brought on by the fancy dress and fine dining central to city life. Camps were most commonly located on a body of water, which provided numerous opportunities for fresh air outdoor recreation such as boating, fishing, and swimming. Even though the camps were rarely occupied, a caretaker and other staff lived and worked at the camp year round in order to maintain the camp and prepare for the owner’s arrival every year during summer. There were over one hundred similar camps in the park. Many camps also incorporated farms, water systems, power plants, and other facilities to create a self-sufficient enclave in the wilderness. One cannot underestimate the role of the support staff, which generally increased during the summer months and was essential to the smooth operation of the camp.

National Importance

Great camps are historically significant on a national level both culturally and architecturally. This has been institutionally recognized by the inclusion of four great camps as National Landmarks and numerous others on the National Register through a multiple property listing entitled the “Adirondack Camps National Historic Landmarks

7 In 1873, Dr. Edward Livingston Trudeau arrived in the Adirondacks and in 1885 he established the Adirondack Cottage Sanitorium for tuberculosis patients in Saranac Lake. Trudeau himself suffered from the disease and he found relief in the fresh air of the Adirondack Mountains so he devoted the rest of his life to helping victims of the disease. See Philip Terrie, *Contested Terrain: A New History of Nature and People in the Adirondacks* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 65.
Theme Study." While these camps do hold an important cultural significance for both the owners and the workers, the focus of the nominations and the most nationally recognized aspect of these camps was the architecture. Just decades after a distinct style of rustic decorative arts and architecture originated in the Adirondack Park, these rustic characteristics appeared nationwide. Architectural historian Wesley Haynes, who authored the nomination, argued that “[i]n its rustic use of indigenous materials and low-impact methods of site integration, the Adirondack camp served as the prototype for what was to become the accepted standard of federal resort development in national parks.”

In 1916, the newly formed National Park Service incorporated rustic characteristics into the design of many lodges and camps. Yellowstone National Park’s Old Faithful Inn, Glacier, Grand Canyon, and Yosemite national parks all boasted rustic styled accommodations, signs, bridges, and gateways. The characteristics of rustic architecture fit with the goals of the National Park Service by harmonizing the built environment with the natural one. Even into the 1930’s architects for the National Park Service named Augustus Shepherd’s 1931 work about Adirondack camps entitled *Camps in the Woods* an important resource. Shepard, himself an architect of several great camps, wrote about the evolution of the Adirondack style and reinforced this style as the architecture of choice for natural areas.

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8 Sagamore and Sanatoni were granted National Historic Landmark status in 2000 while Pine Knot was included in 2006 and most recently Uncas in 2008.

9 Haynes, 2.

William West Durant and the Development of Adirondack Camps

While many carried on the tradition, the true pioneer in the development of the great camp was William West Durant. He was responsible for opening the central Adirondacks to tourists and creating transportation routes to make his camps accessible. Educated in Europe, Durant went to the Adirondacks as a young man at the request of his father, Thomas Clark Durant, a railroad magnate who developed the railway that ran from Saratoga to North Creek.11 William West Durant designed prototypical great camps in the Raquette Lake area that were emulated by others in the region. Adirondack historian Alfred Lee Donaldson described Durant’s influence by writing, “He was the first to ask his friends to travel north by train and then by sleigh over forty miles of snow and ice for the novelty of eating Christmas dinner in the wilderness. He was, in short, the first to inaugurate many things which had never been dreamed of in the Adirondacks before.”12

Durant’s Adirondack endeavors ushered in an era of recreation that entirely changed the Park. Great camps played an active role in the development of the Adirondack Park and they remain a physical testament to what the Adirondacks became in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Before the influx of visitors to the region inspired by William H. H. “Adirondack” Murray’s 1869 publication Adventures in

11 Thomas Clark Durant is perhaps most well known for his role as vice president of the Union Pacific Railroad. He was a Union Pacific executive when it met the Central Pacific Railroad in Promontory Summit in 1869.

the Wilderness, few knew the Adirondack area. During the years following Murray’s publication, many began to revere the Adirondacks for the natural setting, but attitudes viewing nature as an exploitable resource did not entirely disappear. Seven years after “Murray’s Fools” commenced woefully unprepared camping trips, William West Durant entered the region and had big plans for its development. In 1886 he told the New York Daily Tribune, “I firmly believe, that the Adirondacks are the resort of the future.”\textsuperscript{13} Durant, however, embraced the idea of nature and his Adirondack developments included a wilderness aesthetic that appealed to wealthy urbanites seeking nature and solace.

As more industry, visitors, and sportsmen came to the Adirondacks, many felt that the natural character of the region could be lost if unrestricted development and logging continued. This fear had an impact on the legislation creating the park and by 1885 New York State was no longer a seller of land within the Adirondack Mountain region. Many

wealthy individuals, however, had precipitated this move and purchased large tracts of land to create their own private preserves. By 1904, one third of the privately owned land in the park was part of these preserves. For example, railroad magnate Dr. William Seward Webb once owned 188,000 acres of Adirondack forest. Although he only kept a portion of that acreage, which he named Nehsane Park, he built a large lodge for his family and friends to commune in the summer months.

It became fashionable for the upper crust to purchase large land tracts and commission the construction of large camps in order to vacation in the wilderness during the summers. Durant designed his camps in a way that was able to tap into an appetite for nature that began with the urban park movement. According to Durant biographer Craig Gilborn, rustic materials “to the eyes of a newly transplanted cosmopolitan like Durant, [were] rich with suggestive power to charm men and women accustomed to parlors and counting rooms in the city.” While the architecture copied nature and the remote setting provided visitors with an opportunity to experience wild nature, Durant realized that certain amenities were necessary to attract visitors. Durant brought civilization to the wilderness in order for visitors to feel close to nature without forgoing creature comforts. Ironically, these Adirondack getaways had all of the newest technology. The Prospect House in Blue Mountain Lake was the first hotel in the world

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15 Gilborn, *Adirondack Camps*, 90. Webb earned money through Adirondack railroad development, but most of his assets were the result of his marriage to Lila Vanderbilt, granddaughter of “The Commodore” Cornelius Vanderbilt.

with an electric light in every guest room.17 Wires providing electricity were buried in order to maintain a natural appearance. Even after automobiles were the standard mode of transportation, they were often hidden at camp in favor of the horse and carriage. These anti-modern impulses were common at Adirondack camps and played a role in the general desire to become closer to nature.

Great camps represented the physical evidence of the reverence for nature that became increasingly common in the late nineteenth century and herein rests Durant’s legacy. The architecture of Great camps emulated the wilderness and most camps used materials from the surrounding forests such as spruce and cedar logs, bark, twigs, and even local quarried stones. This was done partially as a result of price and convenience, but mostly because of an aesthetic choice. The desire to blend camp structures into wilderness revealed a desire to attain harmony with nature even though trees were cleared, roads were created, and water levels were manipulated in order to install infrastructure, erect camp buildings, and create the most attractive setting possible. These ironies underscore the sense that nature was not just revered, it was also consumed. Wilderness became a commodity.

Great camp building boomed all over the park and Durant’s use of the Swiss chalet, knotty wood paneling, bark covered exteriors, and half log construction influenced many local architects and builders. In the Saranac Lake area, architect William Coulter and his protégé William Distin designed many rustic camps that utilized much of the innovation and styling common to Durant’s camps. While not every lavish camp was rustically styled, camp builders and architects owed much to Durant’s innovations.

17 Terrie, Contested Terrain, 67.
Durant himself was only a player in the region until 1904, but he succeeded in developing the Central Adirondacks. By the time Durant went bankrupt, the prestigious families of Collis P. Huntington, J.P. Morgan, and Alfred Vanderbilt owned his three grandest camps. Visiting and owning an Adirondack camp remained popular through the first half of the twentieth century. Even President Calvin Coolidge chose to reside in an Adirondack camp during one summer of his presidency. As the Adirondack vacation became more popular and more democratic, great camps remained a prominent symbol of wealth and prestige in the region.

Ultimately, however, the popularity of great camps declined. Soon airplanes facilitated an ease of international travel that became increasingly popular. In addition, the expense required to maintain a great camp became diminishing returns for many owners. As a result, great camp construction drew to a close. While Pine Knot is recognized as the first great camp, most historians consider the 1949 construction of Camp Minnowbrook on Blue Mountain Lake the end of the great camp era.\(^{18}\) Although the great camp lifestyle was ultimately unsustainable, the aesthetic remained in the art and architecture of the physical camp structures.

The journey of most great camps has followed a similar trajectory. Built for wealthy families around the turn of the century, camps were utilized as summer retreats until newer modes of vacationing became more popular. Camps became increasingly expensive to maintain and difficult to sell. Beginning during the Depression and continuing through the 1970’s, camps changed hands more frequently. As the original camp owners passed on, successive generations lost interest and either donated the camp

\(^{18}\) Kaiser, 165.
to organizations in need or sought outside parties to purchase the camp. Oftentimes, the state was the only interested buyer, which put the future of many camps in jeopardy.

**Preserving the Great Camps**

In the late 1970’s many of these camps were at risk of deterioration or wholesale destruction, a risk that spurred Harvey Kaiser to write his book about great camps. Kaiser made no bones about the fact that he hoped to “inspire action to propose a public policy for preserving the great camps that still remain.”19 Because many of these camps were at risk when he was researching the book in the late 1970’s, this issue was a timely and important one for Kaiser. At this, time many of the families who had owned these camps since their construction were deciding the expense of building maintenance was too great. Their grandchildren did not have the same interest in these structures as the original owners. Some tried to find private buyers, but others donated the camps to the state. Additionally, the state began to acquire land that was once owned as part of large family preserves. This land often contained camps and other buildings whose preservation was immediately threatened once in state hands.

These acquisitions left the state in a bind because the state constitution did not allow for the preservation of historic buildings in the forest preserve. Moreover, it explicitly necessitated the removal of such structures. Added in 1894, Article XIV of the state constitution, the “forever wild” clause, banned nonconforming structures on state land inside the Adirondack Park. It mandates that “any building on lands acquired by the

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19 Ibid., xii.
state must be destroyed.”20 State lands needed for administrative or management purposes would be excepted, but environmental groups serve as watchdogs to ensure no loopholes exist. Furthermore, this clause dictates that forest preserve land cannot be sold. Ignoring this legislation has been cause for legal action and environmental groups oppose any attempts to change or amend the clause. A constitutional amendment is necessary to exchange title to the land and this is a very lengthy and involved process. Once the state assumed ownership of land containing great camps, a new precedent was necessary if preservation was going to be a feasible option. The state was not eager to destroy great camps, but even without the restrictions in the constitution, the state did not have the resources to maintain an entire great camp. This clause places natural preservation and historic preservation in direct opposition to one another and has greatly impacted the future of many Adirondack great camps.

The increasing attention given to great camp preservation went hand in hand with the rise of the historic and environmental preservation movements in the United States. By the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, both cultural and environmental preservation was a hot topic ushered in by a growing awareness of pollution and expanding commercial and residential spaces that threatened forested land. An increased appreciation for history was partially inspired by United States bicentennial celebrations. While the goals of each movement have been in opposition from time to time, an overarching desire to curb disposable attitudes and, instead, motivate the public to support preservation was the result of both efforts. The passage of the National Wilderness Act in 1964 and the National Preservation Act in 1966 lit a fire under many non-profit groups and

preservation efforts began to increase on a national as well as local level. This rising tide of support contributed to the creation of the Preservation League of New York State in 1974, which tackled the preservation of Great Camp Sagamore as their initial project.

Historic preservationists lauded the national and regional importance of great camps and in 1980 were afforded a great victory when Governor Mario Cuomo passed the New York State Historic Preservation Act. This act ensured that the state would survey future forest preserve purchases for potential historic resources. While this could potentially protect future great camps purchased by the state, it did not immediately garner more support for the current camps owned by the state.21 The struggle to preserve great camps continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s as the public became more aware of the historic importance of such camps and the preservation perils they faced. From Sagamore to Camp Santanoni, which was finally deemed safe from destruction in 2000, great camp preservation garnered support for camps now seen as much more than disposable toys of the Gilded Age aristocracy.

**Sagamore**

Many trace the beginning of great camp preservation to Sagamore, a camp that has thrived since it first faced an uncertain future in the mid 1970’s. According to Craig Gilborn, an ”awareness that the camps were vulnerable came late, in 1975, when Syracuse University announced it was selling Sagamore Lodge, both the camp and farm buildings, and a preserve of some 1,500 acres of forest land.”22 Most of the crises and

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uncertainty involving great camp preservation have been rooted in the transition of the
camp’s ownership from private hands to state hands. Private owners have some leeway
in how they choose to utilize their land and the buildings on it, but the state must comply
with Article XIV of the State Constitution. Some great camps on state land have been
demolished and others have suffered from deterioration, but a few camps, including
Sagamore, have forged a new solution to ensure the camp’s survival and preservation.
The preservation of Sagamore has occurred in different phases with different solutions,
but preservation has been the end result in each case.

The camp was initially built in 1897 by developer William West Durant who
focused his development efforts in the Raquette Lake area. He purchased 40,000 acres
south of Raquette Lake and first built Camp Uncas on small Mohegan Lake. On a
similarly sized lake about three miles away, he built his grandest camp, Sagamore. After
facing financial problems, Durant sold the camp to Alfred Vanderbilt in 1901. After
Vanderbilt tragically died on the Lusitania in 1915, his widow Margaret Emerson utilized
and expanded the camp until the 1950s.

Eventually in the 1950’s, Margaret Emerson found herself using the camp less
and less. She had a home in Hawaii and the loss of trees from the Blowdown of 1950
changed the property so much she could barely stand to visit again. Her children did not
want to take over Sagamore so she donated it to Syracuse University who had a presence
in the area and already owned two great camps. Syracuse used the camp for
approximately twenty years as a conference and retreat center. However, in the 1970’s
many colleges and universities experienced financial problems and Syracuse University
was no exception. Selling their Adirondack holdings was one solution to these financial problems and the university sold Sagamore as well as Camp Pinebrook on Upper Saranac Lake in favor of retaining the smaller scale Camp Minnowbrook on Blue Mountain Lake.

The state was immediately interested in the purchase and possessed the necessary funds from a 1972 Environmental Bond Act that allocated $44 million towards the acquisition of Adirondack lands. Both Syracuse and the state did recognize, however, that such a sale would result in the demolition of Sagamore’s buildings, which was something that neither was eager to have happen. Norman VanValkenburgh, superintendent of land acquisitions with the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), commented, “If we acquired the buildings, they would have become part of the forest preserve and therefore could not continue to exist.” It was very unlikely that demolition would have occurred immediately, but the state would not have maintained the buildings and they would be subject to decay and vandals. As a result, a clause to the sale allowed the state a thirty day option to find a third party buyer for the approximately eight acres that contained the main buildings. The option ran out at the end of October.


24 The Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and the Adirondack Park Agency (APA) are in charge of administering policy in the Park. The APA is charged with the development and subsequent adaptations to the State Land Master plan while the DEC is charged with the on the ground enforcement.

25 Ibid., 45.

26 New York State did buy 1517 acres from Syracuse University for a price of $550,000, which was $100,000 less than the asking price. The state then sought a buyer to purchase the six acres with buildings for $100,000.
In 1975 and the newly formed Preservation League of New York State, a non-profit organization actively promoting historic preservation in the state, eagerly sought a buyer.

In a coup for historic preservationists, a buyer did come forward and the buildings were saved from a future of deterioration, decay, and, most likely, demolition. There were several conditions for this sale, however, that were added to the camp’s deed. Some of the major provisions included an agreement to maintain Sagamore in good condition, make no major architectural changes, and provide some level of public access. In addition, the deed stipulated that the price of any future resale of the property must not be more than the purchase price of $100,000 plus the value of subsequent property improvements.27 The winning bidder, a non-profit organization specializing in teacher training called the National Humanistic Education Center, purchased the camp as a site for offices, workshop, and seminars.28 Directors Barbara Glaser and Howard Kirschenbaum had been in search of a new conference site for their organization and were thrilled to find Sagamore. By November 1, 1975 the closing took place with the Preservation League first taking the camp’s title and then reselling the camp with the preservation restrictions to the National Humanistic Education Center.

Beginning in the summer of 1977 the Education Center took over the camp and soon changed their name to the Sagamore Institute. Residential and educational programs began immediately that summer and, according to Kirschenbaum, “Sagamore Institute quickly became a leading organization for interpreting and advocating the


28 There were only two bidders, the other being a private hunting group.
preservation of the Adirondack Great Camps and for conducting tours of some of the major camps throughout the year.”29 The preservation of Sagamore brought public attention to Adirondack great camps, their influential architectural style, and the uncertain future many camps faced. This attention coincided with a revival of interest in rustic arts and crafts and the beginning of the Adirondack Museum’s rustic fair, to which many attribute a renewed interest and market for rustic furniture that has only increased in the past quarter century.30

Sagamore was a great example of a success story for preservationists, but the possibility of finding a third party buyer to restore and interpret other great camps in order to prevent state ownership would be difficult and was not the guarantee historic preservationists hoped to attain. This was not a viable permanent preservation solution and Sagamore was an exception because the buyers had considerable financial resources at their disposal. Not only would a third party buyer have to have strong financial backing, it would take considerable commitment to implement a preservation ideology that would provide longevity to the camp. While wealthy donors have proved invaluable to great camp preservation, it is a risk to balance the future of a camp on the possibility of finding a devoted donor. It would be prudent to find another solution beginning at the policy level that would allow and implement preservation measures at a state level. A new precedent for the treatment of historic resources within the forest preserve was essential to avoid the future loss of other great camps.

29 Kirschenbaum, 50.

30 This information was gathered from labels gracing the rustic exhibit at the Lake Placid History Museum and the rustic furniture exhibit at the Adirondack Museum.
While the Sagamore Institute continued to successfully preserve and operate the camp, some of Sagamore’s out buildings remained at risk. The initial eight acre purchase did not include the caretaking complex, which was separated from the main buildings by a half-mile. Since those buildings were now in state hands, their destruction was imminent and the state had begun to solicit bids to dismantle some of them.\(^\text{31}\) With the rush to save Sagamore in 1975, there was not time to renegotiate with the state to include the service buildings. The state had drawn a tight boundary around the main buildings that was consistent with state policy to limit private in-holdings within the forest preserve. They assumed the added buildings would further burden the new owners since most were in poor repair and the common farm buildings did not have the same architectural significance as the main camp.

Nevertheless, this logic was flawed in two ways, which illustrate the state’s lack of foresight and vision when dealing with historic resources. First of all, the service buildings were essential to the maintenance of the camp when occupied by Durant and the Vanderbilts and the same practical concerns faced the Sagamore Institute in the 1970s. Secondly, the destruction of the service buildings would erase the physical history of the camp’s workers and prevent future interpretation of gilded age class structures. New trends in historical scholarship mandated that history did not lay solely with the rich and famous and the existence of the self-sufficient worker’s complex was an

\(^{31}\) Kirschenbaum, 56.
integral part of great camp history. Furthermore, these buildings were essential to the history of craftsmanship and Adirondack workers that built and operated the region’s large camps.

Figure 6 - The worker's complex at Sagamore, Raquette Lake, NY, 2006

With the desire to save the services buildings on the minds of many, the next step was developing a strategy to ensure their preservation. Howard Kirschenbaum, Sagamore’s executive director, decided to draft an amendment to Article XIV of the state constitution to create an exception to save Sagamore’s service complex. The amendment involved a land exchange where the Sagamore Institute would trade 200 acres of forestlands elsewhere in the park for the ten acres containing the service buildings. Buoyed by efforts from the Preservation League, the amendment went through two sessions of the state legislature in spring of 1982 and 1983 and passed almost unanimously. From there, passage of the amendment required a public vote set for November 8, 1983. The Sagamore Institute had to figure out how to rally New York

32 Great Camps were often self-sufficient villages and had buildings to serve all needs because of the remote location of most camps. Additionally, all of the rustic craftsmanship so vital to Great Camps was developed and built in these buildings.
State residents behind the cause of eleven farm buildings as well as tackle the opposition that arose.\textsuperscript{33}

The Coalition to Save Sagamore, which was made up of over seventy historic and environmental groups, worked to ensure the public passage of the ballot proposing the amendment to Article XIV. The coalition argued that the workers’ buildings were integral to the story and maintenance of Sagamore. Howard Kirschenbaum made the case for preservation and publicly stated, “Generations of local families lived and worked in these buildings. They created the crafts which became synonymous with Adirondack regional culture.”\textsuperscript{34} In an opinion piece published in several Adirondack newspapers including \textit{The Lake Placid News} and \textit{Adirondack Daily Enterprise}, Assemblyman Anthony Casale utilized similar language when he urged voters to support the buildings that “housed generations of hardworking Adirondack families who maintained the camp and developed regional crafts.”\textsuperscript{35} Those trying to garner support for the amendment created a vernacular storyscape to which they consistently tied the buildings to local history and local families and made it very clear that workers and not the patrons of Gilded Age excess occupied the buildings in question. Those expressing support for the amendment also emphasized the educational mission of the Sagamore Institute and benefit for future generations of Adirondackers. A \textit{New York Times} staff editorial supporting the amendment added, “The Sagamore Institute has already proved they can

\textsuperscript{33} Schneider, 278-279.


put the buildings to good use.”36 Supporters of the amendment held several press conferences and information sessions to inform voters about the amendment. In addition to canvassing, the Coalition to Save Sagamore conducted a very visible campaign with numerous flyers, stickers, and signs all geared towards a yes vote for the proposal.

![Figure 7 - A poster used to garner support for the 1983 amendment. It is now on display in Sagamore's barn, Raquette Lake, NY, 2010](image)

Opponents to the amendment included environmental groups such as the Sierra Club, several members of the Adirondack Park Agency, and the editorial departments of several local newspapers. All of the opposition presented similar arguments and urged voters to vote against “a particularly onerous piece of special interest legislation.”37 The


Sierra Club publicly opposed the amendment because it feared it would weaken the constitutional protection of the forest preserve and set a precedent that would encourage future exceptions. Sierra Club state chairwoman Pam Woywod expressed her group’s position and argued, “We felt that the entire Preserve should be consolidated and owned by the state. Trading off land doesn’t answer the question of creating the natural boundaries of the Preserve.” 38 They argued that the amendment was a piecemeal solution to a larger problem and that the amendment amounted to special interest legislation since there was not any allowance for other state owned historic properties. 39 These critics believed a constitutional amendment was unnecessary to save the buildings and likened it to “using an atom bomb to dig a basement”. 40

Other opponents accused the Sagamore Institute of utilizing misleading literature and questionable rhetoric. Common signage supporting the amendment appeared with the words “Save Sagamore” above an image of Sagamore’s Main Lodge, which was already saved and not in danger of destruction. 41 Print on the back of the flyer does mention that it is the eleven outbuildings and not the main lodge in danger. However, more than one staff editorial in the Adirondack Daily Enterprise accused amendment backers of dishonesty and misleading the public by utilizing the image of the Main


40 “More Than is Needed,” Lake Placid News, October 27, 1983, 4. Opponents also argued that the preservation of Sagamore’s outbuildings did not need an amendment because they would be covered under a preservation law signed by Governor Cuomo in June 1983. However, this law forbids the state to purchase land with historic buildings from that point on, but it did not guarantee protection for prior purchases.

41 The campaign likely used the image of the main lodge because it is the recognizable image of Great Camp Sagamore and it would allow voters to easily relate the amendment to Sagamore.
Lodge. Yet they did not mention the additional signage Sagamore used that included an artist’s rendering of the main lodge surrounded by the service buildings. The main lodge is the public face of Sagamore and therefore is consistently used in all press and publications about the camp.

In addition to the arguments mentioned above, Adirondack Park Agency chairman Theodore Ruzow also contended that the structures were not worthy of being saved. He classifies great camps as “monuments to conspicuous consumption…[that] memorialize an era when those with more wealth than they could manage built palaces in the bush from which to maintain a feudal ‘lord of the manor’ lifestyle over the local citizenry.”42 Sagamore director Howie Kirschenbaum responded to this by re-emphasizing the function of the buildings in question and linking the caretaking buildings as a place where “hardworking local families lived and worked and produced important regional crafts.”43 But what he did not mention was the valuable lessons apparent in interpreting structures that many do see as “monuments to conspicuous consumption.” By the 1990s Sagamore did begin to present a slide show and tour that emphasized the lesson inherent in interpreting buildings owned by the elite. By interpreting both the workers complex and the guest complex, the tour exposes the excessive indulgence of the upper crust. Such an interpretation asks visitors to examine consumption in the past and present as well as the ways the relationship between the people and the land differed


along class lines. Certainly, the worker’s buildings are essential to creating the contrast and supporting the interpretation.

Also notable about the conflict surrounding the proposed amendment was the difference between the support of newspapers inside and outside the park. All articles in the *New York Times* minimize the opposition to the amendment to a single quote from the Sierra Club. A staff editorial strongly supported a yes vote for the amendment. Meanwhile, the editorial staff of the *Adirondack Daily Enterprise* and *The Lake Placid News*, two papers printed inside the park, included several staff editorials urging voters to vote against the amendment. The difference between Adirondack papers and a New York City based paper points to an insider outsider divide that has shadowed the park since its creation. While in this instance sentiment for historic preservation was stronger outside the park, it was clear that Adirondackers felt very protective of the constitutional protection safeguarding their park.

Despite the opinions of newspapers, voters statewide had their opportunity to be heard on Election Day and they spoke by approving the amendment with 63% percent of the vote.\(^4\) The amendment passed even inside the park and voters in Essex County passed the amendment 4472 votes to 3892.\(^5\) This was a victory for Sagamore as well as historic preservationists since this was the first time historic preservation was included on a statewide ballot. This vote proved that the public saw the value of historic preservation within the Park and it also showed how adept the Sagamore Institute was at educating

\(^4\) There were eight proposals on the ballot and Proposal Six, the Sagamore amendment, passed with the highest percentage. \(^5\) *Lake Placid News*, November 17, 1983, 4.
New York Staters about the importance of the service buildings to the state’s cultural heritage. Education has been a primary component of the Sagamore Institute’s mission since the beginning and the Institute consistently opened the camp to the public more than the one day a week required in the deed. The Sagamore Institute worked to restore the dilapidated service buildings, and returned several to their original uses. Adirondack artisans have utilized the carpenter’s shop for woodworking and blacksmiths have again rekindled the fire in the forge. Workshops and demonstrations of the region’s arts and crafts have become a staple of the adaptive reuse of Sagamore’s worker’s complex. Sagamore’s programs underscore the role of great camps in creating and sustaining an indigenous regional culture.

While the land exchange worked very well with Sagamore, it was not again utilized as a strategy to preserve other great camps in the park. The worry that the Sagamore amendment would lead to countless similar amendments proved false. Several other camps had fallen into state ownership in the 1970s and the state had yet to develop a strategy to treat these historic resources in a manner other than following Article XIV and uniformly destroying every historic building on state land. By constitutional law, the state was bound to remove the structures, and the threat of destruction always loomed as a legitimate possibility, but historic preservation advocates contested the official policy of wholesale historical erasure. Nevertheless, an official preservation policy remained elusive and while Sagamore’s preservation was a success, some great camps have fallen prey to deterioration and even destruction at the hands of the state. William Seward Webb’s camp Nehasane, Richard Hudnut’s Foxlair, and Marjorie Merriweather Post’s
Camp Topridge were owned by the state at one point. Each camp faced a different fate, but none of these camps secured a future with as much protection as the Sagamore purchase and corresponding constitutional amendment. Ultimately, Santanoni has been the only camp under state ownership to remain as a historic resource. While the case study of Santanoni is tantamount to the history of great camp preservation, it is important to first examine the other camps where the state did not find a successful balance.

**Nehasane**

The acquisition of William Seward Webb’s camp Nehasane occurred when the state purchased a large amount of the expansive Webb preserve in 1979, which was one of the largest private holdings left in the Adirondacks. The state actively pursued the purchase rights and while it bought approximately 15,000 acres outright, it was able to get conservation easements on much of the rest.\(^{46}\)

William Seward Webb was a very influential individual in Adirondack history since he was largely responsible for the development of the St. Lawrence & Adirondack railway, which connected Utica to Montreal when completed. Along with the Durant railroad, Webb’s railroad opened up the Adirondacks to visitors. The railway ran through Webb’s land and he even had a rail station on the property that only his family and guests were allowed to use.

In 1890, Architect Robert H. Robertson designed the shingle style Forest Lodge at Nehasane. Robertson was a well-known New York City architect who designed several

\(^{46}\) According to Philip Terrie, conservation easements are when “a property owner could sell to the state or a third party such as the [Adirondack] Conservancy some or all of the development rights on a tract of private land.” Terrie believes that conservation easements are integral to the future of the park and will prevent the over development and subdivision of large tracts of private lands that may be sold. Philip Terrie, *Contested Terrain: A New History of Nature and People in the Adirondacks* 2nd ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 190-191.
skyscrapers. He also maintained a presence in the Adirondacks and also designed Camp Santanoni. The lodge overlooked Lake Lila and was supplemented by over a dozen guest cabins. The camp was not overly rustic in style and could have easily passed as a fashionable seashore resort. Yet historian Harvey Kaiser describes the camp as “a magnificent representation of the ‘improbable if not the impossible’ achieved by camp builders challenging the wilderness.” Dr. Webb’s preserve was perhaps better known for his conservation practices and game preserve than the buildings, but the lodge was still a formidable building. With the purchase of the land by the state, however, the lodge was slated for demolition in accordance with Article XIV. An *Adirondack Life* article in 1979 spoke of the lodge’s future in a very nonchalant manner. According to the author, “The buildings are not considered architecturally or historically outstanding, and so they will be demolished during the next few months.” All buildings were eventually removed in the early 1980’s nearly four years after this article was published. There was very little public outcry likely because the buildings had deteriorated. The lack of strong public opposition can also be attributed to the fact that the camp was styled more for the seashore than the wilderness.

**Foxlair**

Nehasane was not the only camp that the state has destroyed to comply with the state constitution. In 1979, the state burned Foxlair, a camp located in the southern

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47 Kaiser, 183.

48 Dr. Webb was a pioneer in forest conservation and an employer of Gifford Pinchot. He used his land as a laboratory to experiment with new techniques. His large preserve also included 8,000 acres of fenced in lands for a private game preserve.

Adirondacks near North Creek. The Foxlair estate located on the shores of the Sacandaga River was built for the family of Richard A. Hudnut, a New York City perfumer who made several land purchases in a ten year span totaling 1200 acres. The estate was built over several years and resembled a French chateau more than a rustic retreat. The landscape was constantly groomed and the buildings were eclectic and drawn together only by the same mountain green color of paint. The Hudnut family eventually relocated to France and put Foxlair on the market in 1926. There was little interest in it and, after her husband died in 1928, Mrs. Richard A. Hudnut decided to donate the camp to the Police Athletic League of New York City to be used as a summer camp for underprivileged children from the city. The camp received several groups of boys each summer from 1938 well into the 1960s. Camp maintenance was expensive, however, and after the camp failed a fire inspection in 1964 the Police Athletic League never reopened the camp and sold it to New York State for a mere $40,000. Under state ownership the camp fell into further disrepair and was heavily vandalized until the Department of Environmental Conservation eventually burned it to the ground in 1979.

The state did burn Foxlair in order to adhere to the policies of wilderness land, but an additional factor was the deteriorated state of the buildings. A member of the Hudnut family even wrote to the DEC requesting removal of the buildings due to the potential  


dangers they posed.\textsuperscript{53} Today, the land where Foxlair used to stand is part of the Siamese Ponds Wilderness Area. Despite the destruction of the buildings, the state did not erase all remnants of the past. Stone foundations, staircases, and rusting metal objects remain and hikers into the area are able to explore the ruins. Hikers often visit the area and some have reported walking through the ruins and noted that the state could not totally erase the past because the remains of Foxlair are very visible.\textsuperscript{54} The destruction of both Nehasane and Foxlair brought into question the appropriateness of state policy relating to buildings with historical and cultural significance. The destruction of these two camps also brought up the need to act quickly before camps fell into such a state of disrepair that they were deemed a lost cause. Deterioration was less a concern at the next camp, the luxurious Topridge, but the state was still uncertain about the appropriate course of action for the future of the camp.

\textbf{Topridge}

Although occurring a few years prior to the transactions surrounding Sagamore, Santanoni, and Nehasane, the state did not acquire Camp Topridge through a land purchase, but instead the camp was gifted to the state from the Marjorie Merriweather Post Foundation in 1974. The camp was momentarily safe from the “forever wild” clause when the state placed its administration under the Office of General Services and not the DEC.\textsuperscript{55} Certainly Marjorie Merriweather Post never intended the camp to become

\textsuperscript{53} Clarkson, 213.

\textsuperscript{54}“After the Deluge, Foxlair Trail is Open,” \textit{Adirondack Safaris: Nature Up Close and Personal} (blog), June 29, 2006, \url{http://adirondacksafaris.blogspot.com/2006_06_01_archive.html}.

\textsuperscript{55} Kaiser, 214.
part of the forest preserve and although the camp existed in legislative limbo, no one
wanted to tear it down per Article XIV. Regardless, the camp’s future remained
uncertain and the need for a definitive state policy became even more apparent.

Camp Topridge consisted of 207 acres and sixty-eight buildings located on the
shores of Upper St. Regis Lake. Post cereal heiress and businesswoman Marjorie
Merriweather Post purchased the land and a small rubble camp in 1924 that she expanded
on an overwhelmingly grand scale. The camp was certainly one of the largest great
camps and architectural historian Harvey Kaiser considered it “the most lavishly
appointed.”56 Post spared no expense as she eclectically assembled the camp, which
included the now infamous Russian dacha, built because Post’s third husband was the US
ambassador to Russia. When she died in 1973, the camp was held by her trust and
ultimately donated to New York State in 1974.

While some recognized the historic value of the camp, most of the public viewed
the camp as a luxurious rich woman’s indulgence that was now eating up taxpayer
money. In fact, the camp was originally bequeathed to C.W. Post College, but they
refused to accept it.57 After the camp received little use as a gubernatorial Camp David,
the state occasionally utilized the camp for conferences. The extravagant nature of the
camp, however, created a lot of criticism in the local press because it was so expensive to
maintain. A 1977 Lake Placid News article entitled “Care of White Elephant Camp Costs
State $70,000 a Year” mentioned that “its gradual secession from the tax rolls is still

56 Kaiser, 214.

57 Bill McLaughlin, “Care of ‘White Elephant’ Costs State $70,000 a Year,” Lake Placid News 6
October 6, 1977, 11.
alarming to local residents who bear the same tax burdens despite the shrinking tax base.” The camp also received a lot of negative attention when its use during the 1980 Olympics was subjected to exaggerated rumors. The public was generally unsupportive because they saw camp as a luxury and the press supplemented that perception.

Historians, however, recognized the historic and architectural merits of the camp. The camp was the greatest achievement by well-known Adirondack builder Ben Muncil who famously submitted his own design to Mrs. Post after finding her initial plans inappropriate for the region. During its years of state ownership, the camp was also open for weekend public tours coordinated by the Saranac Lake Chamber of Commerce. Despite little publicity, visitors steadily increased over the years, which helped to create some revenue, but the camp still operated at a huge net loss for the state into the 1980’s. The state had only a few options and most administrators felt that selling the camp was the best one.

The $350,000 annual price tag to run and maintain the camp resulted in a financial loss to the state each year and by the mid-1980’s the state could no longer justify the expense. Governor Mario Cuomo instructed that the camp be used for state purposes or economic development and, if not, it should be returned to the tax roles. The state could not make greater use of the camp because its construction did not meet fire codes or provide access for the disabled. The state first offered to sell the camp to the

58 Ibid., 11.
59 Kirschenbaum, 18. There were rumors about the amount of money the state spent to winterize and create a road to the camp for Olympic visitors staying at Topridge.
Town of Brighton and Hamilton County for $1, but both parties declined. The Town of Brighton and Hamilton County recognized the impossibility of maintaining the camp with their meager resources. The annual budget to maintain the camp was actually more than the Town of Brighton’s entire annual budget.\(^{61}\) After the town and county declined to purchase the camp, the state sought a buyer, but not without continued opposition from those who hoped the camp could become a state historic site.

Many stakeholders weighed in on the future of Topridge and what was best for the community. The town of Brighton supervisor wished to see the camp sold to a private citizen in order for the town to collect taxes on the property. John Johnson, manager of Franklin County, expressed his desire for the state to use the camp to its full potential as a conference center or tourist destination or allow a nearby university with a hotel management program to operate the camp. The state, however, was set on selling the camp despite opposition from environmental groups such as the Adirondack Council and local residents like Johnson who believed the state should maintain the camp for the public.\(^{62}\)

The Adirondack Council believed that the sale violated the state’s constitution, which requires that state Forest Preserve lands must not be “sold, leased or exchanged.”\(^{63}\) Although they threatened litigation, the small watchdog organization had limited funds and chose not to follow through with legal action. Executive director Gary Randorf did

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\(^{62}\) Ibid., 49.

\(^{63}\) Kirschenbaum, “Camp Topridge,” 19.
express the Council’s opposition to state actions. He stated, “It is ironic and inappropriate for the state to ignore the state Constitution during the centennial year of the forest preserve.”\textsuperscript{64} The Council was pleased, however, that the state kept 102 acres of land and sold the remaining 105 acres with many restrictions aimed to retain the integrity of the property. The \textit{New York Times} reported that the restrictions included: “no subdivision, no signs or billboards, no topographical changes and no alterations to either the outside or inside of the buildings without state consent.”\textsuperscript{65}

New Jersey businessman Roger Jakubowski finally purchased the camp and its furnishings in July 1985 at a public auction for $911,000. Although Jakubowski had grand plans for the camp, it soon became too much for him to afford and the future of Camp Topridge was once again at risk. Perhaps the result of overextending himself by making several other Adirondack land purchases, by the early 1990’s Jakubowski had defaulted on Topridge’s mortgage.

In an auction on April 22, 1993 the camp was returned to Midlantic National Bank, which had foreclosed on the $1.5 million mortgage. The auction was complicated due to legal uncertainly over right of way to the camp and the disposition of the original furnishings and contents of the camp; however, Midlantic offered the camp for sale for $2.5 million.\textsuperscript{66} There were no acceptable offers during summer and fall 1993 so

\textsuperscript{64} Harold Faber, “‘Great Camp’ in Adirondacks is Passing into Private Hands,” \textit{New York Times}, November 14, 1985, C10.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., C10.

\textsuperscript{66} Adirondack Architectural Heritage newsletter, May 1993, 8.
Midlantic lowered the price to $2 million. By spring of 1994 they lowered the price again to $1.8 million, which was a fairly low price considering the value of the property, but still an expensive purchase considering the hefty insurance, tax, and maintenance costs. Finally, in November 1994, Harlan and Kathy Crow from Dallas, Texas purchased the camp for $975,000 to use as their private summer residence. They planned renovations to the camp and, in compliance with covenants placed on the deed when NYS first sold Camp Topridge, the new owners contacted the NYS Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau where the staff gave them technical assistance regarding the changes. The office, however, never saw a concrete plan when the Crow’s began to renovate the camp. The state did not approve a construction plan and preservationists have since criticized the Crow’s changes to the camp.

By summer 1998, Adirondack Architectural Heritage (AARCH) put Camp Topridge on its list of most endangered historic places because the Crow’s had made many changes including demolition of old buildings and the construction of new structures. The renovations and reconstructions seem to have been done in the nineteenth century spirit of overindulgence great camp style, but they were not done in the spirit of Topridge’s historical accuracy. The Crow’s spent nearly $2 million updating the camp and hired an architect to oversee new buildings styled after structures in Norway, Germany, and Russia. Richard Giegengack, Mr. Crow's architect affirmed the

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69 Adirondack Architectural Heritage (AARCH) is a regional historic preservation organization that was formed in 1990 largely as a result of the conflict and uncertainty surrounding the future of Camp Santanoni. Adirondack Architectural Heritage newsletter, June 1998, 10.
indulgence stating, “We are going to out-Dacha the Dacha.”70 Recent rumblings have indicated that the Crow’s are hoping to sell the camp and it is possible that this luxurious camp could again face an uncertain future if Harlan Crow is unable to find a buyer for a camp that embodies both early and late twentieth century indulgence.

**Santanoni**

In addition to its decade long ownership of Topridge, the state also owned Camp Santanoni. While there was not enough time and backing to mount a campaign for Nehasane or Foxlair, the issue of Santanoni loomed as the best opportunity to change policy. An important question remained, one that has been reiterated several times by the Adirondack Museum, “How could the wilderness view of the Adirondacks as a sanctuary, untouched by all human influence, coexist with the reality that this region also has a rich history of settlement and human development?”71 Many inside the Park understood this conundrum, but there was little to be done when the law explicitly favored nature at the expense of history. The cases of Sagamore and Topridge kept the issue of great camp preservation in the public eye and Santanoni became the next project for preservation advocates and those who saw the importance of retaining these historical storied landscapes in the park. There were years of uncertainty but ultimately Camp Santanoni became a landmark example of preservation and partnership within the Park.

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70 Patricia Leigh Brown, “Out Twigging the Neighbors; In the Adirondacks Great Camps are Sprouting Again,” *New York Times*, October 23, 1997, F7. Richard Giegengack, the architect for this project, was a former partner in the Washington D.C. office of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.

In 1890 Albany banker and businessman Robert C. Pruyn began to buy land near the hamlet of Newcomb for a private family wilderness retreat. He purchased 12,990 acres and commissioned his college friend and New York City architect Robert H. Robertson to build a camp. Built during 1892-1893, Santanoni was located five miles into the woods on the shores of Newcomb Lake. The lodge at the main camp consisted of five log cottages and was connected by porches and a single expansive roof. A covered walkway leading to the kitchen was also attached to the main lodge. An aerial view of the camp shows these structures stretched out into the shape of a phoenix.\(^{72}\) Pruyn and Robertson worked together to create an Adirondack version of a traditional Japanese ho-o-den.\(^{73}\) The Japanese design elements can be contributed to Pruyn’s experiences living in Japan as a child.\(^{74}\) The camp was constructed out of large spruce logs dyed with a black stain, which may have been reminiscent of Norwegian or Russian churches.\(^{75}\) Although the camp was built out of materials taken from the forest, very little land was cleared near the main camp and it was not visible until the road was upon it. Historian Craig Gilborn describes, “The camp, which cannot be seen or comprehended at a glance, was experienced as an extension of nature, an organic whole

\(^{72}\) In Japan, the mythical Phoenix was adopted as a symbol of the imperial household as early as the 7\(^{th}\) century. It became a symbol commonly used in Japanese temple architecture.

\(^{73}\) Lee Manchester, “Santanoni: A Japanese Retreat in the rustic Adirondacks,” *Lake Placid News*, October 31, 2003. In Japan, a ho-o-den is a palace whose shape is meant to resemble a bird in flight. The name means “villa(den) of the phoenix (ho-o).”

\(^{74}\) His father was the American ambassador to Japan and Pruyn lived there for a year in the priest’s quarters of a temple.

\(^{75}\) Kaiser, 170.
that was part of the continuum of space and foliage around it.\textsuperscript{76} Architects and historians have consistently regarded the camp as one of the most innovative camps in the Adirondacks.

The main camp was just one of three building complexes at Santanoni. In 1905 Pruyn utilized the architectural firm of Delano & Aldrich to build the gate lodge at the entrance to the camp. A stone arch grandly welcomed visitors into the camp and framed the mountains and nearby Lake Harris in the background. The large farm complex was located approximately a mile down the road towards the camp. Edward Burnett, a prominent agriculturalist, planned the twenty plus building farm complex and adjacent grazing fields. The structures were capable of producing and processing meat, dairy, poultry, and wool products.\textsuperscript{77} Built between 1902 and 1908, the farm allowed Santanoni to achieve relative self-sufficiency.

\textsuperscript{76} Gilborn, “Adirondack Camps,” 229.

The Robert Pruyn family utilized the camp each year and hosted prominent guests such as then Governor Theodore Roosevelt and his family. Pruyn died in 1934, but his heirs continued to use the camp through the 1940’s. In 1953 Pruyn’s heirs sold the camp to brothers Crandall and Myron Melvin, a banker and lawyer from Syracuse. The Melvins restored many buildings at the camp that had suffered from deferred maintenance and many buildings continue to stand today because of the work they did.

The Melvin family explored selling much of the camp and the preserve as early as the late 1950s, but found that the state was not willing to pay their asking price of $1.5 million. The family did finally sell the camp after a tragedy there in 1971 involving the disappearance of eight-year-old Douglas Legg, the grandson of Myron Melvin. An intense manhunt never found any trace of the boy and the family soon abandoned the scene of the tragedy and sold the camp to the Nature Conservancy.

Initially introduced to the Nature Conservancy by Pruyn family members hoping to preserve the camp, the Melvin family saw this transaction as a way to maintain the entire preserve and avoid developers. Ironically, it was this sale that threatened the fate of the buildings. The Adirondack Conservancy Committee, which was a regional chapter of the Nature Conservancy arranged the deal and worked as an intermediary to transfer land ownership to the state. The Melvin family lowered their asking price to $1 million and soon sold the land to New York State for inclusion in the forest preserve, a move that began nearly two decades of uncertainly for the camp. The federal government contributed $875,000 towards the purchase, but the Adirondack Conservancy still had to raise $125,000. Luckily, a single anonymous donor later found out to be Adirondack
Museum founder Harold Hochschild contributed a significant portion if not all of the necessary funds.  

The state finally took title to the lands in February 1972 and soon began the complicated classification process. Wilderness is the most restrictive classification in the forest preserve and while the state set out to designate some of the over 12,000 acre lands as wilderness, they set aside about 1500 acres including the three major building complexes to be classified differently. The state recognized the historical interest in the buildings and made it clear that the buildings would be retained for administrative uses. There were some environmentalists who expressed concern about these plans and worried about the type of precedent any use of these buildings would set. Yet the opposition was not strong and many within the state had varying opinions about the future of the buildings. As a result, the camp remained in limbo for nearly two decades.

In the interim, the state also gained ownership of Topridge, Nehasane, and Sagamore’s service complex. Ownership issues were resolved in each of these cases, but Santanoni still remained while the state did nothing with the camp and the structures continued to decay. At the same time appreciation and public knowledge of these camps was increasing, while preservationists were banding together to find a way to preserve Santanoni. In 1985, Sagamore’s executive director Howard Kirschenbaum tried orchestrate a partnership between the state and Sagamore. The Sagamore Institute offered to enter a management agreement with the state where Sagamore would operate

78 Ibid., 179. The gift was eventually revealed to the public at the Adirondack Museum on the centennial of Hochschild’s birth, several years after he died.

79 Ibid., 184-186.
Santanoni for the state. The Sagamore Institute would work on restoration and improving public access while respecting the wilderness character without expense to the state. This did not occur, but these conversations led to the formation of Adirondack Architectural Heritage (AARCH) in 1990. Although this organization was formed to promote better understanding, appreciation, and stewardship for the architectural heritage of the Adirondack Park, they focused their early years on securing Santanoni’s future. They pressured the state to develop a plan that would allow both the preservation of the camp and visitors to the camp.

AARCH worked with the Town of Newcomb to persuade the state to develop a plan that would commit to preserving the camp. Newcomb was a very small town that no longer possessed any industry and with limited economic prospects, Camp Santanoni provided the potential to draw visitors and much-needed funds to the town. Popular support was important to the preservationists’ cause and in 1991 AARCH conducted a survey of individuals who made the five-mile trek to see the camp. According to the survey 98% of respondents agreed with the statement that the presence of the historic buildings “enhanced my experience in the forest preserve and should be preserved.”

This level of popular support was important to bolster AARCH’s case that wilderness conservation and historic preservation can and should go hand in hand. On March 23, 1992 the state issued a press release that stated, “Santanoni, a 19th century Adirondack

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80 Howard Kirschenbaum, “To Save Santanoni,” Adirondack Life January/February 1986, 54. While Sagamore’s offer did not come to fruition, the terms formed the basis for a future agreement with AARCH.

“Great Camp,” will be preserved as an historic site closely associated with the wilderness under a plan discussed today…the camp buildings will be preserved through the joint efforts of the Department of Environmental Conservation, the Town of Newcomb, the Preservation League of New York State, Adirondack Architectural Heritage and other governmental and private organizations.”  

Although the state affirmed its commitment to the preservation of Santanoni, it would be nearly a decade of legal red tape before the plan was official.

An advisory committee including AARCH, Newcomb local government, the Adirondack Council, and the state Office of Parks and Historic Preservation among others worked with the Department of Environmental Conservation to develop a constitutionally acceptable Unit Management Plan to ensure preservation. Santanoni’s land was currently designated Wild Forest and would need to be reclassified by the Adirondack Park Agency (APA) in order for the state to actively preserve the camp. When the Adirondack Park Agency, responsible for creating land management policy inside the park, was founded in 1971, they introduced the option of a “historic” land designation. Other classifications included wilderness, wild forest, primitive, and hamlet.

In 1971, the APA was tasked with classifying all land in the forest preserve and creating Unit Management Plans to outline and govern the uses of each individual area of all classification types. The Unit Management Plans were developed under the guidance of the Adirondack State Land Master Plan, which followed the spirit of the constitution and

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Article XIV, but provided more detail about proper and improper uses of the land. While a “historic” designation was always an option, the APA had never used the “historic” designation to reclassify an area. The unit management plan was a landmark document that would for the first time advocate for the preservation of historic resources within the Adirondack forest preserve.

The meeting of the advisory committee was not without conflict and The Adirondack Council voiced most of the opposition. They did not oppose efforts to preserve Santanoni, but they did oppose the way in which it was done. The Council felt that a constitutional amendment was required as was the case with other intensive-use sites such as Whiteface Mountain ski area and Veteran Memorial highway. However, while the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan required a constitutional amendment for intensive-use areas, it was silent on the issue of historic areas. The conversation became public when the APA held four public hearings in May 2000 to garner feedback on the reclassification and the DEC’s draft Unit Management Plan for the proposed historic area. Seventy-five people attended the Newcomb hearing and listened to both support and opposition to the historic area. Newcomb supervisor George Canon continued his strong support for the project and expressed his hope to save the buildings. Canon hoped that one day a fully functioning historic site could attract visitors and much

84 Lee Manchester, “Preserving Santanoni,” Lake Placid News, September 10, 2004. Even today there are only three “historic” designations within the Adirondack Park. There were two other sites within the park designated historic: John Brown’s farm near Lake Placid and the forts at Crown Point. Both of these sites are considered official state historic sites and have a staff, which is not the case with the Camp Santanoni Historic Area. Additionally, these two sites were never intended to become part of the forest preserve as environmentalists hoped for Santanoni.

needed revenue to Newcomb. After an evening of successful debate, local wilderness recreation student Kevin Clark put it best when he remarked, “We’ve learned that wilderness sites cannot be managed in a vacuum.” Clark’s comment gets to the heart of the issue: Should wilderness exist at the expense of history? The state’s answer was clear and by July the APA approved the historic area and the unit management plan for the newly created Camp Santanoni Historic Area and sent their recommendations to the governor.

Finally, all the preservation efforts on behalf of Santanoni culminated in a victory when the governor signed the measure that set aside thirty-two acres as the Camp Santanoni Historic Area and the camp was bestowed with National Historic Landmark status. A celebration at Santanoni on September 8, 2000 recognized these achievements and culminated with the Preservation League of New York removing Santanoni from its Seven to Save list. The Unit Management Plan, which governs the management and use of the historic area, emphasized the close relationship between the buildings and the forest preserve. It requires that Santanoni “be managed to preserve the quality and character of the historic resource, that is, to the greatest extent feasible, in a setting and on a scale in harmony with the relatively wild and undeveloped character of the Adirondack Park.” The passage of this plan ensured that future generations of visitors

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to Santanoni would be able to appreciate the forests, the buildings, and the way they complement and seamlessly blend into each other.

Architectural historian Richard Longstreth views the creation of a thirty-two acre historic area as “a major precedent for preservation that has received far less attention nationally than it deserves.”89 He does lament the fact that the historic area did not include the open working landscape that was part of the camp’s farmlands. A living farm would be a big draw at the camp, but such a venture would be problematic with the current unit management plan and the desire to keep the lands wild. The majority of the land that the Pruyn’s had initially cleared for agricultural purposes has since reverted to wild forest lands and a recreation of the farm would take considerable funds. While New York State has contributed funds to Santanoni’s restoration and AARCH secured several grants, the funds are considerably less than needed. There has been progress at Santanoni, including a completely restored boathouse finished in 2008, but the camp still requires major repairs should it ever operate as a working state historic site or overnight facility.

Visitors to Santanoni today arrive at the main camp after walking, biking, skiing, or buggying the five-mile road to the lodge. Vehicles are not allowed on the trail, but the area is popular with hikers and bikers. For many the camp does not detract from, but rather enhances the wilderness experience. The signage is minimal at the main camp and signs reveal only names and dates. Only a handful of interior spaces in the camp are

open for visitors and all of the rooms are devoid of furnishings. Several picnic tables provide weary travelers an opportunity to lunch on the grounds. To walk five miles in the woods and come upon an architectural masterpiece over a century old provides an important understanding of the way the land has been utilized in the park. Visitors who make the five-mile trip understand the secluded nature of the camp and they can understand how the camp blends into and complements the surrounding forest. Despite being man made, an important case can be argued– that mere existence of Santanoni adds to the understanding of the surrounding wilderness and shows a state of harmony between humanity and the land.

While the state has owned, destroyed, or disposed of several great camps, they ultimately retained ownership of one camp and arranged a unique partnership to restore and interpret the camp with Adirondack Architectural Heritage. Camp Santanoni remains under state ownership today and resides in a historic area that allows preservation of the buildings. Currently the only camp owned by the state, Santanoni went through several years of uncertainty because of its status as a state owned camp on designated wilderness land. Santanoni was not the only camp to fall into state hands, but it is the only camp to remain in state hands and it sets a precedent for state ownership of historic resources in the forest preserve. Even though the pathway of Santanoni’s preservation was not without failures and flaws, it does provide one model of successful preservation within the park. It is also reveals the need for a uniform policy when dealing with historic resources in the park. While a lack of funds limits a more ambitious preservation and
stabilization of the camp, the survival of Santanoni’s buildings was certainly a victory for a definition of wilderness that is inclusive of its cultural elements. 90

White Pine Camp

A final camp worth discussing is White Pine Camp located near Paul Smiths, NY on the shores of Osgood Lake. White Pine is one of three camps open today for public tours and a unique partnership saved this camp from deterioration and potential state ownership. White Pine is also important architecturally because brainstorm siding was invented for use at this camp. Best known as Calvin Coolidge’s 1926 Summer White House, White Pine Camp is currently open year round for cabin rentals, guided tours during the summer months, and the occasional special event such as the camp’s centennial celebration in 2008. The camp, however, has very limited staff and while mostly restored, the camp has much unrealized potential as a historic site. The current owners, White Pine Associates LLC, have hopes to continue to draw an increasing numbers of visitors and to improve historic exhibits and programs at the camp. This camp is also an important example of the potential of a Great Camp when purchased by a third party with a mission that values history and public education.

Originally built in 1907 for the New York banker Archibald White, White Pine Camp was conceived by William G. Massarene an architect, developer, and promoter known for his work on resort communities, Westchester County estates, New York’s Waldorf Hotel, and Carnegie Hall. According to a New York Times article, Massarene “call[ed] the camp an architectural paradox. It seems, he sa[id], to be rustic, but in truth

90 Sadly, in July 2004 a fire completely consumed the dairy barn in the camp’s farm complex. The barn had been recently restored and stabilized. Although arson was determined to be the cause of the fire, no arrests were made.
it is civilization at its acme. It is civilization, but in the abstract.” Massarene admits the illusion of rusticity was a defining characteristic of his camp and he saw this type of camp as a new form of civilization showcasing an ever-changing relationship between people and nature.

Figure 10 - A sleeping cabin at White Pine Camp illustrates subtle rustic accents, brainstorm siding, and asymmetrical lines, Paul Smiths, NY, 2009.

During the building process Massarene disagreed with Ben Muncil, who oversaw camp construction, about the camp’s siding. Muncil, a well-known Adirondack Great Camp builder whose other projects included the famed Camp Topridge, favored a rustic half log construction. Massarene, however, preferred a more traditional clapboard siding. As a compromise they developed brainstorm siding, which is a rough milled siding that

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91“Coolidge’s Camp Unique in Design,” *New York Times*, July 6, 1926, 13. This is a truth scholars have focused on in the past two decades. We now see that the rusticity of these camps is an illusion. It is interesting, however, to see that a builder of this camp would admit this very truth. The rusticity appealed to Adirondack visitors and was one of the main draws of great camps.
combines traditional siding with a rustic unfinished look. After its invention in 1907 at White Pine, brainstorm siding became very popular in the Adirondack Park. A work in progress, in 1911 the Whites hired architect Addison Mizner, best known for planning, designing and developing Boca Raton, Florida, to make several additions to the camp. As a result of Massarene and Mizner’s visions, the exterior of White Pine’s buildings are more modern looking and lack the external look of rusticity and exposed logs common to many other great camps.

In 1926, the camp and the Adirondack Park were thrust onto the national scene when Mrs. Coolidge’s friendship with camp owner Laura Kirkwood resulted in the choice of White Pine Camp as the summer White House. From July 7, 1926 through September 18, 1926, the Coolidges embraced outdoor life and tranquility of the camp. The president was occupied by both business and fishing, which was duly noted by cartoonists of the day who joked that the President included fishing as one of his official duties. The summer of 1926 brought both the Adirondacks and White Pine into the national spotlight as the newspapers emphasized the benefits of “life in the open and exhilarating air and the altitude of 1,600.”

After nearly forty years of private ownership, the camp was donated to Paul Smith’s College in 1948. Paul Smith’s College owned the camp from 1949-1983 and the college used the camp for its forestry program as well as student and faculty housing until

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92 Irwin and Laura Kirkwood were prominent in the Kansas City newspaper business and had purchased White Pine in 1920. Laura died in 1926 and Irwin died in 1927, but the Kirkwood Trust owned and rented out the camp until it was sold in 1930 to the Smith and Levy family who had rented the camp.

93 “Coolidge Ends Vacation; Off For Home Today,” Chicago Daily Tribune, September 18, 1926, 11.
1976 when rising heating costs forced the college to stop using White Pine as a residence. From 1976 until 1983 the camp was used only sporadically for field trips and rentals and, as a result, the camp suffered from deferred maintenance and vandalism. In 1983, the college sold the camp to Warren Stephen who soon began restoration work on the camp. He added many new roofs, windows and doors, which saved many buildings from complete deterioration, but ultimately his finances took a turn for the worse and he too could not continue to sustain the camp.

Consequently, in order for the camp to achieve long term sustainability, it needed a new owner who would be able to commit to the restoration and maintenance of critically decaying buildings. White Pine found that owner in Dr. Howard Kirschenbaum who stepped in and purchased the camp in 1993. Kirschenbaum brought a lot of experience to White Pine seeing as he was one of the main forces behind the purchase of Sagamore Lodge and its subsequent development into a viable historic site with considerable public access. Additionally, Kirschenbaum was the founding president of Adirondack Architectural Heritage and already was a great camp owner being a partial owner of Camp Uncas adjacent to Sagamore. At White Pine, Kirschenbaum hoped to create programs similar to those at Sagamore and he organized a group called White Pine Associates who began to explore options for the camp in 1994. While the immediate

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primary goal was stabilization and restoration of the camp’s structures, White Pine Associates opened the camp to the public beginning July 1, 1995.  

Because Kirschenbaum stepped in, he was able to save White Pine from state ownership and the years of uncertainty and lobbying that would be likely to follow. With White Pine Associates, Kirschenbaum helped to create a unique private ownership group with a focus on preservation and an appreciation of the history of the property. Similar to the Sagamore Institute, this group provides another means for Great Camp preservation. White Pine Associates LLP plans to continue active preservation and maintenance at the camp while also providing public opportunities to experience the camp.

**Current Interpretation and Programs at Great Camps**

Harvey Kaiser writes,

> To preserve the camps is not to make remote museums of former playgrounds of the rich but to save unique structures embodying a regionally distinct architectural tradition. More than this, the camps are living lessons that have much to teach: how to build in harmony with nature, how to use local materials and craft traditions—in short, how to live in nature without destroying it. The camps are architectural treasures that, once lost, can never be replaced.  

These lessons that Kaiser espoused in the early 1980’s are still very much a part of great camp interpretation today. The original reasons to preserve and interpret the camps in the first place echo the idea that the buildings can serve as a living lesson. Great camps illustrate the efforts and talents of local craftspeople and they can be admired as an art museum patron might gaze at a painting. However, these camps also stand as living

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96 “Great Camps Open to the Public,” Adirondack Architectural Heritage newsletter, Spring 1995, 8.

97 Kaiser, 223.
monuments built with local materials now scarce due to environmental changes in the park since the early twentieth century. To admire these camps today is something very different than to admire these camps a century ago. Current reverence for great camps illustrates both a continued and changing public appreciation for nature.

Once a great camp is no longer in danger of destruction, the next step is to negotiate how and when the camp will be open to the public. In what ways will the camp tell its own story and the history of its preservation? Do the tours, exhibits, or videos make a point to discuss how the camp evolved to its current state or is the focus the camp’s “golden years”? Currently, three great camps are open to the public for tours or residential programs.98 Even though Santanoni is owned by the state, all three utilize non-profit organizations to facilitate the interpretation and public access of each camp. While all three offer visitation options and tours, Sagamore has the most defined and established interpretative plan. The interpretation at Sagamore consistently addresses issues of class, sustainability, and wilderness while also emphasizing the rustic architectural styling at the camp. Sagamore was certainly a pioneer in great camp interpretation and public programming while programs at White Pine and Santanoni are much newer and less contextual.

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98 A fourth, now named The Point, but formerly the Rockefeller family’s Camp Wonundra, is also open to overnight guests, but the camp is much more resort than historic site. The Point is one of the most expensive lodgings in the Adirondacks and there is not an emphasis on the site’s own history through historic tours of exhibits on the premises. On average, it costs over $1000 a night to stay at The Point. The reuse of this camp is actually keeping with its original purpose in order to secure long-term maintenance and preservation. The camp is again a place for wealthy Americans to experience luxury in a remote wilderness setting. In this case, however, aesthetics is more important than historical accuracy.
White Pine

Of the three camps White Pine was most recently made accessible. Beginning in 1995 the camp was open daily from July through October and tours by appointment were available the rest of the year. The goal of the owners, White Pine Associates, was to run a museum at the camp and while it was open for two years, the endeavor was not financially viable and White Pine Associates reorganized to conceive a new plan for the camp. In 1997 the group became White Pine Associates, LLC and the ownership of the camp was split between each of the thirteen members. The new organization retained the same goals Howard Kirschenbaum had when he first decided to purchase the camp. According to an exhibit panel displayed in the camp, the goal of White Pine Associates, LLC is “to restore White Pine Camp and operate it as an historic site open to the public, for the education and inspiration of present and future generations; to utilize White Pine Camp for the enjoyment of the members and their families and guests.” Membership in White Pine Associates LLP has grown since 1997 and they have continued to restore the camp and provide public access. After the museum failed to generate enough revenue, the camp has focused on cabin rental and overnight guests as a way to meet costs. Guests are able to stay at White Pine year round and participate in hiking and boating on the property while limited public tours are

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100 White Pine Exhibit Panel – “White Pine Associates”
available during the summer months through a partnership with Adirondack Architectural Heritage.

While White Pine is still a work in progress, visitors can experience the camp through either a tour or a residential visit. The camp most strongly emphasizes its history as the 1926 Summer White House. They have even gone so far as to name two of the cabins The President’s cabin and Mrs. Coolidge’s cabin in honor of the rooms the famous first couple occupied for the three months they lived at the camp. The phrase “The 1926 Summer White House” graces the front of all of White Pine’s promotional literature as well as their web page. It is clear that White Pine utilizes the residency of its most famous guests as a selling point to attract visitors. Once at the camp, however, there is a more egalitarian approach to the camp’s history.

Exhibits showcase the history of the camp from site selection to the present. The exhibits trace the chronology of the camp through all phases of ownership focusing on each owner and the changes they made to the camp. The exhibits also show the importance of White Pine Camp from the standpoint of architecture and forestry. While there are several panels dedicated to the 1926 Summer White House, one of those panels is dedicated to the staff who lived at the camp that summer to tend to President Coolidge included interesting anecdotes from Ellen Riley, the “first housekeeper.” The panel “Staff and Servants at the Summer White House” is, however, the only mention of the caretaking staff in the entire exhibit.

White Pine Camp partners with Adirondack Architectural Heritage to conduct tours of White Pine camp and every summer since 2005 they have offered twenty tours
during July and August. Visitors who take the tour will see several of the camps buildings and the two exhibits. The exhibits, which include both text and photographs were installed in 2003 and created by Howard Kirschenbaum and Mark Rice. In addition, several historic photographs are placed throughout the camp, which provide visitors with a way to compare past and present at White Pine. Visitors to the camp are able to pick up a map/guide for a self-guided tour, but it is dated and the brochure no longer accurately describes the current use of each building. Since self-guided tours of the camp were last offered, the exhibits have been moved to provide more space for overnight guests. The camp relies on overnight guests for the large majority of its income, but providing guided tours are important to the camp’s owners. Tour participants are able to more fully appreciate the camp’s architecture and craftsmanship and the interpretive emphasis of the camp lies in that area.

Santanoni

In addition to managing weekend tours at White Pine, AARCH also coordinates interpretive programs and a summer intern staff at Santanoni. Because the state and AARCH have limited funds, Santanoni has only reached the beginning of its interpretive potential. Once New York State established a partnership with AARCH and a commitment to the preservation of the camp, interpretation became a possibility at the camp. Beginning in 1991, AARCH and the Town of Newcomb sponsored a summer interpreter at Santanoni. Santanoni’s interpreters work during the summer months to speak with the camp’s visitors and provide tours of all three complexes.

Visitors to Santanoni in the summer will encounter an interpreter, but they also may have the opportunity to observe preservation work in progress. Santanoni has been undergoing restoration for over a decade now and during the summer months visitors are able to watch skilled builders rehabilitate the buildings. One of the largest scale projects completed at Santanoni was the restoration of the boathouse. Recently completed in 2007, the boathouse was severely deteriorating before builders led by Michael Frenette restored it to its original appearance. Other recent projects include the stabilization of several farm buildings and the main lodge porch. The experience of viewing the construction firsthand proves that preservation is an ongoing project for a historic camp. AARCH has also sponsored several hand on workshops led by Michael Frenette to teach basic timber framing and log work. Participants had the opportunity to do actual restoration work on the camp.102 This experience has a larger potential impact on the visitor than any interpretive panel or sign.

Most of Santanoni’s buildings are without signage, but each complex is adorned with a simple sign with the name and a short description. There are several exhibit panels, however, located inside the Gate Lodge, which is the first building visitors encounter. There are laminated sheets that describe the main camp, farm complex, and gate lodge as well one that includes a description of some of the preservation work. More permanent panels in the exhibit space examine camp life, Santanoni’s architecture, and the farm. The interpretation is framed primarily in the experiences of the Pruyn

family. The panels describe how the Pruyn’s love of Japan influenced the camp’s architecture and the type of outdoor activities the Pruyn’s offered to their guests.

The final panel, however, moves beyond the traditionally discussed topics of architecture and recreation and invites visitors to learn more about the farm, which was something very unique to Santanoni. The final and most probing panel is entitled “A Patient Contest with Nature: The Farm at Santanoni,” which examines the farm’s products and the Pruyn’s commitment to experimenting with new techniques in order to create a model farm. This panel is unique because it includes the only mention of the workers and their efforts to maintain a working farm in an inhospitable climate. The panel reads, “Farming at Santanoni was not simple—it was an expensive undertaking, requiring several workers whose labor and expertise allowed campers to enjoy a comfortable lifestyle in the midst of wilderness.”103 The emphasis on self-sufficiency through farming illustrates the view of wilderness as a working landscape. This idea was often lost given the prominence of the concept that wilderness can only be a romantic, untouched landscape. Certainly the Pruyn family and their employees utilized the wilderness landscape and the current interpretation of the camp emphasizes their view of wilderness as a working landscape. A nostalgia for the simple life in spite of the science, technology, and workers required to run the farm show a complex relationship with nature that is revealed here more than anywhere else in Santanoni’s interpretation. Yet it is up to the visitor to make the move from past to present in order to gain insight into the ways the complex relationship between man and nature has progressed.

While Santanoni may no longer serve as a working landscape, the experience of visiting Santanoni more closely connects the buildings and the forest preserve than the experience at other great camps. Even though there are interpreters, self-discovery plays a large role in any Santanoni visit. Much of this is the result of the process of visiting the camp. Since motored vehicles are not allowed on the nearly five-mile path into the main camp, hiking and biking are the only means of transportation. After parking near the Gate Lodge, visitors are able to walk up to the Gate Lodge and view exhibits before beginning to traverse the path.

An exterior panel entitled “Roughing it in Style” asks visitors to envision the experience of arriving at the camp after a long rough journey. This panel places Santanoni in a broader context and highlights the common impulses of many to both control and embrace nature. This panel shows that Santanoni’s interpretation is beginning to address the changing and ambivalent attitudes toward nature held by camp owners and guests. Inside the Gate Lodge are several other permanent panels as well as one wall of less permanent sheets of paper that provide a description of each complex, a short history of the camp’s ownership, and description of restoration projects. These descriptions focus solely on the original use, architect, and construction timeline of each complex.

After leaving the exhibit space, the farm complex appears nearly a mile down the road and visitors are free to walk around and peer into the buildings. Ruins and foundations of certain farm buildings are also visible and reveal the original farm to be larger than what remains. After crossing several bridges and passing over rather
monotonous, flat, and forested terrain, the visitor suddenly arrives at the main camp. The dark color of the camp’s exteriors and the placement of the buildings mask them until the visitor is nearly upon the camp. The travel experience can also provide visitors with greater insight into the long process of transporting the initial materials to build the camp. The trip allows visitors to experience a great camp, but also to experience the forest preserve, which enhances the experience of both.

**Sagamore**

On the other hand, the experience of visiting Sagamore is much more structured. Tours of the entire camp are currently available only through guided tour. While historic interpretation has grown over the years, Sagamore retains its title as the oldest and most well established great camp program. Beginning the late 1970’s, the Sagamore Institute allowed public access to the camp and conducted programs for residential visitors. Even though public access was part of the purchase deed, the Sagamore Institute was education based and saw tours as a way to educate the public about great camps at a time when several were in peril and at risk of demolition.

Once the Sagamore Institute took over ownership of the camp in the summer of 1977, residential programs commenced immediately. These programs continued to expand over the years and, once the camp was winterized in 1980 to house Olympic visitors, Sagamore began to offer programs throughout the entire year. The primary focus of conferences and workshops was Adirondack history and craftsmanship, outdoor recreation and environmental education, as well as some professional training and personal growth workshops. Tours were also available that first season, but it was
overnight programs that received the emphasis during the early years of the Sagamore Institute. Since 1977, and especially since the arrival of the current camp directors Beverly Bridger and Michael Wilson in 1990, residential programs have grown and now largely focus on great camp and gilded age history as well as intergenerational grandparent / grandchild camps. Even though it is no longer financially feasible for the camp to remain open the entire year, the Sagamore Institute has introduced several new programs and the number of visitors has increased.

By summer 1987, Sagamore opened the worker’s complex to the public. Once the Sagamore Institute gained ownership of the severely deteriorated buildings, much preservation and stabilization work was necessary to make then accessible and safe for the public. Once the worker’s complex was available, various artisans began to demonstrate their crafts during the summer months. Over the past twenty years a variety of blacksmiths, boat builders, wood carvers, rug makers, and others skilled at making traditional Adirondack arts and crafts have demonstrated their craft to Sagamore visitors. In addition, the availability of the worker’s complex allowed interpretation of the camp to also include class as an integral theme. Interpreters can employ the built environment to discuss Gilded Age class differences. The physical separation of the two camps as well as the architectural differences illustrates the divide between owners and workers.

The upstairs/downstairs interpretation of the camp is something that Sagamore’s historic interpreters incorporate into guided tours of the camp. Since visitors are not allowed free reign at the camp, guided tours are offered daily during the season. The

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strength of Sagamore’s tours are the themes that connect each interpreter’s narrative. Interpreters are not given a script, but instead they are given a list of stations and asked to develop their own tour with at least three themes. Some potential themes include: changing relationships between nature and culture, contemporary issues of sustainability, the illusion of the rustic, or changes in Gilded Age attitudes toward nature. Interpreters become well versed with the changing definition of wilderness and the context of that discussion in the relation to Sagamore’s history. One station on the tour focuses specifically on the Adirondack Park and the conflicts surrounding appropriate land use, which specifically connects to the Adirondack experience of many visitors on the tour. In addition, this station can allow interpreters to speak to the struggle and valiant efforts to preserve both of Sagamore’s camps. Tours are not a mere recitation of facts, they invite visitors to think and reconsider their own prevailing assumptions.

Recently during the 2005-2007 seasons Sagamore gradually expanded the camp’s interpretation to include permanent exhibits in the carriage shed and barn in the worker’s camp. These exhibits focus on several integral players in the camp’s history and discuss the ways they conceptualized or utilized wilderness. These panels present a very nuanced portrait of the role of each individual and the role of wilderness in each individual’s life. The introductory panel reads, “In its architecture, social life, and setting in the Adirondack Park, [Sagamore] represents an era of great change in our ideas of wilderness

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105 Besides a single “Save Sagamore” sign displayed in the worker’s camp Sagamore does not address its post-1977 history.
and in our consequent behaviors toward wild nature." Subsequent panels examine how Sagamore’s players utilized wilderness as a resort, to exploit, as home, and as art. The exhibit and subsequent photographs clearly explore the changing relationship between nature and culture and the changing relationship between humans and wilderness within the Adirondack Park. These complex ideas take great camp interpretation beyond a mere description of camp life or architecture and provide a contextual background not yet broached in other great camps open to the public.

**The Great Camp Renaissance**

While the interpretation of Sagamore, Santanoni, and White Pine begins address the importance of class to the history of Adirondack great camps, they do not illustrate

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the way history is repeating itself in the park. Resurgence in the interest of Adirondack
great camps went hand in hand with the publication of Harvey Kaiser’s book in 1982 and
the historic preservation controversies surrounding these camps. One tangible way that
this renewed interest has appeared is through an increase in rustic construction. In the
recent past great camp style architecture and building has become desirable for second
home building. A 1999 article in the *Wall Street Journal* noted this new trend and its
recent regional transcendence. Eileen Daspin reported that compounds appearing in
Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina mimic the style of turn of the century Adirondack
great camps. She wrote, “There is, in fact, something a bit odd about wealthy landowners
and suburbanites across the country spending millions of dollars to haul cedar logs and
big rocks out of the mountains of New York. After all, the whole point of the original
‘great camps’ was that they were built with materials on hand.”107 It is true that the warm
weather climate of southern states does not provide the best conditions for the imported
wood used in these buildings, which contributes to the folly of the whole exercise and
makes it appear to be a lesson in opulence and indulgent consumer culture. Yet it is the
attitudes revealed by this appetite that are more important than the actual buildings that
result.

The desire for second homes built in the Adirondack style actually reveals much
about the attitudes towards wilderness and nature that have continued to pervade the
American consciousness. The *Wall Street Journal* article even mentions a family who
converted several rooms in their home into a mini great camp. They connect their use of

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these rooms with a need for a place to find the ultimate relaxation. It is easy to see how nature and by connection natural materials provide a sense of solace and escape from present problems and stresses. Since nature is often viewed in opposition to technology and industry, a return to nature allows a reprieve from work and the constant communication technology permits. These attitudes reveal that a separation between daily life or work and nature or wilderness remains in the American consciousness.

Hand-in-hand with the national popularity of Adirondack inspired rustic construction, new great camps also began to appear inside the park. While the grand camp era is considered to fall between 1877 and 1949, a great camp renaissance began in the 1990’s. Even though so many of these camps languished and decayed in the latter half of the twentieth century, great camps continue to remain desirable to many who have vast resources. While many existing great camps are privately owned, there has also been a rash of new construction that was noted in a 1997 *The New York Times* article. Patricia Brown’s article “Out-Twigging the Neighbors; In the Adirondacks, Great Camps are Sprouting Again,” details the growing appetite for the Adirondack great camp and its rustic style. She mentioned nearly a dozen new compounds that were recently built for wealthy businessmen or CEOs.\textsuperscript{108} History repeats itself again when building is guided by the owners’ desire to have rustic looking structures fitted with all modern amenities. Chairman of a tech company, Kip Eaton, looked at old camps for years before he and his wife decided to build a new one. Eaton admitted, “They either needed a ton of repair or

\textsuperscript{108} Some of the individuals mentioned specifically in the article were: Sanford I. Weill, chairman of the Travelers Group, Kip Eaton, chairman of Network Powers Systems, Craig E. Weatherup, chairman of Pepsi-Cola Company, and singer Shania Twain.
didn’t have the amenities we wanted." It appears that great camps once again are the battleground between modernity and a desire to live simply in harmony with nature.

The appetite for luxury has changed little from the Gilded Age and clearly has grown. There remains a gulf between the rich and the poor in the United States and today these large camps serve as clear reminders that the wealthiest Americans still have a strong presence in the park. One wonders if these newly constructed great camps will face the same fate as their predecessors if owners are unable to keep up with the maintenance and large costs. Facing an uncertain economy, the housing market has not been stellar. In fact, cracks may already be showing in nouveau great camp ownership.

After engineering a massive construction and restoration projects at Camp Topridge that began in 1994, Dallas real estate magnate Harlan Crow has begun to quietly seek a buyer. Furthermore, the owners of Kamp Kill Kare in Raquette Lake, also Texas real estate moguls, lease the camp to visitors for $14,000 a day. Since their purchase in 2006 the family has not utilized the camp as much as planned and the rentals will offset the camp’s high maintenance costs. It appears that these great camp owners did not learn the lessons of the ‘50s and the reasons behind the initial decline in great camp building and ownership.

Even though there have been many successes in great camp preservation, the historic Wawbeek on Upper Saranac Lake was torn down in May 2008. Operating as a restaurant and resort for the past thirteen years, the owners sold the camp to Dick and

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Diane Sittig from Malibu, California for $6.25 million.\footnote{“Wawbeek Teaches Us All to be Vigilant,” \textit{The Press Republican}, May 10, 2008, \url{http://www.pressrepublican.com/0201_editorials/local_story_131230102.html}.} When asked about his plans for the property Dick Sittig said, “We wanted to design a camp that would fit in the Adirondacks, a modern interpretation of a great camp made of stone and shingles and timbers.”\footnote{Kim Smith Dedam, “Changes Planned at the Wawbeek,” \textit{The Press Republican}, February 22, 2008, \url{http://www.pressrepublican.com/0100_news/local_story_053160110.html}.} Despite local support and protests against the demolition of buildings designed by renowned Adirondack architect William Coulter, the Sittigs did move forward with demolition, as was their legal right. Still, it was a cultural loss to the community and one that could have been prevented with the use of local ordinances or preservation easements attached to the deed. AARCH uses the Wawbeek as an example illustrating the importance of considering preservation when selling a historic property.\footnote{“The Wawbeek: Lessons Learned,” AARCH newsletter, Winter 2008/2009. The owners of the Wawbeek did not implement any preservation easements into the deed, and some owners may be hesitant to do so because of a fear that it will decrease the selling price and pool of buyers for the property.}

One wonders how much longer this new crop of wealthy families will maintain their interest in the Adirondacks and their nouveau great camps. From the vantage point of a historian, it is easy to see the structural cycle of life beginning yet again. In fifty years will the state purchase land and again have to decide whether to destroy or purposefully neglect a 1995 era great camp? Using history as a guide, this is a distinct possibility, but until then it is possible that the initial battles have set a precedent that will remain constant. Along with the rising tide of recycling and a “green” lifestyle, the preservation of Adirondack great camps provides a wonderful counter balance to the disposable attitudes often prevalent in today’s world. When something does not work or
gets old, we just get a new one provided the availability of funds. That is very hard to do with a great camp as materials are growing scarce and large native trees are less and less available. These attitudes are reflective of both our consumer culture and the economic realities of construction costs. While it may be less expensive to destroy and rebuild rather than restore, many who often place a greater value on economic concerns than historical ones. It is a common impulse to desire a home with features resembling a historic home, but not a home that is actually old. Meanwhile, preservationists hope that the examples of White Pine, Santanoni, and Sagamore illustrate the importance of preservation and the importance of education. The adaptive reuse of these camps creates an important correlation and showcases the historic connection between nature and culture in the park, which supports a definition of wilderness that exceeds the romantic and the wild.
CHAPTER THREE
REINTERPRETING A FALSE DUALISM:
FIRE TOWERS, RUINS, AND THE CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF
ADIRONDACK LAND MANAGEMENT DECISIONS

The time has come to rethink wilderness.
-William Cronon, 1995

Museums, historic sites, exhibits, and commemorative observances all interpret the past and present a distinct interpretation of the past to the public. All of these sites or events place value on history and, in so doing state what is important and what is not in the eyes of the planners or creators. Similarly, land management policies also place value on what is essential to the land and what should be removed. Since it was first adopted in 1972 the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan (APSLMP) has interpreted the Adirondack Forest Preserve and dictated that historic or cultural resources are not compatible with the natural landscape and should be removed from wilderness lands. Through the APSLMP, New York State has interpreted the landscape and created a divide between nature and culture within the forest preserve. This is a problematic divide, however, because the two were never and can never be two entirely separate entities. This unnatural division has become even more apparent in the academic debate
surrounding the concept of wilderness, which was thrust into the public spotlight following *The New York Times* publication of William Cronon’s article “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.” The effects of this debate have not remained in academia, but have moved into the land management arena.

What happens when there is a conflict between preserving nature and preserving culture? In the Adirondack Park, this debate first appeared with the preservation of great camps starting in the 1970s. The debate has moved, however, into cultural relics that are far less grand or recognizable. More recent debates involving ruins, fire towers, and other types of cultural landscapes in the Adirondack Park have begun to reveal a shift in policy that commands attention. Erasing layers of stories from the landscape would only obscure and bury the region’s history. The move away from a monolithic removal of all man made structures in the wilderness has forced managers to recognize that preserving remnants of human impact in natural areas can be of value. This is an indication that attitudes concerning the relationship between the cultural and natural landscape of both Adirondackers and lawmakers have begun to shift.

**The Wilderness Debate**

The wilderness debate had been brewing for a long time before it exploded into public consciousness when William Cronon’s 1995 article “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” was reprinted in *The New York Times Sunday Magazine.* Inflaming environmentalists and inspiring other scholars to

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2 Ibid.
weigh in on the subject, Cronon ignited a firestorm of discussion and debate that remains ongoing. In this article, Cronon described wilderness as a cultural creation and a product of civilization, which spurred many critics to erroneously report that such a claim would discourage wilderness preservation and provide bait to rivals of environmental protection measures. The prevailing idea about wilderness was that it was a pristine landscape untouched by human influence. Cronon countered that wilderness “is not a pristine sanctuary where the last remnant of…nature can for at least a little while longer be encountered without the contaminating taint of civilization. Instead, it is a product of that civilization, and could hardly be contaminated by the very stuff of which it is made.”³ Cronon promoted a full acceptance of everything wilderness had to offer and hoped others would fully accept the way nature, culture, and history have combined to impact the landscape and create the world as it is today.

Cronon’s article served to upset the standard narrative of American wilderness, which is often traced to Roderick Nash’s 1967 work *Wilderness and the American Mind*. According to Nash, wilderness was viewed first as something foreign that evoked fear when settlers first entered the continent and then as something to be conquered as westward expansion commenced. He writes, “It [wilderness] was instinctively understood as something alien to man—an insecure and uncomfortable environment against which civilization had waged an unceasing struggle.”⁴ As the narrative

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continues, Nash discusses an increased appreciation for wilderness after industrialization and urbanization relegated nature to spaces far away from cities and unimaginable to many urban dwellers. Conservation and preservation legislation followed the growing reverence for nature and soon wilderness was a precious commodity. This narrative, which has continued to separate the human world and the natural world, has positioned wilderness as something apart from humanity that needs protection.

Nash’s work reflects the consensus of the environmental community. Wilderness as defined by state and federal legislation mirrors ideas about wilderness present in Nash’s work. Before the firestorm of the great new wilderness debate ignited, the definition that has governed land management and wilderness preservation in this country was determined in the 1964 Wilderness Act. This legislation defines wilderness in an absolute manner. It reads,

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain…[and] an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation.\(^5\)

This key piece of legislation established the National Wilderness Preservation System and its statutes govern the management of wilderness in this country. The separation between the human sphere and nature is clear in the language of this legislation.

In the Adirondack Park, the working definition of wilderness is stated in the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan (APSLMP). Concern about unguided

development within the park’s 3.5 million acres of private land led to the creation of the Temporary Study Commission on the Future of the Adirondacks in 1967. The commission recommended the creation of the Adirondack Park Agency to oversee the park and, in turn, it prepared the APSLMP, which became law in 1972. This document includes a definition of wilderness that is consistent with and, in many respects, identical to the definition in the 1964 Wilderness Act. Again, the legislation governing land management reinforces a wilderness devoid of people. The APSLMP has been updated and revised since 1972, but the definition of wilderness has remained static.

Even today the term wilderness is used to indicate an ideal, an absolute, and the ultimate state of perfection for a landscape. Wilderness is something to strive for or something that can be attained after removing all traces of the human impact. When the State Land Master Plan designed a land classification system to govern the Adirondack Forest Preserve, wilderness was at one end of the spectrum. Wilderness lands have the strictest restrictions regarding use and the least amount of visible human impact. The next level of land classification, primitive, is land that includes elements that are incompatible with wilderness, but the plan dictates that “the ultimate goal is clearly to upgrade the area to wilderness.” This language plainly reveals a value system that views primitive areas as less than wilderness areas, hence the goal to “upgrade.” The existence

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6 State of New York, “Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan”, 2001, http://www.apa.state.ny.us/Documents/Laws_Regs/SlmpPDF2001.pdf, 26. In 1972, the APSLMP classified all forest preserve land as either: wilderness, primitive, wild forest, canoe, intensive use, historic, travel corridor, wild, scenic, or recreational river, or state administrative. For example, there are currently 18 wilderness areas, 17 wild forest areas and 1 canoe area. Each area has a Unit Management Plan that serves to examine the area’s resources and “identify management objectives for public use which are consistent with the land classification guidelines and the wild character of these lands.” See http://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/4979.html.
of the primitive classification supports Cronon’s idea that wilderness is a product of civilization. If, according to the APSLMP, wilderness can be created through the removal of “structures, improvements, or uses that are inconsistent with wilderness,” then the human involvement in the creation of wilderness is undeniable. Wilderness is the result of human decisions and human policies.

While this land classification system may unwittingly align with one element of Cronon’s argument, it reinforces what Cronon criticizes as a false duality. Cronon writes, “The wilderness dualism tends to case any use as ab-use, and thereby denies us a middle ground in which responsible use and non-use might attain some kind of balanced, sustainable relationship.” By placing the most value on areas where people are not, this construction of wilderness overlooks humanized landscapes closer to home that might teach important lessons about living with nature. Even though Cronon hoped to find more sustainable ways of living in nature, many environmentalists roundly criticized him. He was most vilified for the perceived political harm to the environmental movement.

About the debate, historian Char Miller writes, environmentalists “were appalled, in the wake of the 1994 Republican ascendancy in the state and national legislatures, that his words would give succor to the then-looming anti-environmental conservative backlash embodied in the so-called ‘Wise Use’ movement.” The extent to which Cronon

7 APSLMP, 26.


9 Char Miller, “An Open Field,” Pacific Historical Review 70 (2001): 73. The Wise Use movement gained national attention in the late 1980s and strongly advocated a decrease in government regulations and an expansion of private property rights. Movement supporters opposed environmental legislation and cast the environmental movement as elitists who were indifferent to the plight of the working class.
provided ammunition for enemies of conservation is debatable. More important is the fact that Cronon spoke about the long term benefits of having the environmental movement based on true principles and not cultural myths. It is undeniable that Cronon helped to instigate a lively debate and point discussion about wilderness in a useful new direction.

In many ways, the public has been slow to embrace some of the ideas espoused by Cronon and others. Culture has consistently reinforced a romantic view of wilderness and many proponents of wilderness love it solely because it is a place to escape the hustle and bustle of daily life and commune with nature. The public has been slow to embrace Cronon’s definition of wilderness because it sees it as antithetical to wilderness preservation and the prior definition is constantly reinforced by the definition of the law as well as the impact of culture. Writers such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson as well as paintings from Hudson River School artists first allowed the idea of the romantic wilderness to be engrained into national consciousness. While it is difficult to escape these oft-emphasized cultural constructs, there is worth in doing so. Both natural and cultural preservation are vital to human communities and by “embrace[ing] the full continuum of a natural landscape that is also cultural” 10 Adirondackers can hope to find a sustainable balance between nature and culture. This balance is especially important as increased development and climate concerns become a threat to the wilderness character of the park in the twenty-first century.

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10 Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness,” 85, 89.
Wilderness Land Management – The National Park Service

The conflict between natural and cultural preservation is not limited to the management of the Adirondack Park. The implementation of a national wilderness system in 1964 and the National Register of Historic Places in 1966 created a clash of values and legal mandates that emerged in the 1970s and has been fought in almost every park ever since. There are many areas across the country that can provide examples of relevant land management decisions. As stewards of the majority of wilderness areas in the United States, the National Park Service has faced several occasions where the preservation of nature and the preservation of culture have conflicted. The National Park Service defines wilderness in a manner consistent with the Wilderness Act of 1964. Both the act and the park service mention that wilderness may contain features with historic value and the park service document explains, “The presence of historic structures does not make an area ineligible for wilderness. A recommendation may be made to include a historic structure in wilderness if (1) the structure would be only a minor feature of the total wilderness proposal; and (2) the structure will remain in its historic state, without development.”¹¹ Once an area has been designated wilderness, the superintendent of each site will develop a Wilderness Management Plan to guide the management, use, and preservation of all resources. Yet there is little guidance for park managers on how to combine the interpretation of natural and cultural resources and most often an imbalance exists that results with the stress on wilderness that nearly omits the human history. Education and interpretation are the heart of the National Park Service’s work, but an

increasing emphasis on wilderness preservation education presents a challenge to the effective interpretation of cultural resources.

Meanwhile the National Register is an entity that has often been utilized as a means to evaluate the importance of solely historical and cultural resources. The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 set up a system to evaluate sites, buildings, and other objects that should be taken into account in the planning process. Part of this involved the creation of a register including “sites, buildings, objects, districts, and structures significant in American history, architecture, archaeology, and culture.”¹² In order for inclusion on the national register, the nominated party must document an association with a significant person, event, architectural style, or archeological discovery. In addition, the property must also fit a long list of criterion and pass through several stages of the nomination process. Although inclusion on the National Register does not ensure preservation, it is often used as a benchmark to determine whether a structure is worthy of preservation. The register lends national significance to properties that are primarily significant on a local or state level. Yet in light of its very strict criteria and nomination procedure, the National Register does not necessarily document cultural resources or structures that are valuable to the people of a local community. This represents a flaw in the register and can be harmful to the preservation cause if the structure or cultural resources is not eligible for the register.

It is important to remember that inclusion on the National Register does not prevent demolition and, like New York State’s Department of Environmental

Conservation, the National Park Service has also been guilty of dismantling or demolishing historic structures. In “The Trouble with Preservation, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Term for Wilderness Protection,” a study of National Park Service management at Point Reyes in California, Laura Watt examines the NPS’s efforts to recreate a pristine wilderness in an area that had been heavily logged and grazed and included nearby ranches still in operation. Some of the National Park Service’s efforts included destruction of historic structures, privileging certain historic eras over others, and implying that landscapes were more pristine than reality dictated. Although ranching had played an integral role at Point Reyes, it received only a scant mention in one corner of the main visitor’s center exhibit space. Furthermore, the environmental impact statement for the proposed wilderness area scarcely mentioned the former ranch sites inside the area’s boundaries yet emphasized the environmental damage caused by the remaining operational ranches outside of the wilderness area boundaries. Watt writes, “This omission distorts public understanding of the area’s past, perpetuating the myth of wilderness as ahistorical and purified of all traces of civilization.”

She laments the need to obscure history in order to aspire to a certain definition of wilderness. She also criticizes an apparent contradiction in the way the Park Service preserves nature versus buildings. Watt points out that the National Park Service has long opposed recreating historic buildings lest they mislead the public, but they are less concerned with misleading the public regarding natural landscapes that have been recreated. She suggests that the National Park Service should allow a historic wilderness where

13 Laura Watt, “The Trouble with Preservation, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Term for Wilderness Protection: A Case Study at Point Reyes National Seashore,” Association of Pacific Coast Geographers Yearbook 64 (2002), 68.
wilderness is managed as such, but where cultural resources are stabilized, restored, and interpreted through hikes, lectures, and audiovisual aids. Watt’s suggestions could easily apply to the Adirondack Park although some areas of the Adirondacks seem to have already adopted ways to interpret cultural resources.

Apostle Islands

Another area that possesses issues similar to Point Reyes, but where management decisions are still ongoing is Wisconsin’s Apostle Islands. Located on Lake Superior in the northernmost portion of Wisconsin, the National Park Service has administered these twenty-two islands since designating the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore in 1970. William Cronon wrote an article about the islands inspired by a 2003 NPS study recommending wilderness designation for the islands. Cronon expressed some worry about the wilderness designation because while the islands would constitute an important addition to the National Wilderness Preservation System, they are not merely an “untouched” landscape and should not be managed as such. The islands were home to the Ojibwe peoples for centuries, commercial activities such as fishing, logging, mining, and farming have taken place, and remnants of over a century of tourism remain. Cronon argues, “To acknowledge past human impacts upon these islands is not to call into question their wildness; it is rather to celebrate, along with the human past, the robust ability of wild nature to sustain itself when people give it the freedom it needs to flourish in their midst.”14 A complex human history created the islands and likewise the forest cover on the islands today is a result of a human influence that greatly impacted the

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“rewilding” on the islands. The problem was that a wilderness designation for the islands meant that “improvements” would be held to a minimum and there could be no interpretive signage. Structures would be razed or left to decay and trail maintenance would be minimal.

Cronon suggests an interpretive framework that follows fellow historian and former student James Feldman’s ideas about the islands. This interpretive framework is also important because it does not cast human interaction with the land through the lens of exploitation. Instead, Feldman argues, “rewilding landscapes should be interpreted as evidence neither of past human abuse nor of triumphant wild nature, but rather as evidence of the tightly intertwined processes of natural and cultural history.”

Feldman’s rewilding narrative would allow the Park Service to tell a tale of historical wilderness that would explain an abandoned plow blade or a rusting fence or even a carefully crafted stone foundation. He supports the idea that one should be able to encounter such remnants of human presence that would not ruin but enhance the wilderness experience. This type of interpretation would help the public recast ideas of wilderness. A cabin or shack in the wilderness should not automatically degrade the wilderness experience or downgrade the quality of the wilderness. The stories apparent

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15 The term “rewilding” was first used in this sense by James Feldman to explain the processes at work on the Apostle Islands.

16 Cronon advised Feldman’s dissertation at the University of Wisconsin, Madison and Feldman’s manuscript about the islands is scheduled for publication in 2010.

in the landscape of the Apostle Islands are important examples of ecological restoration and illustrate that wilderness indeed can be created.

In December 2004, the Gaylord A. Nelson National Lakeshore Wilderness Act was officially approved and signed into law. This federally approved wilderness area includes 33,500 acres, which is approximately 80% of the entire 42,308 acres that composes the land area of the islands. The wilderness area was named for former Wisconsin governor and US senator Gaylord Nelson who fought for the preservation of the islands. In 2006 the process of revising the General Management Plan for Apostle Islands began in order to address wilderness issues for the first time since the creation of the Gaylord Nelson Wilderness. This process, which is ongoing, has included several public sessions in order to get feedback for the development of the new plan. A draft of the plan will be released shortly and the public will again have the opportunity to comment on the specific proposals before the plan is finalized. The opportunity for public comment allows the NPS to gauge the way the public views wilderness through the ways the public advocates (or not) to preserve or utilize the land.

**Pinelands National Reserve**

A third example of NPS land management, the Pinelands National Reserve, showcases a unique example of the codependence between humans and nature. Situated on one million acres in Southern New Jersey, this area is not designated wilderness, but it has pioneered many smart-growth planning techniques such as timed growth, transfer of development rights, and conservation planning on an area that includes both pine forests

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and small hamlets. The natural features of the region, namely an abundance of marshes and bogs, served to limit the area’s development while the rest of New Jersey boomed. The reserve was designated in 1978 as an “effort to safeguard natural and cultural resources while maintaining patterns of compatible human use and development.” This designation was unique and differed from other nature preserves because it took into account the people living in the area and actually encouraged them to continue their traditional land use practices. This designation expressed faith that the people of the Pinelands were the best equipped to care for their homeland. It also illustrated that the region was important for the natural environment, but also for the local cultural traits including social patterns and economic activities that made the region distinct. Certainly the Pinelands National Reserve is managed very differently from the Adirondack Park and exists for very different purposes, but the unique relationship between the people and the land is similar. The Adirondack Park is a patchwork of public and private land and the struggle to co-exist has plagued the park since its creation over a century ago. Perhaps the Pinelands Reserve provides some answers to the tough question of sustainable co-existence.

**Adirondack Park Land Management**

While the Adirondack Park has stricter land protections than the National Park Service, similar management conflicts have occurred in areas within the forest preserve


that have both natural and cultural resources. In recent years, despite some opposition from environmental groups, changes in unit management plans have begun to favor cultural resources. These changes, however, are largely a result of public efforts to adapt Unit Management Plans to save what would be considered a non-conforming structure from removal. Entire communities have mobilized to form friends groups that work to not only save local fire towers from destruction, but to also restore them and provide summer interpreters. These structures may be saved, stabilized, restored, or any combination of the three, and while this in itself is important, it is the subsequent interpretation that is most revealing about attitudes towards wilderness.

Non-conforming structures are often unexpected discoveries for recreational users of wilderness lands. Not only fire towers, but also ruins in the Adirondack forest can complicate recreational visitors’ conceptions of and relationships with the land. Encountering these structures that disturbed the natural landscape on wilderness land adds a new layer to the conception of wilderness that is romantic, natural, and timeless. Man-made intrusions in the landscape allow the public to realize that wilderness in the Adirondacks was as much a creation as a road or a village. Through land management decisions and the subsequent interpretation of these structures, history can be used to enhance the public understanding of and appreciation for nature.

By the late 1970s, as great camp preservation was gaining ground and historic preservation was receiving more attention nationwide, many people began to think about the state of historic resources inside the Adirondack Park. A 1978 conference entitled “Cultural Heritage in the Wilds” was in part a result of these concerns. The conference
brought together state lawmakers as well as historic and environmental conservation advocates to discuss the future of cultural resources in the Park and find common ground. In her opening remarks, Lieutenant Governor Mary Anne Krupsak surveyed the stakes. She indicated that, “the wild areas also contain another kind of heritage – a cultural heritage of archeological, historical, and architectural vestiges of the life-styles of the region: Indians, trappers, hunters, entrepreneurs, early industries and mines, and many other evidences of the cultural development of the region.” She hoped that conference participants could examine important questions about state policy and brainstorm ways to creatively adapt reusable structures.

Historic preservation in the park was still a recent phenomenon and preservation campaigns had not yet moved beyond structures that were visible enough to easily garner public support. Nonetheless, the participants at this conference recognized the need to preserve more than just great camps. Commissioner of the Office of Parks and Recreation and State Historic Preservation Officer Orin Lehman noted, “Coach stops, mining camps, hermit camps and other structures and sites are other elements in the story.” The conference continued for two days and participants agreed that the enhancement and preservation of both forested and historical resources was a compatible venture. They believed Article XIV needed a more in depth legal review in order to develop a mechanism to deal with and ideally reuse historic structures.

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22 “Cultural Heritage in the Wilds,” 17.

23 Article XIV of the New York State Constitution is the governing principle for land use in the Adirondack Park. It requires that state owned lands within the Adirondacks and Catskills be kept “forever

did not concretely answer all of the tough questions regarding natural versus cultural preservation, but it provided a forum for discussion and a chance to find common ground. In the end, however, most of the conclusions addressed great camp preservation and, likewise, historic preservation in the Adirondacks would follow suit for the next two decades.\textsuperscript{24}

Despite satisfactorily solving the uncertain preservation status of many great camps by the beginning of the twenty-first century, the push and pull between natural and cultural preservation continued in the Park. In many ways, the issues raised in the 1978 conference remain very relevant today as lands designated as wilderness still contain non-conforming structures that many consider historic resources. In an area with a rich human history it is impossible to escape the physical remnants of human interaction with the wilderness and, since the state has continued to acquire more land, the acquisition of historic structures or ruins has gone hand-in-hand. While many of these physical remains are destroyed by the state, others are able to remain and, in doing so, they can teach valuable lessons to the public.

**Bog River Flow: Biological Ruins**

One example of an area with a rich human history that has been virtually ignored by the state of New York is the Bog River Flow. A 1994 article by Michael Wilson described the potential benefits of interpreting and educating the area’s steady stream of

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\textsuperscript{24} I say this not to downplay the importance of great camp preservation, which was vital to the historic preservation movement in the park. Additionally, the conference was held at Camp Topridge, which was owned by the state at this time, but faced uncertainty regarding funding and future uses.
recreational users. Wilson, Associate Director of the Sagamore Institute and visiting professor at SUNY Potsdam, first explores the idea of the historic compound in the park as an area “best viewed not as a primitive area (to be ‘upgraded’ to wilderness), but as a cultural landscape that will show the marks of human intrusion for centuries to come.”

Wilson advocates for interpretation of the area’s history and laments a missed opportunity for important lessons about the human impact on natural succession. The Bog River is also an interesting case because the area is not traditionally “pretty” like mountaintop vistas commonly treasured in the park; it is, instead, valued for its biodiversity. In the late nineteenth century, Abbot Augustus Low began to develop the area and constructed a rail station, a mill, and facilities with which to bottle spring water and maple syrup. Low also built housing for his family and his workers as well as two large dams for hydroelectric power. By 1909, however, Low had left the region and by World War I his descendants had sold their share in the land - save one structure that became a family retreat. The state acquired a portion of the land in 1978 and removed some buildings such as the rail station. In 1985, the remainder of Low’s land was added to the forest preserve and when public access to the entire Bog River Flow began, it soon became a popular canoe route.

Twelve structures remained from Low’s complex and by 1999 all were demolished by the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) in order to comply

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with the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan.\textsuperscript{27} The APSLMP designated the area as a primitive area, which meant one of two things: either the land “contains structures…that are inconsistent with wilderness…and whose removal…cannot be provided for by a fixed deadline,” or the land “contains, or is contiguous to, private lands that are of a size and influence to prevent wilderness designation.”\textsuperscript{28} Primitive classification covers both land areas where the goal is to upgrade the area to wilderness as well as land where wilderness classification is impossible to attain. Even though the DEC destroyed all of the Low estate, it could not erase his presence from the landscape since several stone foundations remained.\textsuperscript{29} In addition, both dams that Low built remain and have not been slated for demolition. Wilson argues that the dams are enough to preclude the Bog River Flow from future wilderness classification. Even if the dams were removed immediately, “there is an absolute loss of biodiversity which…would take millennia to restore.”\textsuperscript{30} Industrial use of the land and a significant fire severely affected the ecosystem and common bog dwelling plants continue to disappear, which means that the Bog River Flow is a place where both human and \textit{natural} ruins exist.

Since the publication of Wilson’s article, the Bog River Unit Management Plan was developed and passed by the DEC in 2002. This plan provides guidance for the use of the land and addresses the impact of past activities on the ecosystem. As a result of these efforts, the area continues to be managed with the goal of preserving its natural character.

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\textsuperscript{28} APSLMP, 26.

\textsuperscript{29} Bill Frenette, “Former A.A. Low Buildings Razed by State,” \textit{Tupper Lake Free Press}, February 10, 1999, 4. I do not mean to lament the loss of Low’s buildings because they were vandalized, in total disrepair, and full of asbestos. However, the more important point is that while the state might hope to return the area to its primitive state, the human impact and “historical footprint” remains.

\textsuperscript{30} Wilson, 27.
and management of the area. It echoes Wilson’s desire for historic interpretation of the Low estate and mentioned the permissible signage limits. In a primitive area interpretation is limited to “interpretive signs of rustic materials and in limited numbers.”\textsuperscript{31} The hope was to create a kiosk at the Upper Dam to provide historical information about the Low estate as well as a map with the location of historic buildings that includes a self-guided tour, but these plans were not fully realized. A desire for interpretation was apparent in the plan’s public comment section where several comments addressed the issues including one that read, “Need better interpretation of the history of the former Low estate.”\textsuperscript{32}

This area would be a perfect place to utilize interpretation to instill long-term stewardship in the minds of the area’s recreational users. As a heavily utilized canoe corridor with two Boy Scout camps nearby, the Bog River Flow would be an excellent tool to teach visitors about the interdependence of nature and culture. John Friauf, Jr. and Michael Wilson guided trips to the Bog River from the Sagamore Institute from 1991-1994, but few others who visit the landscape are able to gain the same type of understanding.\textsuperscript{33} The bog is a perfect example of the way the interdependence between nature and people resulted in the ecological ruin of the bog ecosystem and the way which nature has subsequently responded over time to human disturbances. Furthermore, ruins

\textsuperscript{31} “Bog River Unit Management Plan”, 39.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 113. Despite this comment and a few others concerning interpretation and the Low empire, most of the battles surrounding this UMP were related to the proposal to ban planes from landing on Lows Lake. The initial plan was to phase out planes and implement a total ban in five years time. This plan angered both environmental groups and plane owners. In April 2009 and amendment was added to the UMP that allowed planes to continue landing on Lows Lake, but utilizing a permit system and a limited number of yearly flights that will eventually be phased out.

\textsuperscript{33} Wilson, 31.
evoke a very different reaction than roadside panels, museum exhibits or nature trails. Ruins place people in the role of discoverer and often peak a natural curiosity and a sense of historical realism that is impossible with a freshly painted and neatly presented building. If only Adirondack educators had the means to parlay this visceral reaction into a greater understanding of natural succession, then the public may begin to gain a fuller understanding of the environment and the relationship of humans to it.

**Fire Towers**

While the Augustus Low and bog ecosystem ruins occupy just one small area of the park, fire towers are very common. More so than any other threatened structure, fire towers have engendered the most public support for preservation and restoration. Communities have banded together to form friends groups to restore, maintain, and interpret their local fire tower. Preservationists often strive to find new uses for historic structures in order to merit preservation and fire towers are an excellent example of adaptive reuse. Once used to spot fires in the forest preserve, fire towers are now vestiges of a bygone era. They have become popular destinations for hikers in the park because of the amazing views they provide. Fire towers also attract locals who have memories or a personal connection to former tower observers. History is more attractive to the public when it is personal and it is easy for many Adirondackers to feel a close connection to fire towers. In the last decade when many fire towers were slated for removal, the public zest for their restoration saved a number of them. Today, fire towers serve several purposes. They remind visitors, for example, of a time before aerial surveillance and before Smokey the Bear warned children and adults alike: “only you can
prevent forest fires,” which is evidence of the state’s long vigilance to protect the region. They also provide a way for Adirondack visitors and locals to experience both history and nature simultaneously. They exist as a testament to the hard work locals invested into restoration and lobbying efforts.

A series of devastating forest fires between 1903 and 1908 burned nearly one million acres of forest in the Adirondacks. As a result, the state began to systematize forest fire management through the creation of fire districts, the appointment of superintendents and patrolmen, and, finally, the construction of fire towers. Between 1909 and 1950, the state built fifty-seven fire towers in the park and hired observers to man the towers from dawn to dusk during the months of April through October. Originally made out of logs, the towers were built on mountaintop summits throughout the park. By 1916, the wooden structures were replaced with steel towers that ranged from forty to seventy feet in height. The state also built cabins to house the observers and improved the hiking trails to the towers. Fire towers soon became popular destinations for hikers and tower observers soon assumed a new role as an educator due to consistent interaction with hikers.

By the 1970s, the state began new methods of fire detection that were less expensive and more effective. The state implemented aerial surveillance and began to close towers found unnecessary. The state closed thirteen towers in 1988 alone after a 1987 study found that 96% of all fires were reported by local residents or passing

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motorists. By 1990 the last four towers closed and, while many began to deteriorate, local residents started to raise funds for tower restoration. Despite a lack of state funding for maintenance, the DEC asserted the importance of the fire towers to the region. DEC regional director Stuart Buchanan stated,

> The state fire towers have long been a symbol of the mission of the Department of Environmental Conservation in forest protection. Although they no longer serve this function, they remain a tangible part of the legacy of natural resource conservation in New York State and popular hiking destinations, just as they were in their heyday.

The DEC clearly recognized the importance of fire towers and though they did not spearhead preservation campaigns they were supportive and worked with groups through an Adopt a Natural Resource Program. The sentiment to preserve fire towers was strong and the DEC realized that many in the Adirondack Park felt a personal connection to the towers.

Fire tower preservation did not occur from a single initiative, but instead individual groups formed on a case-by-case basis to lobby for the restoration and interpretation of towers on state land. As per the 1972 Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan, fire towers were considered non-conforming structures and, therefore, were slated for removal within designated wilderness, primitive, or canoe areas. Fire towers in wild forest areas were not specifically slated for removal due to non-conforming status,

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35 Since the early twentieth century the public has become more attuned to reporting fires. Forest fire education coupled with a civic responsibility and an increased number of people populating the park during fire season steadily increased the number of fires reported by residents and visitors.


37 The APSLMP stipulated that fire towers were non-conforming in wilderness, primitive, and canoe areas if they no longer served their original purpose.
but they were still plagued by vandalism and deterioration. In the initial years following
the creation of the APA and passage of the APSLMP, several towers were dismantled.
The first to go was the tower from Whiteface Mountain, which was removed in 1972 and
reassembled two years later for display at the Adirondack Museum where it remains
today. The future removal of countless other fire towers loomed and as a result
campaigns to save them emerged all over the park. Most were successful and today fire
towers across the park have been preserved, restored, and staffed with summer
interpreters.

The campaign to preserve and restore fire towers first began in the early 1990s,
just years after the last manned towers were decommissioned. The movement gained
widespread support, but it was clear that fire tower preservationists faced some
opposition when the Pharaoh Mountain fire tower was irreparably vandalized in April
1992. The tower was first vandalized a year earlier, but the DEC made repairs to
stabilize the structure. When it was again vandalized later in 1992, the vandals sawed
through the two support legs and the structure toppled. Locals from nearby Schroon
Lake were devastated at the loss of the tower, which was visible from town and often
visited by school groups. The tower was then removed and airlifted off the mountain
by a DEC helicopter. This image became a symbol that inspired a grassroots response
and the formation of friends’ group throughout the park. Although no one was ever

38 The vandalism of the tower cannot be viewed in isolation. During 1989-1990, fierce battles
between environmentalists and locals erupted after the DEC closed the road leading to the tower, Crane
Pond Road, to motorized traffic. Local citizens groups and Earth First! clashed as the road barriers were
removed and replaced several times. See Martin Podskoeh, *Adirondack Fire Towers Their History and

charged with the crime, local residents speculated that the vandals belonged to a radical environmental group and targeted the tower to make a statement about the importance of strictly adhering to the law and removing all non-conforming structures from wilderness areas.  

In 1994 the Blue Mountain Fire Tower Restoration Committee was the first fire tower group to raise enough money to restore the tower, print an educational pamphlet, and hire a summer interpreter. Despite an act of vandalism in 1992 thought to have been carried out by the same individuals who vandalized the Pharaoh Mountain Fire Tower, supporters were not deterred. Early efforts to restore the tower began with the Adirondack Mountain Club, but they passed the reins to local interests once the project gained traction. The idea was broached at a February 1993 Long Lake Town Board Meeting and there was no resistance from the board.  

A representative of the DEC mentioned that the organization was not opposed to fire tower restoration; they just did not have the funds to do so. In fact, the DEC was pleased at the local initiative and fundraising. Private donations raised about one third of the funds while the Hamilton County Board of Supervisors made a substantial contribution to fund the restoration and hire a summit steward. Groups that joined the cause and played a role supporting the endeavor included the Blue Mountain Fire Tower Restoration Committee, Cornell University, the National Park Service, and the Adirondack Mountain Club.

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41 Blue Mountain and the town of Blue Mountain Lake are under the jurisdiction of Long Lake.

Cooperative Extension, the DEC, and Adirondack Architectural Heritage (AARCH).  

Education was the major impetus for the preservation campaign. According to James Briggs, Hamilton County Cornell Cooperative Extension office, “The unanimous opinion was that the educational potential of the towers should be the driving force…our primary goal is to utilize the mind-opening experience of visitors to the mountain summits, to help them learn what the Adirondack Park is all about and in the process preserve a slice of our rich heritage.” There was a sense that communities lost a valuable educational resource when the tower observers no longer occupied the summit and they hoped summer interpreters would fill that educational role. Chris Saunders, the first Blue Mountain summit steward during the summer of 1994, found that the crux of his job involved answering hikers’ questions. According to Saunders, people were most interested in the history of fire towers, wildfire, wildlife, and local camping. Saunders served as part historian, part naturalist, and part guide while working on Blue Mountain. Saunders also authored a guide for future summit stewards, which was important because the position expanded to other towers throughout the park.

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Often using the success of Blue Mountain as a model, other local grass roots campaigns formed to restore and interpret towers in wild forest areas. Friends groups successfully restored the fire towers on several mountains including, Hadley (1995), Arab (1998), Snowy (2001), Azure (2003), Poke-O-Moonshine (2005), and Bald (2005).

With the success of fire tower preservation in wild forest areas, there was also a desire to preserve towers situated in wilderness areas. A sense of urgency was generated when the state began to update individual Unit Management Plans in the 1990s. A new Unit Management Plan could specify the removal of the fire tower in an absolute way with a timetable or it could provide an opportunity to reclassify the land and preserve the tower. Yet before tower preservation supporters could fully tackle adapting unit management plans to preserve fire towers in wilderness areas, a situation arose where supporters had the chance to ensure the preservation of a tower on land that was about to become part of a wilderness area.

The Mount Adams fire tower was originally located on land owned by the National Lead Corporation, but in 2003 the Open Space Institute purchased the land.46 The Open Space Institute made the purchase with the intent that approximately 6,000 acres of the 9,600 acre purchase would be sold to the state and added to the High Peaks Wilderness Area. Fire tower enthusiasts had been worried about the tower’s future for several years when the land transfer seemed inevitable, but the Open Space Institute expressed a commitment to the tower’s preservation. Consulting with the Friends of

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46 According to their website, the mission of the Open Space Institute is to “protect scenic, natural, and historic landscapes to ensure public enjoyment, conserve habitats, and sustain community character.” They have protected more than 100,000 acres in New York through direct acquisition and conservation easements. “OSI’s Mission,” [http://www.osiny.org/site/PageServer?pagename=AboutOSI_Mission](http://www.osiny.org/site/PageServer?pagename=AboutOSI_Mission), accessed June 2, 2009.
Mount Adams who offered to restore both the tower and the observer’s cabin, the Open
Space Institute decided to retain .41 acres that included the fire tower and the .3 acres
with the observers cabin in order to prevent both structures from becoming non-
conforming. The plan was subject to Adirondack Park Agency (APA) approval, but in
April 2006 the agency approved the subdivision and the state moved forward with the
purchase. This was a unique solution to fire tower preservation since the state strongly
discouraged small private inholdings in the forest preserve, but the value of the 6000+
acre addition to the High Peaks Wilderness Area outweighed this concern.

Adirondack environmental groups were not unanimous in their support or
opposition to this proposal. The Adirondack Mountain Club and the Residents’
Committee to Protect the Adirondacks (RCPA) actively supported the preservation of the
Mt. Adams fire tower because it provided a view that was otherwise unavailable on the
wooded summit. While the membership of the Adirondack Mountain Club extends far
beyond the blue line as illustrated by the organization’s many chapters throughout the
state, the Resident’s Committee to Protect the Adirondacks strongly presents itself as a
grass roots organization with leadership solely from full time park residents. RCPA
Executive Director Peter Bauer mentions “Not only does a hiker get a tremendous view
of the High Peaks, but one can also see the old mine site and that hugely altered

47 Lee Manchester, “APA approves Plan to break up Newcomb’s Tawahus Tract,” Lake Placid
News, April 14, 2006, 11.

48 Residents’ Committee to Protect the Adirondacks, “About RCPA,”
http://www.rcpa.org/aboutrcpa.html, accessed June 4, 2009. The RCPA touts the fact that 100% of its
board members are full time Adirondack residents. This is unique among environmental groups in the
park.
Even though the RCPA only supported the retention of the fire tower because of the view, it is revealing that the organization saw the importance of hikers viewing the impacts of industry in the wilderness. On the other hand, the Adirondack Council opposed the plan partially because they had concerns about the effects of public visitors to the fire tower site. The Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks also supported this position and specifically found “the proposal to maintain the Mt. Adams fire tower and observer’s cabin as wholly inconsistent in an area where creation of unspoiled wilderness is the dominant objective of this acquisition.” The wording of this statement is interesting because for many the phrase “creation of unspoiled wilderness” is a misnomer and William Cronon would likely bristle at such a proclamation. Is it truly possible to remove entirely all traces of humanity from the landscape? In another vein, the quote from the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks reveals the idea that wilderness can be created. This creation, however, reemphasizes the dichotomy between man and nature since it dictates that removing human influences from the landscape results in wilderness. At the heart of the fire tower conflict, different ideas and values placed on wilderness revealed the ways environmental groups had begun to accept a more complicated definition of wilderness.

Not every party was pleased with the preservation of the Mount Adams Fire Tower, but this opposition was minimal compared to the battles faced by supporters of the St. Regis Mountain and Hurricane Mountain fire towers. When land in the


Adirondack Park received classification in the early 1970s, the St. Regis tower became part of a canoe area and the Hurricane tower part of a primitive area with both towers considered non-conforming structures. All four environmental groups who weighed in regarding Mt. Adams supported the removal of these two structures even though the opinions of their membership were divided on the issue. Although they had supported the retention of the Mt. Adams fire tower and have commended the restoration of several other fire towers, the Resident’s Committee to Protect the Adirondacks released a report in December 2004 recommending the removal of the St. Regis and Hurricane fire towers and asked the Adirondack Park Agency to expedite the process. They argued that the fire towers did not enhance the public experience and, in fact, actually detracted from the wilderness quality on these two mountain summits. In spite of these pressures from environmental groups, local residents sprang to the defense of the towers by gathering thousands of signatures, attending meetings, opposing the removal through local government, and remaining present in the dialogue.

In September 2001 the St. Regis tower was officially slated for removal and reconstruction at the nearby Visitor’s Interpretive Center. After this plan fell through, David Petrilli, a member of the Azure Mountain Friends group spearheaded efforts to save the tower and formed the Friends of St. Regis Mountain Fire Tower. He was able to collect 2,000 signatures as well as the support from the Franklin and Essex County

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52 Ned P. Rauch, “Fire Tower Moving to the VIC,” *Adirondack Daily Enterprise*, August 29, 2001, 1. A British mobile artillery unit was scheduled to remove the tower as part of their mountain maneuverability training. The troops, however, were dispatched elsewhere and the removal was indefinitely postponed.
Legislature and the towns of Brighton and Santa Clara. These efforts as well as the National Register eligibility of the tower were enough to earn it a temporary stay from removal. The St. Regis Fire Tower was granted a temporary reprieve after accepting the revised Unit Management Plan in June 2005. The UMP set forth a plan:

- Develop a comprehensive Adirondack fire tower management plan. The Department will work with the APA in the development of this plan through a process that includes public involvement. This plan will address all state owned fire towers in the Adirondack Park. Until this plan is completed the fire tower on St. Regis Mountain will not be removed.

The Friends of St. Regis Mountain Fire Tower continued to run a website to provide information to potential volunteers and individuals who support saving the tower. The site lists thirteen reasons why the tower should be saved. This list includes motives often repeated in similar campaigns throughout the park. Arguments cover issues such as environmental educational value, National Register inclusion, public support, and the success of other restoration efforts in the park. One unique bullet point, however, provided a slightly different rationale for supporting the tower’s existence. It reads, “Many see fire towers as a symbol of wilderness. This tower can be seen as a visual representation of the unspoiled forest.”

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53 While 2,000 may not initially appear to be a large number, it is a substantial amount when compared to local populations. According to 2000 census figures, the nearby villages of Lake Placid and Saranac Lake had approximately 2,638 and 5,041 residents respectively. Santa Clara, the town that encompasses the land with the fire tower had 395 residents and neighboring Brighton reported 1,682 residents.


man made structure as a symbol of wilderness speaks volumes about a more complicated public perception of wilderness that is moving away from the false dualism the separates humans from nature. Although many environmental groups argue that a fire tower will take away from the wilderness experience, the Friends of St. Regis argue instead that it will enhance the experience of wilderness for visitors.

To many, the fire tower represents a visible form of wilderness protection from the past. This idea has become more prevalent in fire tower interpretation. Azure Mountain Friends board member and volunteer summit interpreter Sandra Hildreth believes that visitors “know that the unbroken forest stretching out for miles is due exclusively to the fact that the fire tower is there.” 57 Whether or not the fire tower was entirely vital to the protection of the forests from fires, fire tower interpretation now makes a codependent connection between the wilderness and the structure. There is a strong connection between the forests and man, which contributes to a desire to preserve both. This connection, which is vital to the already preserved and annually interpreted Azure Mountain, can teach the public countless lessons about Adirondack history when the towers remain.

The Hurricane Mountain Fire Tower was also in jeopardy and it engendered more passionate support for both retention and demolition than any other tower in the park. The Friends of Hurricane Mountain Fire Tower formed in December 2004 and quickly worked to gather signatures and support for the tower. They collected resolutions and letters from nearby towns, state politicians, local fish and game clubs, and local elementary students. The group’s rallying cry, a quote often mentioned in the press,

57 Sandra Hildreth, email message to author, June 7, 2009.
came from a 90-year-old retired schoolteacher who proclaimed, “That tower on Hurricane Mountain is my Statue of Liberty! When I see it, I know I’m home. Why the heck do they want to take it down?” Yet for others the tower was much less aesthetically pleasing than the well-known New York landmark. In a May 2005 editorial to the Lake Placid News, C. Peter M. Fish, a thirty-year resident of Keene and former forest ranger, advocated strongly for the tower’s removal. The reasons he expressed were aesthetic and safety related. He echoed the rationale of the Resident’s Committee to Protect the Adirondacks and lamented the way the tower spoiled the mountain’s summit view. Fish even evoked the fallen Pharaoh Mountain Tower when he wrote, “I am hopeful that the tower will be removed to a new and safer place soon. I say the latter with a memory that the Pharaoh Mountain Fire Tower was cut down years ago by a person or persons unknown. It would be a terrible waste, if this was to be Hurricane’s fate.” Fish supported the relocation of the tower to the Washington County Fair, an option which had been frequently discussed.

This fire tower fight also reveals a resentment of outsider influence and a desire for local control. A quote from Gretna Longware, the most vocal member of the Friends of Hurricane Mountain, at the February 2005 APA meeting reveals one motivation behind the desire to preserve fire towers. She proclaimed, “We are people who were born here, worked here all our lives and love the area. We are also people who feel locals

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should have a certain say about things in our park.”  

Even though the RCPA, who has advocated for the tower’s removal, is comprised of local Adirondacks, a desire for rule at a local level permeates the dialogue and usurps even a regional stance.

The regional preservation organization Adirondack Architectural Heritage (AARCH) has provided one solution that has been strongly supported by the friends groups for both St. Regis and Hurricane. AARCH submitted letters to the DEC and APA that urged state lawmakers to reclassify the immediate area around the towers as Historic. It would seem that a historic classification provides the best solution to preserve the towers while remaining true to the Unit Management Plan. Yet the state has been hesitant to re-categorize wilderness to historic and Camp Santanoni was the only case where the state utilized this method for the sake of historic preservation.

By 2007, the fire tower was added to the National Register, which added some ammunition to the cause, and finally in October 2010 the Adirondack Park Agency’s Board of Commissioners voted unanimously to reclassify the land underneath the towers as historic. Commission Richard Booth, head of the State Lands Committee, remarked, “I think the reality is that historic resources are in a different place today than they were.

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60 Andy Bates, “Formerly used as viewpoints, fire towers are now debated as views,” Adirondack Daily Enterprise, March 18, 2005, 1.


62 This may be a permanent solution for all fire towers on wilderness land, but the state has not fully embraced this possibility.

in the 1970s. Society gives much greater recognition to them than they did. I think the
towers are absolutely tied to the history of the woods. While there is an impact on the
surrounding areas, other than aesthetic impact, it's an extremely limited impact. The
friends' groups for both mountains have begun to raise money for the restoration of the
towers and are optimistic about the future of the towers even though opponents of the
decision remain. Proponents from both sides spoke strongly about the need to preserve
or remove these two towers and the dialogue has revealed many people in the park
passionate about both wilderness and local landmarks.

Figure 14 – The Hurricane Mountain Fire Tower is currently in a state of disrepair. The
DEC removed the stairs to discourage hikers from climbing the tower, Keene, NY, 2009.

Fire Tower Interpretation

While the relationships between history, wilderness, and fire towers are
important, they may not be obvious to hikers who visit the towers unless interpretation is
available. Fire tower interpreters, also called summit stewards, have populated and

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continue to populate several towers during the summer months. In addition to keeping visitation records, they interact with the public to answer questions in a manner similar to the role of the original fire tower observers. Summit stewards talk about the surrounding environment including both the cultural history and the natural landscape. While summit stewards are an expense, several friends groups have sponsored college students to serve as ambassadors and educators to the public.

Immediately after restoration in 1994, the Blue Mountain friends group funded a summit steward, but because of financial limitations, the position has not been funded consistently during the past fifteen years. Other fire tower volunteer groups have followed suit and hired a summit interpreter. While education remains the main role, summit stewards have also deterred vandalism and, on the rare occasion, even spotted a fire. In 2002, while Sarah Gould served as Mount Arab’s summit steward, she also worked to develop a curriculum for school groups who visited the mountain. Young children have less of a personal connection to the towers than their parents or grandparents, but school programs bridge this gap and create a continuing connection. Various youth contingents have proved essential to the continuing maintenance and restoration of Mt. Arab through both fundraising efforts and volunteer work crews.65 This kind of work begins a new type of connection to the tower for the next generation.

Working as a volunteer with the Azure Mountain Friends group inspired Sandra Hildreth to create a fire tower lesson plan for the Adirondack Curriculum Project. The Adirondack Curriculum Project, which began in 2000, was formed to integrate the

cultural and natural resources of the Adirondack Park into the classroom. The project currently exists as an online collection of individually submitted lesson plans designed to bring Adirondack Park issues into the schools. Ms. Hildreth’s lesson plan contains two parts entitled “Adirondack Fire Towers: Are They Worth Saving” and “Adirondack Fire Towers: How can you become involved?”66 Not only can this lesson plan provide classrooms with an ample opportunity to teach local history, it can also give students a chance to understand how local history can impact and inform current debates in the park. Ms. Hildreth has retired from teaching, but continues to occasionally volunteer as a summit interpreter each summer. Of the experience she writes, “I have made some interesting discoveries - the mountain is very personal to many people - they climb it every year with friends or family, almost like a pilgrimage.”67 This close connection motivates both residents and vacationers to climb the mountain and stimulates much of the conversation with the interpreters. Since it formed in 2001, the Azure Mountain Friends group has remained active and members volunteer on the summit each weekend during the summer. Most fire tower friends groups remain independent and each group operates differently, but more recently many groups have tapped into a program at SUNY Potsdam in order to utilize environmental studies students to serve as interpreters.

Under the supervision of the DEC and local friends’ groups, SUNY Potsdam students have been a major source of summit stewards since 2004. Students majoring in environmental studies are required to complete a capstone experience that involves

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67 Sandra Hildreth, email to author, June 7, 2009.
working as a fire tower interpreter. Coursework including a “Field Preparation” course prior to the actual fieldwork provides students with an understanding of the natural and cultural history of the park as well as the relationship of the past to current issues and conflicts in the park. In preparation, students read Cronon’s “The Trouble with Wilderness” as well as many other essays also published in *The Great New Wilderness Debate*. Formed and implemented by Michael Wilson, Sagamore’s Associate Director and Director of SUNY Potdam’s Adirondack Field Studies Program, the program was created to provide students with an education about the park and also provide a benefit for the park through an integral service-learning component. The fire tower interpreter experience offers students the opportunity to work as an employee of the DEC and the local fire tower friends’ group – two groups that are often in opposition. Wilson believes that the Adirondacks serve as a model for public and private cooperation in a way that is entirely unique. He often tells students, “If you learn about the park, what it does and what it doesn’t do, you can work anywhere.” As interpreters, students are asked to develop a ten minute spiel about the Adirondack Park, threats to the park’s future, and the implications of the split between public and private land. They also develop a second ten-minute spiel about the tower itself, how it relates to conservation history, and the local involvement integral to the preservation of the tower.

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In addition to creating the Potsdam program, Wilson also founded a central fire tower organization named the Adirondack Fire Tower Association. The organization was formed to provide a way for fire tower friends’ groups to gain non-profit status as well as initiate a forum for common problems. The Adirondack Fire Tower Association is presently trying to develop a universal guide to fire tower interpretation to use as a training tool. This organization, which was formed to serve as a central body supporting individual fire tower groups to provide education and stewardship, has proposed some interpreter guidelines or standards for the fire tower interpreter. Realizing the importance the public educational mission to the legal justification for retaining fire towers, the Adirondack Fire Tower Association asserts, “serving educational purposes becomes by loose interpretation and default the primary legal justification in the SLMP for the preservation of Adirondack fire towers.”

Furthermore, even though this project began with Potsdam students, the Adirondack Fire Tower Association hopes to standardize a fire tower educational model for students as well as a larger population of tower interpreters.

In addition to fire tower interpreters, some mountains have interpretive pamphlets available to visitors. These pamphlets often provide facts without any perspective or context on the tower or park and they are no substitute for interaction with an interpreter. For example, Poke-O-Moonshine Mountain, whose tower re-opened after restoration in 2005, provides visitors with a pamphlet at the trailhead. The pamphlet guides visitors on a naturalists’ trail with eleven stops along the way to the summit that highlight the

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mountain’s flora and fauna. This pamphlet attempts to educate the public in order to instill a greater sense of stewardship and awareness of the fragility of ecosystems especially alpine communities on many summits. Interpretive pamphlets are common, but few towers have permanent interpretive signage. The most notable example, however, was recently installed at Bald Mountain, which is one of the most heavily visited towers in the park with over 20,000 visitors annually. In 2008, the Friends of Bald Mountain in conjunction with the Department of Environmental Conservation unveiled a new kiosk at the mountain’s trailhead. This panel provides a short history of fire surveillance on Bald Mountain and includes some historic photos of the tower as well as images of the recent restoration. The photographs emphasize the view from the tower and the text provides some background about the experience of life as a fire observer. The recent addition of this panel was made possible by many donations and is one indication of the tower’s increasing popularity. Concurrently, visitation numbers to fire tower summits across the park have been on the rise and fire towers have become a form of alternative tourism in the Park that provides both an educational and wilderness experience. Hikers are often pleased to encounter both a fire tower and a friendly face at the mountain.

Figure 15 – Interpretive Panel at the Bald Mountain Trailhead, Old Forge, NY, 2009
summit after a long trek up the mountain. Interpretation, especially presented by modern day summit stewards, can serve as an important tool to educate visitors about the historical and natural features of the land as well as the current realities and threats facing the surrounding environment. Interpretation can provide a purpose for the hike and it can aid visitors in making an important link between the tower and the landscape readily viewable from the summit.

Ruins

As New York State has continued to update Unit Management Plans with zeal, fire towers are not the only cultural resources that have been addressed. Beginning in 2001 and 2002, historical ruins have become a subject of discussion during Unit Management Plan revision. Ruins were often slated for destruction in earlier versions of the plan, but these ruins were a low priority and a lack of funding and manpower stalled any action. In the interim, varying levels of local support for the retention of ruins appeared. While efforts to save pieces of the cultural fabric of the former Whitehouse area in the Silver Lake Wilderness Area failed, the Sagamore Institute lobbied with greater success against the destruction of Great Camp Sagamore’s hydroelectric plant in the Blue Ridge Wilderness Area. Together, these two cases illustrate the problematic place ruins play in the management of the Adirondack Park landscape.

Whitehouse Ruins

The Whitehouse area sits along the West Branch of the Sacandaga River and was first settled in the late nineteenth century. Today, it is a very popular camping location and part of the Northville-Lake Placid hiking trail, but historically it was the site of a
lumber camp, followed by a private hunting lodge, and later a boys’ camp. The main
structure, a white house, along with several cabins could accommodate fifty boys
attending Mountain Terrace Camp during the summer. In addition to operating
Whitehouse as a popular hunting lodge, the proprietor from the early 1900s, Lee
Fountain, was well known throughout the park for his well-crafted Adirondack furniture.
In 1962, after the state purchased the Whitehouse property, it burned the buildings to the
ground. Today, only a few foundations and cellar holes, a family cemetery, and two
stone chimneys remain.\footnote{New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, “Silver Lake Wilderness Area Unit Management Plan,” April 2006, \url{http://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/lands_forests_pdf/slwaump.pdf}, 2-3. Although cemeteries do not conform to wilderness guidelines set forth in the APLSM, they cannot be removed due to their unique legal status.} The state did not remove the chimneys, however, and they became a topic of discussion in 2001 when the park began to redo the Unit Management Plan for the area and recommended removal of the two chimneys.

Even though a major reason for the recommended removal of the chimneys was safety, many local residents still hoped to retain the ruins. Discussions about the chimney’s future sparked a clash of values between several local residents and the Department of Environmental Conservation. Deliberations about the future of the chimneys went public after the DEC released a draft of the Unit Management Plan in 2005. The state welcomed public comments and considered the reasons for and against removal of the chimneys.

The final plan included several examples of public opinion and revealed, “Numerous public comments opposed the proposal to phase out the stone chimney’s at Whitehouse because they felt the chimneys were of significant cultural value and DEC
needs to recognize the heritage and history of the local area and people.”73 Other comments also requested more interpretive information and a cultural center detailing the area’s history even though such a structure would not conform to wilderness management policies. On the other side, the DEC also received numerous comments supporting the chimney removal, noting that the chimneys were a safety hazard and did not conform to wilderness statutes. While the DEC did not wish to downplay local history, their historic preservation officer determined that the chimneys were not historically significant and therefore ineligible for the national register. In the end, the plan approved in April 2006, recommended immediate removal of one chimney, citing safety concerns, and the eventual removal of the other chimney.

It was the final draft of the plan that inspired Susan Allen and Carol LaGrasse, local residents and members of the Property Rights Foundation of America, to travel the route to Whitehouse in April 2006.74 They posted photographs and a trip summary on the Property Rights Foundation’s website. They opposed the actions of the Department of Environmental Conservation and straightforwardly stated, “[the] DEC would be promoting the destruction of local cultural heritage and…would be destroying local historical vernacular architecture and civil engineering work.”75 LaGrasse and Allen did

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73 Silver Lake Wilderness Area Unit Management Plan – Appendix A, 94.

74 The Property Rights Foundation of America is based in the Adirondack Park and is dedicated to the fundamental right to own and use private property as guaranteed in the US Constitution. Even though by name they appear to be a national organization, they focus primarily on issues in New York State. Carol Lagasse, one of the important players, has written several newspaper columns that argue her strong anti-regulation views. All of her actions, views, and writings reflect a strong desire for less government in all aspects of societal life.

not make the trek because they were solely concerned about the chimneys; while they were opposed to the proposed chimney removal they also strongly opposed the closure of a road accessing the chimneys and several nearby campsites. The trip account exposed strong feelings against the DEC and worry about the future of local heritage that the “DEC is inexorably destroying as the radical environmentalists carry out their long-term plan to depopulate the Adirondack region.”76 This quote reveals the strong divide felt strongly by some local park residents. Certainly not everyone who has supported retaining the chimneys believes that the Adirondacks are being hijacked by environmental radicals, but this is an example of local support for the retention of ruins.

A more recent show of support came from Don Williams who contributed a July 2009 article for *The Leader-Herald*, a Gloversville newspaper. In July 2009 over three years after the release of the Unit Management Plan the chimneys remained and supporters continued to advocate for their survival. Williams characterizes the struggle and writes, “Unfortunately, there are those in higher places who want to tear down the Whitehouse chimneys, a short-sighted decision to wipe out more of our Adirondack heritage, a trend that is gaining too much momentum in today’s callous world.”77

Williams is a lifelong Adirondack resident and guide who has published several books about the Park’s history and has remained devoted to preserving an appreciation of the past so it is no surprise that he supports the retention of the chimneys. He uses strong


words in this piece, but it is important to note that he is not alone in the fight. Since there has been no action on the chimneys since the plan was finalized in 2006, there is still a chance albeit small to amend the unit management plan and preserve the chimneys.

Even though local preservation efforts have not been successful in this case, the desire on behalf of the public to preserve culture in a wilderness area speaks to a growing integration of the two. The National Park Service has utilized National Register eligibility to determine areas to include when doing a Cultural Landscape Inventory.78 Furthermore, National Register inclusion is often the benchmark for the state consideration of historical significance. However, this was not the case for local peoples who considered these chimneys significant despite their poor condition and lack of historical integrity. In order to be eligible for the National Register, the chimneys would need to maintain integrity and since they now stand alone without the rest of the complex, they do not meet several of the integrity criterion including setting, association, and design. In addition, the chimneys are in poor physical condition and they do not meet National Register standards through a relationship to a significant event or person.

Since there have often been differences between national register eligibility and local cultural importance, one local organization decided to provide an opportunity for communities to recognize their cultural heritage in a way that was easier and more accessible than a National Register nomination. The brainchild of Traditional Arts in Upstate New York (TAUNY), the Register of Very Special Places (RVSP) looks to

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recognize cultural landmarks important to local communities in the North Country.\textsuperscript{79} Common to many preservation projects, the push to recognize and document local places with cultural value began only after the loss of one. In 1996, Canton shoe repair shop proprietor Herbie Haven died and his shop, a community staple for thirty-five years, was dismantled and lost forever without documentation. The register has provided an opportunity for local residents to develop an interest in naming and documenting their own local cultural landmarks. Landscape features that have been suggested for this register include ‘flat rocks’ for swimming and a village green.\textsuperscript{80} Both are places and objects traditionally unrecognized by historic preservationists, but such features reveal much about the way local residents value and interact with their surrounding environment. Even though the register does not include any ruins, it is a testament to the ways local communities value the built environment while living beside the forest preserve.

\textbf{Sagamore Ruins}

Continuing to explore ruins in wilderness lands brings back Great Camp Sagamore whose integral role in great camp preservation was discussed in Chapter Two. Sagamore’s Unit Management Plan was a different story than that of the Whitehouse chimneys; when this plan was finalized in June 2006, the Sagamore ruins were officially retained and demolition was no longer mandated. Although some may argue that this contradicts Article XIV, the state used this Unit Management Plan to legitimize the

\textsuperscript{79} TAUNY represents the fourteen northernmost counties in New York State. Eight of these counties have land that is part of the Adirondack Park.

presence of ruins in wilderness lands. The change in the Unit Management Plan endorsed the Sagamore Institute’s rationale for interpreting the ruins to the public and set an important precedent for the inclusion of human history into the concept and designation of wilderness.

The ruins addressed in the Unit Management Plan focus on a self-contained hydroelectric complex constructed in 1915 to provide electricity to the camp. Sagamore also has ruins of a farm complex that have long since decayed. Structures such as a barn, cottage, sugar shack, and boathouse were built with wood and they have decomposed to the point where removal is a moot point. In most cases, the only thing remaining is a foundation or alterations to the natural contours of the landscape.\textsuperscript{81} On the other hand, the hydroelectric complex was built with concrete, steel, and bricks and the mark on the landscape remains considerable.

In a historical sense the hydroelectric complex impacted life at Sagamore. Although nearby towns did not yet have electricity, camp owner Alfred G. Vanderbilt wanted to have the best technology and he employed a skilled engineer whose sole responsibility was to oversee and maintain the hydroelectric plant. Even though Sagamore had electricity over fifteen years before the neighboring town of Raquette Lake, the system itself was not entirely reliable and was replaced in about fifteen years time. The hydroelectric system depended on a steady stream of water and, if that stream dried up, there would be no electricity. At times it was less reliable than the gas light system it replaced, but it was nevertheless important to the development of the camp’s

infrastructure. In addition, the importance of the hydroelectric system was recognized by its inclusion as a contributing structure in the Sagamore nomination for the State and National Register as well as the camp’s National Landmark nomination. These designations were enough justification for the DEC to also consider the hydroelectric complex historically significant. Had the ruins been ineligible for the National Register, forced removal would have been much more likely. While the National Register is a useful tool to make a distinction about historical value, National Register eligibility does not necessarily determine what is culturally or historically significant to a community.

After initial construction, the hydroelectric complex consisted of a small dam on the South Inlet just over a mile away from the main camp, a 9’x 12’ valvehouse made of brick with a concrete roof, a 26’ x 33’ powerhouse, several stone raceways for water flow, a wooden penstock, and countless transmission lines.82 Today there no traces of the transmission lines remain, and the only remnants of the penstock that exist are the steel ribs that used to hold it together. The dam has been breached but remains in stable condition and any further changes in water flow appear unlikely. The valvehouse and powerhouse are also structurally sound and stable despite some vandalism and missing hardware. The forest has begun to intrude on these structures and they are not easily visible from the closest hiking trail. Visitors to the ruins are most commonly current Sagamore guests because the ruins are important to Sagamore’s mission and interpretive plan.

82 “Blue Ridge Wilderness Unit Management Plan,” 213-214, 259
There are countless ruins in wilderness areas across the country that do not conform to the rules set forth by land management statutes, but their continued existence is more commonly attributed to a lack of funds or manpower to coordinate their removal than to a policy change. Sagamore is one of very few examples where the unit management plan has been adapted to overrule general policy and align with the reality of wilderness which is intertwined episodes of natural succession and human intervention. Despite the sense inherent in this change, the new plan was not just blindly accepted. While the DEC did change the Unit Management Plan governing Sagamore’s hydroelectric plant ruins, the plan included other possible alternatives and the discussion that led to that decision.

The plan’s chosen alternative read: “Allow the ruins of the structures and improvements within the bounds of the former Sagamore estate to remain, subject to the forces of nature. Take the minimum action needed to remove public safety hazards and leave the valvehouse and powerhouse open for public viewing (the ‘no action’
alternative).”\(^{83}\) For the purpose of preservation and interpretation, the “no action” alternative was preferred given the constraints of the State Land Master Plan, which would not permit maintenance or signage. Again the idea of changing a portion of the land from a wilderness designation to a historic designation did not appear as a viable option. The next alternative involved the removal of the entire complex. The plan detailed this process which would involve destruction using explosives, motorized equipment, and hand tools before removing the debris with horse drawn wagons or helicopters with slings (since motorized vehicles are not allowed in wilderness areas). A third alternative suggested demolition without removal of the rubble. The final alternative recommended no action for the powerhouse and valvehouse, but recommended destruction of the dam with the same removal tactics proposed earlier.\(^{84}\)

The discussion of the alternatives mentioned that full demolition and removal would do the most to return the area to wilderness conditions, but this option also involved considerable disadvantages. The Unit Management Plan explicitly valued the ruins as “significant components of Sagamore’s National Historic Landmark designation considered vital to Sagamore’s educational mission and interpretive programs.”\(^{85}\) In addition to the educational value of ruin retention, the proposed destruction and removal would have constituted a considerable disturbance to the natural environment. It would take decades or longer for the area to recover from full-scale removal, whereas the natural environment and the human additions are currently coexisting peacefully. It may

\(^{83}\) “Blue Ridge Wilderness Unit Management Plan,” 379.

\(^{84}\) Ibid., 379-381.

\(^{85}\) Ibid., 382.
have been the intent of the document’s contributors to make these options sound absurd in order to clearly illuminate the fact that retaining the ruins was the best option.

As has become standard for the process of updating Unit Management Plans, the plan is always available for public comment during the development phase. The Department of Environmental Conservation does take suggestions into account in order to listen to the voice of the public. Michael Wilson, Sagamore’s Associate Director, made considerable contributions to the text regarding Great Camp Sagamore and the importance of the ruins to Sagamore’s interpretation and educational mission. The plan itself included some examples of common responses. Comments regarding the Sagamore ruins all requested a more intensive approach with some maintenance and display, which shows that the public does have awareness and an interest in the duality of natural and cultural resources. When the Unit Management Plan was finalized in June 2006, it legally validated and reinforced the interpretive plan Sagamore already had in place.

Sagamore’s staff has always interpreted the cultural history and architecture of the camp in relation to its wilderness setting. Because the educational mission of the Sagamore Institute seeks to understand “nature, people, and their critical interdependence,” these ruins are crucial to providing a physical example of the intertwined nature of ecological succession and human history. According to the plan, the Sagamore staff reports, “the reactions of their guests have taught them that the decaying ruins of Sagamore’s historic structures are powerful object lessons.”86 Visitors to Sagamore can encounter the ruins in two different ways. Even though the two-hour guided tour for visitors does not physically encounter the ruins, they play a role during a

86Ibid.,” 215.
tour station when the historic interpreter discusses the relationship of the adjacent Blue Ridge Wilderness Area to the camp. Overnight visitors to the camp also encounter the ruins during guided or self-guided hikes. Sagamore distributes maps to guests that indicate the trails and the placement of the ruins on state land. There are also outside hikers who see the ruins, but individuals not associated with Sagamore only sporadically use the trails because signage is sparse and other hikes in the area are more popular. It is also common, however, for visitors taking Sagamore’s guided tour to return in order to see the hydroelectric plant ruins.

The 2006 revisions to the Unit Management Plan are important for many reasons. Foremost, it shows a move away from a monolithic condemnation of all non-conforming structures on wilderness land, which in turn represents the beginning of an acceptance of a natural and cultural history of wilderness that is more based in the actuality of the history of Adirondack lands rather than a romantic myth. It contradicts the idea that an enduring ahistoric nature is entirely independent from humanity. Ruins on perceived wilderness lands present a different type of wilderness than is expected given the idea of the romantic, untouched, pristine wilderness that remains the prevailing cultural model. While this encounter might complicate ideas about wilderness, interpretation of the landscape can certainly enhance understanding and appreciation for nature and our human relationship with the land.

The retention of ruins, however, is nearly inconsequential to the public without education and interpretation. It is true that a sense of mystery can evoke a more organic response to ruins when visitors can contemplate meaning without being instructed what
to think. Yet without any interpretation, hikers are likely to be unaware of the true meaning of the presence of the hydroelectric plant ruins. Most cannot recognize a landscape profoundly altered by human intervention or see the ecological recovery occurring since the plant ceased use in the 1930s. The ruins can teach visitors about the recovery of natural landscapes and to see wilderness as a process. The physical ruins raise important questions such as: Do the structures still dominate the landscape? How has nature begun to take over the structures? How does the dam impact the stream? Answers to these questions can serve as a catalyst for the public to understand the widespread and long standing impact of human intervention. The understanding that wilderness in the Adirondack Park is as much a human creation as the establishment of villages and camps also complicates the traditional romantic idea of wilderness.

Providing further interpretation of the landscape would be an excellent opportunity to begin to change the public perception of the Adirondack wilderness as a place only affected by the forces of nature to a different perception of a landscape that was created and molded by human processes.

Finally, the relationship between the Department of Environmental Conservation and the state has been the subject of much unhappiness in the park due to battles between various stakeholders and, as a result, the DEC must pick and choose battles wisely. Since the establishment of the park there have been debates over how to best manage the land and the removal of historic treasures, such as the outbuildings of great camps and especially fire towers, can be a very unpopular decision. Among residents and visitors to the Adirondacks, however, many support the retention of cultural resources as was
apparent in the public comment sections of several updated Unit Management Plans. Fights to save fire towers have caused residents to mobilize in a way that builds community and historical pride. The towers are a direct connection to the past since many people have relatives or friends who used to work as tower observers. Many friends groups exist to protect, care for, and maintain the towers and the trails leading up to them. To remove pillars of community and historical landmarks such as these would certainly create a lot of anger and resentment. This does not garner overall support for the DEC or many of its strict preservation policies in the park that have angered locals for years. The DEC has limited resources and should choose wisely where to best utilize these resources.

These examples of land management decisions in the Adirondack Park and the resulting public sentiment provide a way to examine attitudes towards wilderness. Fire tower preservation and interpretation illustrates a sense of wilderness that has moved beyond the idea that the human world and the natural world occupy two separate spheres. By visiting fire towers and listening to a tower interpreter, the public is able to understand the role of humans in the creation of wilderness and likewise recognize the fact that the existence of fire towers does not diminish the wilderness experience, but instead enhances it. Similarly, a wilderness hike that includes an encounter with ruins also emphasizes the story of a peopled wilderness and promotes a new understanding of the forest that brings into question the relationship between nature and culture. Through the reconsideration and adaptation of land management plans in the Adirondack Park, the state is beginning to accept small portions of an idea of wilderness that moves closer to
the understanding advocated by William Cronon. But why is it important for the public perception of wilderness to be recast? Understanding the history of the landscape allows full time residents, part time residents, and visitors to see the forces at work molding their landscape and how they affect the present and future. The availability of interpretation addressing the historicism of the landscape can further enhance and advance a public appreciation for nature that can only help but to ensure its future. The balance between people and nature has always been integral to the Adirondack Park and, while it is often a tenuous balance, the interpretation of human built artifacts in the forest helps to make it a little more stable.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE RUSTIC CRAFT:

RUSTIC FURNITURE, ADIRONDACK CRAFTSPEOPLE, AND THE

ESTABLISHMENT OF A REGIONAL STYLE

The deep forest in literature and the arts is a place of loss, trial, and salvation, an allegorical stage on which mankind wrestles with good and evil. Hence, our response to Nature goes far deeper than the pleasure of inhaling fresh air and watching a beautiful sunset. A rustic chair is a chair; it can be a key to the unconscious as well.1

-Craig Gilborn, 1987

While traveling through any main thoroughfare in the Adirondack Park, drivers are often distracted by immense rock cliffs, changing autumn leaves, and vast peaks towering in the distance. While these natural features attract millions to the Park, upon closer view another common trait emerges on these winding Adirondack roads. Chairs. Take a look at any porch whether it is at a bar, cabin, or the countless small motels lining the roadsides. What you will see time and time again are variations of the same chair. Known to the rest of the world as the Adirondack chair, this simple chair turned the word Adirondack into a household term. Now more than just a park or a region, the word Adirondack has become a style represented by architecture, several types of furniture, and, most notably, the Adirondack chair. It is a type of chair that has become synonymous with vacation and relaxation. The seat and the back of the chair is

contoured in a way that allows weary travelers to lean back and take in the view. The wide armrests allow total relaxation of the hands and plenty of room to rest food or drink. To visitors driving by, the thought of sitting in an Adirondack chair represents relief and escape from the world’s worries. It promises a return to simple values. The chair assures relaxation and a return to the vacation mentality, which is why it has remained a popular purchase. Adirondack chairs have become a common piece of outdoor furniture and they bring a little piece of wilderness to one’s very own front porch.

**Introduction**

Great camps, fire towers, forests, and historic landscapes are not the only things to evoke the spirit of Adirondack history; it has also passed down from generation to generation through a tradition of artistry and craftsmanship. While exhibits, tours, and land management statutes present an interpretation of Adirondack history as well as an interpretation of the connection of people to nature, the techniques inherent in the creation Adirondack furniture also showcase a specific understanding of nature. Construction methods, material selection, and rustic design are steeped in a deep tradition that represents over a century of talented artisans and local workers. This type of work represents a harmonious relationship between man and nature through the creation process, but it also can turn nature into a commodity. Increasing in intricacy from log cabin to great camp, a regional style emerged that has remained a primary feature of the region and a strong illustration of the close connection between the lives and attitudes of craftsmen and their patrons.
An analysis of architecture, furniture, art, and other Adirondack crafts can reveal much about the builder as well as the patron.2 Craftspeople who utilize indigenous materials to build and create things in this style have played an important role in the Adirondacks both culturally and economically. Yet while craftsmanship is an integral part of local identity, the rustic style helms an industry that extends far beyond regional boundaries and provides the rest of the nation with a face to the Adirondacks. Even today many outside the park utilize a specific “Adirondack” style to build and decorate homes, which is beneficial to those inside the park who depend on income from Adirondack shops or carpentry work. After its initial popularity in the early portion of the twentieth century, the Adirondack rustic style experienced a renaissance in the 1970s that has continued through the present. Individuals such as rustic craftsmen Jack Leadley and storyteller Bill Smith are known outside the park for their work as well as their lifestyle. They provide a direct connection to the past in a way that reinforces the rustic aura that has become inextricably tied with the Adirondack region.

This chapter will explore traditional Adirondack craftsmanship and the rustic style as an interpretation of nature. History can be experienced through museums, historic sites, tours, and ruins, but the spirit of the past also exists in material culture that is independent of historic institutions and buildings. By exploring the meaning of traditional crafts to both Adirondack craftspeople and outsiders, this chapter will explore the vernacular origins of what has now become a major industry. Art and architecture reveal a new aspect of the relationship between the land and the people and present an interpretation of nature by the artist. In addition, more recent exhibitions with a focus on

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2 Some of these items that have a rich history in the Adirondacks are balsam pillows, carvings, packbaskets, guideboats, and rustic style furniture.
rustic furniture also reveal a contemporary interpretation of an industry that has gained a strong foothold in the Adirondacks since the 1970s. These exhibitions, which began when the Adirondack Museum opened a rustic furniture exhibition in the summer of 1976, went hand-in-hand with an increase in the commercial appeal of the rustic style. It is the commercial availability of these pieces and their continuing production and popularity that reveals important attitudes towards nature and the park. There is an ongoing connection between people and the natural environment, which the rustic Adirondack style helps to facilitate with the use of natural materials. The first wave of rustic furniture and its late twentieth century renaissance of the Adirondack rustic provide a useful window into nature’s eminence in the Adirondacks and likewise into the lives of those connected to the Adirondack Park.

**What is Rustic?**

Adirondack furniture and architecture have been the most popular exports from the region. Both architecture and furniture reveal a distinct style: the rustic. Yet the rustic as a style remains unacknowledged by the larger architectural community and a concrete universally recognized definition is lacking. So, how does one categorize and define what are the most common attributes of the rustic style? Some of the descriptors commonly associated with the word rustic such as simple, unsophisticated, artless, or rough reveal a negativity that is somewhat misleading and cannot be employed in a serious analysis of the Adirondack rustic style. It is true that rustic architecture and furniture utilizes materials kept close to its natural state, but these pieces can be very, very complex and few would call rustic creations either artless or unsophisticated. Yet

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3 Even though Adirondack chairs are now mass-produced in plastic, they continue to appeal to the masses and represent relaxation and the outdoors.
the architectural and artistic communities have been slow to seriously recognize the rustic
and these negative descriptors relate to prevailing attitudes held by those working with
more “sophisticated” faire.

An exhibition at the Adirondack Museum during the 2007 and 2008 seasons
entitled “Adirondack Rustic: Nature’s Art, 1876-1950” offered only a very narrow
definition of the rustic aesthetic. The exhibit showcased several examples of furniture
that the exhibit did not consider rustic including a willow rocker, hickory chair, and chess
piece table. Indeed, the exhibit actually spent more time describing what was not rustic
than providing a true definition of the word. The inability of this exhibit to provide a
satisfactory definition of the rustic aesthetic illustrates the difficulty in defining a style
that contains considerable complexity and variety. There are, however, certain elements
that are always considered elements of rustic style. Designer Ann Stillman O’Leary
argues, “the closer a material is to its natural primitive state, the more rustic it is.” She
believes that rustic signifies the use of materials that are unprocessed with little to no
exposure to machinery or technology. Rustic design utilizes organic components of the
outdoor environment and features these natural elements including bark, twigs, roots,
burls, logs, moss, and even pinecones. The heritage of the Adirondack rustic style is
based on a connection to the land and rustic furniture or architecture represents a
response to and interpretation of nature.

The rustic is also a result of America’s fascination with wilderness. Rustic
furniture captures the essence of wilderness and changes it into forms adaptable for
everyday indoor life such as a bark clad dresser, chair, bed, or desk. In essence, the rustic

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style both tames and reveres wilderness. Rustic furniture has been built and created by craftspeople who clearly shape the design and manipulation of the materials, but the natural materials are always at the forefront of the design. Oftentimes, the natural curve of the wood dictates the design and disfigurations are celebrated rather than sculpted away. Rustic is about the natural world and the natural elements the artisan manipulates to create the piece. With the rustic, the materials are the style and the fact that they appear natural is important to the ethos of rustic design throughout the country and especially in the Adirondack Park. Many different populations within the park have attributed meaning to the Adirondack forest and it is loved for numerous reasons. After locals and visitors alike first valued the Adirondack forest for its timber and its sanctuary, it soon came to represent a source of artistic inspiration.

The appeal of rustic furniture also represents prevailing attitudes towards nature during its two major periods of popularity. During the late nineteenth century, more and more Americans began to value nature in light of industrialization and the excessive logging that threatened natural resources in the park. The potential loss of watersheds due to clear-cut forests in the region was a real threat and many fought to preserve the wilderness character of the remaining land. Today, there is a similar concern for the loss of wilderness through the effects of climate change and acid rain. Many people have differing opinions about what wilderness means and how it will be best preserved. Environmental groups based both inside and outside the park have opinions about the definition of wilderness and their voice in the state legislature can be very strong. The park’s residents often resent the ways the legal definition of wilderness often neglects the reality of human impact. Yet as long as rustic furniture is crafted, it will represent a close
working relationship between the people and the land that illustrates both a sense of ownership as well as a reverence for natural forms. A rustic table or chair can be a tangible expression of a wilderness valued for both its usefulness and its pure natural state.

**The Origins of Adirondack Rustic Furniture**

Despite the aptly named ‘Adirondack’ chair and the tremendous impact of many Adirondack artisans on rustic furniture, similar pieces from the turn of the century have been discovered in wooded areas all over the Northern United States. Even if a region other than the Adirondacks tries to claim to be the birthplace of rustic style furniture or architecture, it is commonly recognized that what became known as rustic furniture had roots in early nineteenth century English tree art.\(^5\) In Europe, rustic elements soon became common to many landscape designers and architects. The first book devoted entirely to twig based furniture was initially published in 1780 and entitled *Ideas for Rustic Furniture*. It was reissued over fifty years later and included many examples of outdoor furniture used to ornament a garden.\(^6\) Tree furniture utilizing recognizable portions of a tree caught on in England when the Romantic Movement began to influence landscape architecture.\(^7\) Compared to the symmetrical, formal gardens favored until the mid-nineteenth century, landscape architecture took on the romantic spirit and embraced

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\(^5\) In all actuality, several authors trace the antecedents of rustic furniture even earlier than 19\(^{th}\) century England. The first documented use of twiggy furniture comes from 13\(^{th}\) century Chinese block prints. While all true, the English romantic influence is the most direct connection to the Adirondacks. William West Durant, the original great camp designer, traveled extensively in Europe and would likely have been familiar with English landscape architecture and garden accoutrements.

\(^6\) Gilborn, 23-24. The alpine vernacular common to France, Germany, and Switzerland also influenced rustic design after it was commonly featured in American periodicals.

\(^7\) Ibid., 25.
a style that represented the inherent beauty of nature. The idea of utilizing nature in outdoor furniture had its genesis in England, but by the time rustic furniture appeared in the United States, portions of trees limbs with exposed bark were used in a way that embraced more naturalistic features and materials as opposed to the tree motif carved of out of wood or made out of cast iron and favored by Europeans.

European landscape designers influenced Andrew Jackson Downing who published several influential books detailing his own ideas about English landscape gardening before his untimely demise in 1852. Downing often utilized elements such as stick lattice work, log seats, log bridges, and rustic buildings in his designs and in turn he inspired a generation of landscape designers in the United States including Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmstead who designed Central Park and Prospect Park in Brooklyn.8 New York City’s Central Park included several outdoor log structures, which showcased the English romantic influence. The appearance of these materials in New York City parks was prominent and likely seen by the same circles that later built Adirondack camps utilizing a very similar rustic style.9

By the end of the nineteenth century the Adirondacks had become a popular vacation destination and thousands of second homes, hotels, and camps were built that needed furnishings. Rustic furniture building flowered from approximately 1875 to 1925 as pieces filled the great camps of wealthy urbanites. The rustic style continued to evolve as it spread throughout the entire park and its popularity was equal parts necessity and aesthetic choice. For many urbanites the rustic style was a nostalgic nod to earlier ways

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9 Ibid., 41.
of living where they perceived everything to be simpler and closer to nature. In addition, it made a lot of sense to use natural materials because they were cheap and abundantly available without having to go to the trouble of shipping materials to a remote locale. Native Adirondack trees such as spruce and cedar were strong and well suited to heavy use and harsh Adirondack winters. The area forests were full of materials suited to furniture making.

Materials from the Adirondack forests were used to make many different furniture pieces including the everlasting Adirondack chair. The actual origin of the Adirondack chair is somewhat of a mystery. Many attribute the design to Thomas Lee of Westport, NY who designed a chair for his family camp initially deemed the “Westport plank chair” in 1903. At his camp in the Adirondacks, Lee discovered he had more family members than chairs and therefore decided to experiment with building chairs with the excess of lumber at his camp. Lee’s niece Anna remembers being a chair-tester while her uncle experimented with the angles of the seat and the back until he achieved the ideal level of comfort.\(^\text{10}\) Since his carpentry skills were limited, Lee visited a local carpenter, Henry Burnell, to produce the chairs. Burnell saw an immense profit potential in the chair and he began to produce them in the basement of his Westport shop. Two years later Burnell secured a patent and the chair became a popular seller in the region.\(^\text{11}\) One of the reasons that the style of the chair was so popular in the region was due to the popularity of the

\(^{10}\text{Bettijane Levine, “Back Story; Seat of the Season; Necessity Led to Summer Staple; the Adirondack Chair,” Los Angeles Times, July 17, 2008, F4.}\)

\(^{11}\text{Burnell did this without Lee’s knowledge or consent, but Lee’s reaction is unknown.}\)
country’s first successful tuberculosis sanatorium in Saranac Lake.\textsuperscript{12} Saranac Lake was a common destination for tuberculosis sufferers and Bunnell noted the appropriateness of his chair for invalids in his patent application. Although the chair differs slightly from the current image of an Adirondack chair, several important elements were the same including a slanted back and seat as well as spacious armrests. The major difference was that the Westport chair was constructed with large wide boards while the traditional Adirondack chair is constructed with smaller individual slats. Burnell sold the Westport chair all along the east coast for the next twenty-five years before he passed away in 1930.

It was not long until new manifestations of the style began to appear. The slatted back was easier and cheaper to mass-produce than solid planks of wood and this likely contributed to the transformation of the Westport chair into the Adirondack chair. The exact date or place of this transformation is unknown, but cheap lumber was plentiful and the style was simple enough for any modest woodworker to create. The name is most likely a salute to the chair’s first incarnation and the sense of relaxation and the Adirondack vacation lifestyle that it evokes. Since its first creation, the Adirondack chair has become synonymous with the Park and has transmitted the word Adirondack to regions far beyond its borders. While it may not be important to know the exact origin of the Adirondack chair, the meaning that it has carried from past to present is essential to understand the place of rustic furniture and the Adirondack style on a grander scale.

\textsuperscript{12} In 1884 Dr. Edward Livingston Trudeau arrived in the Adirondack Mountains to seek a cure for tuberculosis and promote the ‘rest cure’ in the clear mountain air. He eventually organized the Saranac Laboratory for the Study of Tuberculosis, which was the first laboratory for the study of tuberculosis in the US. It was later renamed the Trudeau Institute and continues to study infectious diseases today.
While a local Adirondacker developed the Westport chair, most of the furniture in the park was commissioned and guided by the tastes of wealthy urbanites that were influenced by the English tradition. This tradition was then blended with the native, utilitarian Adirondack vernacular. The style was based on the simple constructions built by guides and locals years before Great Camp construction boomed. Stick furniture was often nailed or tied together in a rudimentary way and it was very common in the park. It lent a sense of civility to a camping trip and provided easily usable outdoor furniture for residents. Frequently built by guides, these pieces were very simple and a far cry from the furniture requested by camp owners with applied bark, mosaic twig work, and unique use of roots and burls. By the camp building boom in the 1880s and 1890s, craftsmen began to build pieces for new camp owners in the region with more longevity than hastily made stick furniture. Unlike the simple chair or table rudimentarily constructed on a camping trip, Great Camp owners valued form over function. These elaborate pieces

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13 Gilborn, 83-84.
were first built for urbanites with Adirondack summer homes, but this type of rustic design soon came to represent the entire Adirondacks to the rest of the world.

Not all furniture ornamenting camps and hotels was made inside the park, however, and Indiana hickory was shipped into the park on a weekly basis in the early twentieth century. Few hickory trees grew in the Adirondack Park, but they flourished in Indiana and the state became a hotbed for furniture production. With the influx of summer camps and hotels in the Adirondack region, local craftsmen could not keep up with the demand for furniture. Indiana hickory was commonly used to supply large numbers of chairs for a dining hall in a hotel or a children’s camp. The largest company supplying the park was the Old Hickory Chair Company located at the time in Martinsville, Indiana. They sent two box cars a week to the Adirondacks and much of that furniture was directed to the Cohen Hardware store in Old Forge. The furniture was so popular that within the week the store would sell out before the next shipment arrived.  

Hickory chairs were simple and functional with seats woven from inner bark and legs covered in outer bark. More importantly, this hickory furniture was considered outdoor furniture that was far from the strict formality of a parlor. Hickory chairs were made for rough use and they remained usable after being left neglected during the months summer camps were unoccupied. Although Indiana hickory looks less ornate than furniture created in the Adirondack rustic style, these mass-produced chairs were a solution to a demand that far exceeded the supply. They were shipped throughout the entire country and even appeared in Old Faithful Inn at Yosemite.  

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15 Gilborn, 42.
Old Hickory Chair Company reveals a desire for informal outdoor furniture that extended throughout the country.

The popularity of rustic furniture should also be discussed in conjunction with the Arts and Crafts movement. The movement, which was initially popular in Europe, peaked in the US between 1910 and 1925, and it shared several principles with rustic craftsmanship. The appeal of rustic pieces as well as pieces built in the arts and crafts style was based on a similar desire for items that were handmade and not mass produced. This reaction against industrialization also revealed a romantic idealization of the craftsperson. The skills and talents of the individual craftsperson were revered and there was a recognition that the craftsperson themselves was able to take satisfaction from their work in a way that was impossible in a factory setting.  

The popularity of rustic furniture among designers as well as wilderness resorts and hotels influenced the subsequent commercialism that took root in the latter half of the 20th century. In comparison, local artisans making twig or mosaic furniture had a much smaller output than the thousands of manufactured hickory furniture pieces that proliferated the park. The example of Indiana hickory reveals the commercial roots of an industry that has become increasingly commercial. Even the difference between well-known Adirondack artisans of different decades is notable. For example, well known artisan Ernest Stowe produced only about 65 birch bark inspired pieces, whereas twenty to thirty years later Lee Fountain mass produced hundreds of birch rockers and tables and

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sold them throughout the park.  To most Adirondackers Indiana hickory furniture is no comparison to one of a kind handcrafted Adirondack furniture, but its widespread presence in the park shows the early seeds of commercialism that now play an important role in the rustic furniture business.

Rustic furniture had a distinct aesthetic approach that was articulated in design books and magazines beginning as early as the 1880s. David S. Gordon wrote in a 1909 magazine article:

My idea of an artistic piece of rustic furniture is one so constructed that it appears as if it might have grown from the soil; one which every piece of wood starts somewhere, goes somewhere, and does something. An interesting feature of this sort of rustic work is that each chair or table is individual. It is practically impossible to make two pieces alike.

This quote is important because it reveals a connection between the natural materials and the need to manipulate and adapt them to fit the design. Rustic furniture may have utilized materials from nature, but it did not actually grow from the ground, which meant that the artisan had to put a considerable effort into making the piece look as natural as possible. The individuality and uniqueness inherent in rustic furniture appealed to the sensibilities of wealthy families building camps in the park and camp owners commissioned craftsmen throughout the park to create all types of furniture.

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17 Mack, 103.

18 Indiana hickory is not included in the Adirondack Museum’s exhibit of rustic furniture and was even included in a panel as an example of furniture that was not rustic.

19 Found in Mack, 81-82.

20 While rustic furniture generally did not grow from the ground, there is one unique story about a Wisconsin man who planted elder seeds in a specific pattern in order to graft specific pieces and literally grow a chair from living trees. The eleven year project which began in 1908 received attention in the 1920s and toured the country including a short feature with Ripley’s Believe it or Not. See Mack, 78.
Great Camp Rustic – The Intersection of Class and Rustic Furniture

Great camps were notable for their role in the development of the Adirondacks as a social destination for urban dwellers, but they were equally important for the distinct regional style inherent in their construction. The rustic architectural design of most great camps went beyond solely the building’s exteriors and extended to all of the ornamentation and furniture inside the buildings. Carefully constructed twig tables, deer antler light fixtures, bark covered dressers, and balsam pillows were just a few of the items that commonly furnished Adirondack camps. These types of pieces are noteworthy for the intersection between native Adirondack craftsmanship and the perception of the rustic style that became the prevailing taste of individuals owning these opulent camps.

Great camp architecture and the ensuing rustic tradition was largely the domain of the wealthy. It was urban industrialists who financed and commissioned Adirondack great camps. These camps were built to suit their tastes and they traveled to the Adirondacks to escape the city and spend time close to nature so the architecture and furnishings of their Adirondack homes reflected that desire. To any city dweller the simple log cabin was the epitome of wilderness living and they aimed to remake the log cabin into a suitable yet grandiose complex of dwellings. Structures were modeled after bark shanties and lean-tos used by guides and hunters for shelter. They represented the Adirondack experience at its most wild and primitive. Great camp architecture borrowed from that experience and the close proximity to nature it afforded. Families commissioned or purchased camps from great camp designers and architects such as William West Durant, William Coulter, William Disten, Robert Robertson, and Augustus Shepard. Shepard noted that he built his camps “so that one feels no change in
Great camp owners were attracted to interiors and exteriors that were integrated with their natural surroundings.

Integral to this art were legions of local craftspeople who built the great camps and have continued for generations to create rustic architecture, furniture, and other art. The craft has become an industry as well as a part of a local identity. The use of local natural materials to decorate and create served to reinforce the prevailing idea that the Adirondack Park is a place to get closer to nature. Yet a great irony remains because the Adirondack rustic style was not purely Adirondack. Instead, it originated out of a blend of urban romantic fancy and rural craftsmen’s ability and familiarity with the local environment. The rustic style was only attractive in an appropriately wild context and would not fit in a typical Gilded Age home. It required a backdrop of log walls, antler light fixtures, field stone fireplaces, and surrounding forests and lakes. Rustic furniture was part in parcel with a romantic aesthetic that had to be embraced whole, or not at all. In addition, the home of native Adirondackers revealed an altogether different vernacular tradition that is simple and utilitarian. At some point, however, the rustic style came to represent the entire park. Although the tastes of wealthy exurbanites may have been the guiding force behind the stylized Adirondack rustic, derivations of rustic furniture and art now appear in every corner of the park.

Despite the stylistic influences of urban camp owners, local craftsmen are indeed important players in this story. Their depth of knowledge reveals much about their connection to nature and their daily relationship with the surrounding environment. The

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craftsmen and builders who physically created this rustic style are the true innovators and this unique style says much about a regional culture that is connected to yet distinct from the wealthy urbanites. Rustic furniture involves a lot of imagination and it is often theatrical and whimsical, utilizing twigs to create designs or shapes or even initials. Although most native Adirondackers would not have deer antler chandeliers or intricate birch bark and twig styling on their own furniture, Adirondack craftspeople illustrated their knowledge and understanding of the land through the selection and manipulation of local natural materials.

**Adirondack Craftsmen**

A mid-1980s oral history project conducted by Karen Taussig-Lux revealed the immense knowledge and close relationship to nature common to craftsmen who built the buildings and their furnishings at Great Camp Sagamore. Workers knew how to
manipulate the materials so they could best serve the needs of the project. Richard Collins Jr., son of the head caretaker, helped nail bark to the exterior of a new building in 1914. He recalls the process, “Cedar bark was peeled from big cedar trees, and then rolled and stored in water, and then you spread it out.”22 The bark was prone to cracking and the workers had to gradually learn by trial and error how to make it pliable. Allee Roblee, a carpenter at Sagamore, was an expert in calculating log shrinkage when he built beds or tables using whole logs. In addition to utilizing local natural materials for their employer’s camps, workers also created things like fungus drawings during their down time. It was easy to procure fungi big enough for carving after a simple walk into the woods. According to Taussig-Lux, “Roger Vernum, the grandson of W.C.M. Ryan, the electrician…sold fungus drawings to the Vanderbilt guests for one to five dollars each.”23

Even the worker’s children and grandchildren were taught to see art in the wilderness as well as the potential value of their art. The imagination and skill of these workers was able to transform simple wood, bark, stone, and metal into furniture, buildings, and the auxiliary creations that greatly appealed to camp owners and others throughout the park.

Most rustic furniture builders and craftsmen working around the turn of the century did not earn a living from their craft. By necessity, a year round Adirondack resident was a jack-of-all-trades and was proficient in many jobs. Hunting, lumbering, and carpentry were all common skills and, since much Adirondack employment was seasonal (spring to late fall), the majority of rustic furniture was built during the winter


23 Ibid., 139.
months. From December until approximately March or April, the lives of Adirondack residents were at the whim of Mother Nature and any travel away from home was dependant on the amount of snow covering the ground. As a result, during the winter most work was done at home or in the shop, which most often meant carpentry work on both furniture and guideboats. Rustic furniture expert Craig Gilborn categorizes craftsmen in two ways: those who saw the craft as a personal indulgence and those who saw the craft as a livelihood.²⁴ He believes that the most inventive pieces were created for Adirondack camps whose owners commissioned work with intricate and one of a kind twig mosaic designs. This type of work was tedious and very time consuming. Unfortunately, little is known about these individuals and the furniture has become the most lasting legacy of these Adirondack craftsmen who often labored long and hard hours alone. Most craftsmen survived with little means and produced their work for a very small fraction of its value today.

**Ernest Stowe**

One of the more well-known and productive craftsmen from the heyday of Adirondack rustic furniture making was Ernest Stowe. In retrospect, he became an important figure in the history of rustic craftsmanship because several of his pieces have been saved and are eagerly collected and he has received more recognition in the late Twentieth century than during his lifetime even though his work was always in demand. Stowe, a bachelor from Colton, NY settled on Upper Saranac Lake in a small nine by twelve foot cabin on the property of a hotel named Corey’s, later known as the Rustic Lodge. He was a skilled carpenter who found work when several elaborate camps,

²⁴ Gilborn, 302.
including Fish Rock Camp and Bull Point Camp were constructed on Upper Saranac Lake beginning in the 1890s. He worked to construct camp buildings and, in the winter, he made rustic furniture. He is known to have completed at least sixty pieces including desks, chairs, dining room sets, and sideboards. Stowe’s work is distinguished by his use of white birch bark paneling and yellow birch trim covering all seams. In addition, he used unpeeled cedar as chair and desk legs. According to Craig Gilborn, “Stowe’s achievement, a major one, lay in his marriage of rustic materials to high-style, classically derived cabinet forms and their proportions.” This furniture was not just a simple table built in the woods out of necessity; Stowe’s creations were a complex combination of rustic and high style. Although his inspirations are unknown, the amount of furniture he created indicates that his designs appealed to wealthy camp owners and he was in demand.

Stowe left the Adirondacks in 1911 for Florida and never returned. Very little is known about his life after leaving the Adirondacks, but he left behind a considerable

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25 Gilborn, 325.

26 Gilborn, 308.
legacy in the form of his furniture. Today Stowe’s rustic pieces are consolidated into just a few collections including several pieces on display at the Adirondack Museum. In 1986, Christie’s in New York City auctioned an assemblage of Stowe’s furniture owned by Jean Harvey Vanderbilt, wife of Alfred Vanderbilt, Jr.\textsuperscript{27} The pieces in the Christie’s auction went for record prices, and included a dining table set which brought $49,500 and three other pieces that together netted another $32,102.\textsuperscript{28} The purchaser, New York City gallery owner Frank Miele, displayed the entire set in his gallery with a price tag of $185,000. As the subject of the first auction of Adirondack furniture at Christie’s and the resultant high prices, Stowe’s legacy in the history of rustic furniture makers was sealed.\textsuperscript{29} Despite what little is known about the life and inspiration of this solitary man with an excellent work ethic, his furniture reveals a style revered and copied by countless artisans since. More than any other turn of the century rustic furniture maker, Ernest Stowe’s mosaic work represents the epitome of rustic style that has been most commonly replicated by present day artisans.

\textsuperscript{27} Craig Gilborn, “The Rustic Furniture of Ernest Stowe,” \textit{Antiques} (September 1987), 557. Although they had a close connection to Sagamore, the furniture never appeared in any photographs of the often-documented camp and likely came from relatives who had camps in the Saranac Lake area.

\textsuperscript{28} These prices were much higher than an estimate given in the \textit{New York Times} before the auction. The article mentioned that a serving table was expected to go for $800 and the dining room set could bring in as much as $15,000. In reality, the serving table sold for $3,520 and the dining room set $49,500. See Rita Rief, “Auctions,” \textit{New York Times}, December 12, 1986, C30.

\textsuperscript{29} Rita Rief, “Echoes of the Rustic Life From an Age of Opulence,” \textit{New York Times}, September 20, 1987, H41. In 2005, rustic artisan and author Ralph Kylloe made an unsuccessful $25,000 bid on an Ernest Stowe bureau, and he readily expressed his disappointment in being unable to acquire this piece. Kylloe, an expert in the field of rustic furniture and an avid collector, also considers Stowe one of the great rustic furniture builders.
Lee Fountain

If Ernest Stowe was the epitome of a cabin dwelling secluded rustic craftsman, Lee Fountain (1869-1941) represented a growing commercialism in the rustic furniture industry. Getting started almost a decade after Stowe, Fountain was a craftsman, but he was also an entrepreneur who ran several establishments in the park. By 1903 he owned a general store and the Adirondack Hotel in Speculator and in 1910 he began his furniture business. He created a hand drawn catalogue available in area stores to advertise different pieces such as dining tables, end tables, and chairs. Yet, like most local craftsmen, Fountain did not focus all of his work life on his craft and nearly fifteen years later Fountain also purchased and ran the Whitehouse resort and hunting camp. At Whitehouse, Fountain employed several workers who assisted with his furniture work.

Lee Fountain owned the land surrounding Whitehouse and was able to scour the forest for the perfect materials. Worker Irving Clouthier remembers searching mountainsides for specially shaped birch trees and soaking birch trunks to ensure a level cut could be made. Fountain was most well known for his yellow birch rocking chairs, which he rapidly produced with much success between 1914 and 1930. The front legs of the rocking chairs were built with

Figure 23 – This yellow birch and ash splint rocking chair made by Lee Fountain circa 1915 is now at the Adirondack Museum.

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30 The fate of the ruins at the Whitehouse resort were discussed in Chapter Three.

pieces specially procured from a certain spot where the trees grew away from the roots to find sunlight. The natural curvature of the rocking chair legs became Fountain’s signature and revealed his knowledge of natural materials. Fountain was also renowned for his birch stump tables, which required careful selection of a tree stump base to obtain the ideal shape and proper balance. In order to properly collect materials, Fountain was well versed in the proper methods and season for harvesting birch trees. He utilized even very small twigs and every piece had its place and meaning.

According to Craig Gilborn, Fountain “may have produced rustic furniture longer and more systematically than any other man in the Adirondacks.” Fountain sold his furniture, namely the birch chairs and stump tables, from his home in Speculator, but he was also known to travel around the area selling his wares. Fountain’s skill running several business helped bring success to his furniture business and even today countless camps in the vicinity of Wells and Speculator have pieces that were made by Lee Fountain. Fountain became one of the most well known Adirondack craftsmen during his lifetime because he worked to market and sell his goods. Today, local craftsmen carry on Fountain’s legacy, most notably Jack Leadley who continues to build furniture evoking the spirit of Fountain’s work.

**Rustic Design Goes National**

While craftsmen such as Stowe and Fountain represent the popularity of rustic furniture within the park, the Adirondack rustic style became a national phenomenon. The furniture common to great camps soon appeared in all areas of the United States by

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the turn of the century, but the term Adirondack has been commonly used to describe the furniture even if it has a distinct regional style such as the woodlands of the upper Great Lakes or the swampy South. Even though the connection of the Adirondacks to rustic furniture nationwide can be more a connection of name than true influence, the name stuck and Adirondack furniture was soon advertised all over the country. As early as 1900, an advertisement in the Chicago Tribune for the Tobey Furniture Company in Chicago advertised various types of summer furniture including tables, settees, and rockers under the subtitle of Adirondack Summer Furniture. The advertisement supports the idea that Adirondack furniture evoked a connection to nature and sense of relaxation. The advertisement describes the product as offering “a scent of the forest; a natural birch product for the lawn or garden; made from Adirondack birch saplings with the bark left on, and the backs and seats of splints; a picturesque and durable article.”34 The company tried to evoke the idea that buying this furniture would make one’s summer home, porch, or lawn more natural and more comfortable. Because great camp architecture and rustic twig furniture became commonplace in the park, the rustic style and the Adirondack region are forever linked.

Another reason rustic design became popular and spread throughout the United States was due to its use by the National Park Service. The rustic style utilizes natural materials that blend with the surrounding environment and, on these grounds, it became the style of choice for regions where nature was prominent. By 1918, the National Park

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34 “Summer Furniture,” Chicago Tribune, April 29, 1900, 14.
Service decreed the importance of harmonizing buildings with the landscape. The National Park Service adopted specific details from Adirondack camps into many buildings. Chalets at Glacier National Park as well as Old Faithful Inn borrowed structurally from William West Durant’s use of the chalet form as well as the inclusion of native logs and rocks. Several landscape designers as well as architects used the 1931 Augustus Shepard book *Camps in the Woods* as a source to understand integrating rustic design in a natural setting. The idea to create buildings that harmonized with their natural environment was integral to National Park Service architecture and in 1918 they soon adopted rustic design as the official style for Park Service buildings. Americans across the country became familiar with rustic architecture as well as the rustic furniture that decorated the interiors of these buildings.

**The End of an Era**

By the 1950s rustic furniture in the Adirondacks was no longer produced in abundance. The decline of rustic furniture went hand in hand with the decline in the construction and use of great camps, many which became white elephants and money pits to their owners. Very few camps were built after the Depression and, following World War II, many Americans had different priorities. Many were too busy establishing careers and families after the war and, even though the wealthiest citizens were bound to continue to take vacations, the advent of air travel and air conditioning caused many families to give up their camps to embark on bigger and better vacations that superceded the appeal of the wilderness vacation. Also in the 1950s, materials such as aluminum and

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36 See Shepard, *Camps in the Woods*.
plastic surged in popularity and furniture made with these materials grew in number at resorts and at smaller private residential camps. Oftentimes, plastic chairs replaced true wooden Adirondack chairs. Nylon webbing replaced bark woven seats. The cheaper price tag and the thrill of new materials aided changing appetites. Designs became sleek and modern and rustic designs were moved from the interior of the home to the backyard. Soon the rustic represented old time rural folks and a simple lifestyle that was in opposition to the intelligence and modernity of the present. Even antique rustic furniture from the turn of the century sold for very little in the 1950s and 1960s. The amount of rustic furniture built during this era declined and those who still built rustic furniture did so for utilitarian purposes and not financial gain.\footnote{Mack, 102.}

**The Rustic Revival and the Role of the Adirondack Museum**

In the 1970s, however, the rustic style experienced a renaissance rivaling its original period of popularity. External cultural forces were partially responsible. The rebellion against the Vietnam War and the disillusionment with government created a desire for self-sufficiency and simplicity that supported a growing back to land movement. A greater appreciation for the environment and recognition of the dangers facing it helped form the second wave environmental movement. The first Earth Day took place in 1970 and environmental groups found their membership rolls increasing. The same time that environmentalism was becoming more popular, rustic furniture was rediscovered and popularized throughout the country. People started buying rustic furniture, more artisans began to make it, and new homes were built resembling the great camps from the turn of the century.
The Adirondack Museum located in Blue Mountain Lake has played an important role in the rustic revival through exhibitions and the creation of the annual Rustic Fair. Since it opened in 1957, the museum had a fairly extensive rustic furniture collection and in the 1970s they began to explore a way to present it to the public. Craig Gilborn first encountered rustic furniture when he became the director of the museum in 1972. At the time, there were just a few pieces of rustic furniture on display at the museum. One of them was an impressive corner cupboard from Camp Cedars on Little Forked Lake which was ornamented by twigs from ten different varieties of trees that formed the common quilt pattern known as ‘Flower Basket.” Gilborn’s initial estimation of the value of this piece was reinforced by the visit of a former colleague who was an authority on American furniture and a curator at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. In response, Gilborn immediately set out researching rustic furniture and planning an exhibition, the first of its type in a museum.38

Entitled “Adirondack Rustic: Camp Furniture, 1876-1926,” the exhibition filled three galleries of the museum when it opened the summer of 1976. The furniture was displayed as if each piece was a work of art. The exhibition text focused primarily on each piece’s origin and

Figure 24 – This corner cupboard from Camp Cedars is attributed to Seth Piece, circa 1885.

38 Gilborn, Rustic Furniture, 13.
was a celebration of style. Pieces were loaned from over forty museums and collectors and, in the years that followed, the donation of rustic furniture to the museum increased. The collection began to grow as the profile and esteem of rustic furniture continued to develop in art and furniture circles. In 1982 the museum received fifteen pieces of Ernest Stowe furniture from the estate of Warren W. Kay. Kay had purchased the furniture from the proprietress of Camp Ninomis located only a few miles from Stowe’s cabin and felt that it should be shared with the public upon his death. In this early exhibition, the museum presented the furniture as a piece of art and not an important window into the cultural history of the region. Soon, however, the museum explored rustic furniture beyond its artistic attributes and looked at what the pieces revealed about the intersection of nature and culture.

The museum realized the importance of rustic furniture to the region and a permanent exhibit of rustic furniture was added in 1986. The museum’s property included a two-story cabin built by the Reverend Clarence Archibald Bull in 1901, which was restored to install a permanent rustic furniture display. Bull Cottage has remained one of the museum’s most popular exhibits during the past twenty plus years. Each of the rooms in the cottage was set up in the way they were originally used except the large living room, which was arranged as a gallery of tables, chairs, cabinets, mirrors, and beds. Pieces by Ernest Stowe and Lee Fountain as well as pieces from camps Sagamore, Uncas, Pine Knot, and others populate this main room. The dining room that contains

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Ernest Stowe’s furniture has a label to provide information about him, but he is the only craftsman featured in the exhibit. The exhibit focuses on the furniture and not the circumstances of its creation. Introductory labels provide background on Reverend Bull and rustic furniture. A panel entitled “Adirondack Rustic: Nature’s Art” speaks about the relationship between wilderness and rusticity. It reads, “The enduring fascination with rustic object and sensibilities coincides with the enduring attraction of natural places and wilderness for Americans, and the importance of nature in American thought and culture.” 41 The rest of the cottage includes only object identifier labels, but this introductory panel provides an interpretation of rustic furniture that emphasizes the relationship between reverence for nature and the attraction to the rustic. The exhibition argues that the first and second wave of rustic design both resulted from changing attitudes towards the natural environment. This is a step beyond the analysis present in the labels from the initial 1976 exhibition that did not directly connect attitudes towards wilderness with the popularity of rustic furniture.

Inspired by the lack of an exhibit catalogue or accompanying publication, Craig Gilborn wrote *Adirondack Furniture and the Rustic Tradition*, which was published in 1987. The result of thirteen years of work, Gilborn traveled to camps and cottages all over the park in search of rustic furniture. “While [the book],” he writes, “is intended to add to the appreciation of a subject about which little has been known, it may also hasten the dispersal of the very things it praises, making further documentation in the field that

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41 “Adirondack Rustic: Nature’s Art” Bull Cottage Exhibit, Adirondack Museum, Blue Mountain Lake, NY.
much more difficult.” As rustic furniture became more sought after and more valuable, dealers were more concerned about profits than remembering the origins and history of the furniture. Gilborn was afraid of what might be lost, but his book did a very good job documenting the major historic rustic pieces in the museum collection and privately owned. Gilborn’s book focused solely on Adirondack creations and he succeeded in documenting countless pieces of rustic furniture throughout the park. The exhibition in Bull Cottage and Gilborn’s book celebrated the rustic furniture of the past, and in 1987 the museum also began to recognize the countless rustic artisans working in the present.

The museum has held the annual Rustic Furniture Fair every year since it began in 1987. During the first weekend of September, over fifty artisans set up inside the museum and countless others line the roadways leading to the museum. The fair was created as a way for contemporary artisans to display and sell their goods. Featuring both furniture and furnishings, artisans showcase work that is both traditional and contemporary. Entry is by invitation only and artisans must submit an application for consideration. The fair is known as the nation’s premier rustic show and both the artisans and visitors come from areas far beyond the borders of the park. In 2009, 74% of the vendors were from New York State, but the remaining 26% represented nine other states and some were inspired directly by the Adirondacks. Wisconsin resident Janice Kostreva and her husband first visited the rustic fair in the 1990s and were amazed with what they saw. Their Adirondack visit to the museum’s Rustic Fair inspired new

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42 Gilborn, Rustic Furniture, 14.

craftsmanship and new ideas that transformed their cabinetmaking business into a rustic furniture business. They have been vendors at the fair ever since they were initially inspired.44

**Contemporary Rustic Craftsmen**

Books also provided exposure to rustic design and countless coffee table books exist with luscious images of cabins, camps, and furniture across the country. Beginning in 1997, artisan and author Ralph Kylloe has written over twenty such books and continues to be a strong proponent of the style. He is an Adirondack resident, but Kylloe is also a rustic furniture maker and gallery owner who has built and collected rustic furniture for over thirty years. Although his books do not stay within the boundaries of the Adirondack Park, he has a close connection to the park and recognizes the important connection between rustic in the Adirondacks and rustic in the rest of the country. He connects the rustic to a collective history and a way of life and likewise sees the Adirondacks as synonymous with the style that emerged within the region. He writes, “My personal belief is that rustic is part of our heritage and is hard-wired into our brains...The meaning of Adirondack, then, is more of a trend and style today and is often described as such in books and magazines.”45 He sees rustic furniture as an important element of the “Adirondack way,” a lifestyle that may include time in the woods, clean air, and an appreciation for nature. “Rustic,” he says, “is an ethic, a lifestyle. It’s about

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44 Personal conversation with Janice Kostreva, September 12, 2009.

remaining close to nature, our natures.”

This idea is not limited to Kylloe and is commonly recognized by others throughout the country. The word Adirondack represents a style and an area close to nature, which is why rustic furniture perfectly aligns with this image.

The Adirondack Museum has provided an arena to promote traditional Adirondack culture and rustic craftsmanship. They have hosted countless demonstrators including Jack Leadly and Bill Smith who illustrate the close connection of their craft to the past. The rustic revival remained close to the traditional Adirondack rustic. Rustic craftspeople who began to build furniture in and around the 1970s often turned toward their predecessors for inspiration. Most current artisans are familiar with the great camps and familiar with historic rustic pieces. By participating in a demonstration or buying a piece of rustic furniture for the home, contemporary rustic furniture building provides a different way to experience the past. This is a way to present history to the public that is very participatory. Rustic artisans today both look for a profit and those who work because they hope to continue important regional traditions. While it is important to examine the commercialism of the industry, it is also fruitful to explore the ways that rustic furniture evokes the spirit of the past and reveals more about the relationship between the craftsperson and the land.

Most artisans build furniture that reflects their personality and their own style, but the tribute to earlier craftsmen is clear. Oftentimes, the connection is subtle, but occasionally craftsmen will consciously build pieces in the style of an early 20th century

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craftsman. While photographing furniture for Daniel Mack’s 1992 book *Making Rustic Furniture*, Bobby Hansson realized the source of inspiration for the chairs he had been building for many years. Hansson had hazy memories of sitting on a chair at an Adirondack camp as a boy and so he decided to track it down. He was able to find it and after seeing the chair for the first time in nearly forty years, Hansson was surprised by the similarity to his own creations. He had absorbed a certain sensibility from his Adirondack boyhood summers and he felt a connection to past artisans and the simple tools they used.\(^47\) Hansson reflected, “they bind me to the past and give me a feeling of continuity with these craftsmen. It’s as if these tools of men long dead guide my hand, just as my hand guides the tools.”\(^48\) To Hansson and many craftsmen, the creative process is spiritual and almost magical. When Hansson builds chairs he is not only trying to create a usable piece of furniture, he is aiming to create a powerful object that will evoke the senses of any person who encounters it. As he puts it “I’ve been making chairs for decades, but it has only been since I saw that…chair again that I realized the extent to which I am trying to recapture the way that chair affected me.”\(^49\) Hansson is not alone in his desire to recapture the past and recapture the thoughts and feelings of an earlier era.

Jack Leadley, a resident of Speculator, New York, not only works without power tools, he has no electricity in his workshop or the cabin where he sleeps seven months out of the year. The connection between his craft and the past is clear in all of his craftsmanship. Jack Leadley first made a pack basket in 1955 and since then he has

\(^{47}\) Some of these tools include chisels, two man saws, double edges axes, peaveys, augers, rasps, and a Stillson wrench.

\(^{48}\) Mack, 93-95.

\(^{49}\) Mack, 97.
worked throughout the years to create pack baskets, watercolors, maple syrup, and many varieties of rustic furniture for others. Like the guides and craftsmen from the late nineteenth century, Leadley first began to work out of necessity. He needed a pack basket so he decided to make one and he soon followed the same pattern when he needed a fishing creel and when his snowshoes needed redecking. Leadley feels a close connection to Speculator craftsman Lee Fountain. He owns one of Fountain’s chairs and has continued to create chairs that replicate the spirit of Fountain’s well-known birch strip chairs. The legacy of rustic craftsmanship needs this type of learning to perpetuate and preserve Adirondack culture. In 2000 Leadley was the subject of a video entitled *How to Make an Adirondack Packbasket* where he demonstrated this labor-intensive process from the first step of wood collection to the very end when he added his brand to the bottom of the basket. Leadley owns 115 acres of land and on that land he searches for the black ash trees necessary for basket making. He demonstrated the proper way to soak the logs and peel back the tree’s layers all while using the same tools as pack basket 

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51 I first heard of Jack Leadley while attending a lecture at the Adirondack Museum. As I listened intently and took notes at the lecture by Don Williams entitled “Adirondack Guides,” the older gentleman seated next to me asked about my note-taking. As we began to discuss our love for and connections to the Adirondack Park, I learned that he and his wife have a camp in Speculator that has been in his family for many generations. The camp has two chairs originally made by Lee Fountain, the well-known Speculator craftsman. Today Lee Fountain chairs are a prized possession at any Adirondack camp since Fountain is one of only a few early twentieth century Adirondack craftsmen remembered by name. The couple also owned chairs built by contemporary craftsman Jack Leadley and they proudly told me how Jack Leadley visited their camp to examine their Lee Fountain chairs so he could replicate them for the couple. Leadley has become known for this type of work. While the furniture will carry his own mark, Leadley also strives to replicate the style and craft of his predecessors.
makers in the late nineteenth century. The video demonstrated Leadley’s close relationship with the land and the expertise necessary to make a pack basket.

Filmmaker Mike Camoin characterizes Leadley as a woodsman who “courageously struggles against his fellow man, nature and ultimately, time to preserve the wilderness by embracing a dying culture and living in harmony with the land.”

Now in his early eighties, Leadley estimates that he has about 800 visitors a year to his complex of cabins. People purchase his packbaskets from all across the country and he has earned a reputation far beyond the Adirondack Park. He is happy to share his work and he performs demonstrations throughout the park. Yet Leadley is often in conflict with the state’s policies. The 1980 Perkins Clearing Land Exchange between the state and a large company resulted in the destruction of the Leadley family hunting camp located on land the Leadley’s had leased from the company. The Leadley family felt like they lost their home and, as a result, Jack has strong feelings about over regulation in the park. Jack states, “We could all be forced out by regulations and taxes. In effect they are taking our land by just making us untenable. I think I am talking too much.”

Included in a 1997 video entitled Inside the Blue Line: Leadley’s Legacy, Jack became self-conscious when he started talking in detail about the state, but it was obvious his views would be more strongly stated off camera. Jack Leadley utilized his private land for materials and often food and he is an excellent steward of the land, but he sees state

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54 The 1980 Perkins Clearing Land Exchange was a land swapping amendment to the constitution that consolidated holdings and added land to the West Canada Lakes Wilderness Area.

55 Mike Camoin, “Inside the Blue Line”. 
regulations threatening his very way of life. Living artisans and story tellers in the Adirondacks provide a window to the past.

Experiencing Jack Leadley’s way of life is very much like viewing a living history exhibit. His cabin and his lifestyle is a throwback to the guides and craftsmen who made their living from the land. Bill Smith, craftsman and storyteller extraordinaire, also creates the experience of stepping back in time. With a shock of white hair, a broad mustache, and a flannel shirt, Bill Smith enters any room ready to perform. Smith, who looks every bit the part of an old time Adirondacker, has made his mark as the premier Adirondack storyteller. Switching between tales of his childhood and simple folksy tunes, Smith has bewitched audiences for nearly thirty years with his old-timer nostalgia and “aw-shucks” persona. By the time he tells the story of “Rindercella”, Smith has audiences eating out of his hands. Smith is just the type of back woods character one envisions trying to make a living in the Adirondack Park decades before automobiles and electricity. Audiences are thrilled with his performance full of tales of family, farm life, and backwoods shenanigans. To them, Bill Smith is a living representation of the hardworking Adirondacker living off the land. Smith’s stories are much more than mere novelties, they are a direct link to a past era that seems to be slipping further and further away from the present. Local Adirondackers no longer barter goods, drive buggies, or subside solely on venison, but if Smith’s old pickup truck was not parked directly outside, one might think Smith still traveled by horse and buggy.

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56 Many storytellers have repeated the Rindercella version of the commonly known story of Cinderella, but it plays well in front of an audience. The story takes skill to speak without tripping over words and Smith impresses with his gradual verbal acceleration as the story progresses. The story begins, “Once upon a time, in a foreign country, there lived a very beautiful girl; her name was Rindercella,” and continues similarly. See http://www.matthewgoldman.com/spoon/rindercella_2.html.
With his strong persona, Bill Smith can evoke feelings of a bygone era. Bill Smith may have been born in 1937, but his storytelling takes audiences back to a time even further in the past. Because Bill grew up with a large family in a rural area he was privy to several experiences more commonly associated with the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. Bill attended school in a one room schoolhouse, walked a mile to school, and he tells his stories in a manner that evokes a nostalgia for the good ole days.

He sells his carefully crafted walking sticks and pack baskets after the show, which only serves to reinforce his tales and persona as a man of the woods. Unlike costumed interpreters, Smith will not break character once his job is finished. Indeed, Bill Smith is the same person his audiences see during his storytelling yet he is still giving a performance.

Visitors and residents to the Adirondacks can learn Adirondack history from museum exhibits or books, but living and experiential history provides a feeling about the past that is wholly different. Yet traditional living history can feel a bit contrived and glossy. One may visit the Adirondack Museum during Mountain Men weekend to experience smelly men dressed in furs living in tents for the weekend while also demonstrating knife throwing, fire starting, and beaver skinning. Or, one may travel to Fort Ticonderoga to see Revolutionary War soldiers march in formation and shoot rifles.
These interpreters evoke a sense of the past, but visitors know it is simply a re-creation; there is not a direct link to the past. The connection of craftspeople to the past is different than costumed interpreters stationed at historic sites. In a very real sense craftspeople are living historians because they demonstrate historical techniques and skills that have been passed down from generation to generation. There is something authentic about using the same tools and same methods as craftspeople centuries ago. The ability to then purchase rustic furniture crafted in the Adirondacks provides the potential for anyone to bring history home.

A New Wave of Adirondack Museum Rustic Exhibits

The Adirondack Museum has continued to play a role in the revival and celebration of rustic furniture. In celebration of its fiftieth anniversary, the Adirondack Museum planned two rustic themed exhibitions to showcase this unique Adirondack style from its humble beginnings to its present incarnation. Adirondack Rustic: Nature’s Art 1876-1950 opened in 2007 for a two year stint in the museum’s art gallery. Even though rustic furniture was still addressed as art, this exhibition also attempted to explore ideas of wilderness and how they shaped the rustic as an art form. The opening panel read, “Rusiticity is an American expression inspired by romantic notions of wild as untamed nature. This concept of wilderness was really an imaginative creation since by the mid-19th century most ‘wild’ land was tamed and lived in. Nevertheless the idea spawned an extraordinary output of furniture, architecture, and art.”57 Much of this furniture was featured in the exhibition, which explored the ways rusticity was defined and redefined in the Adirondack Park.

One of the ways this exhibition examined the redefinition of rusticity was through the way that it attempted to at least mention environmental concerns; something that had been missing in the 1976 exhibit. This reveals a growing environmentalism and also a growing concern about the availability of finite materials and resources. According to the exhibit, an increased desire for souvenirs from the region including items made out of birch bark caused the supply to noticeably dwindle. As a result, there was an increase in illegally cut timber from state land. A label exploring the evolution of rustic style looked at Augustus Shepard and the beginning of a movement away from a natural style. The label expresses that Shepard was concerned about the wastefulness of his building efforts and the potential destruction of the forest so he began to move away from including rustic embellishments on his creations. Rustic furniture is more commonly recognized for its romantic attributes without much thought to the environmental impact, which makes this exhibit important to the evolution of the interpretation of rusticity in Adirondack history.

A second exhibition entitled “Adirondack Rustic Revived” examined the work of several contemporary artisans. One half of the exhibition examined the rustic revival and the Adirondack Museum’s role in the revival. On display was work from six Adirondack craftsmen including Barney Bellinger from Mayfield, NY who was quoted saying, “[Craig Gilborn] took us rustic makers out of our shops and cellars and wherever we were…what he did, Craig, he really upped the evolution of rustic. He really hurried it along.”58 Several of these pieces on display were from the beginning of the rustic revival and reveal a close relationship between the craftsman and the natural world inside the...
park. This exhibit purposefully revealed a close relationship between contemporary rustic artisans and the museum.

The other half of the exhibition entitled “Rustic Tomorrow” showcased six pieces created specifically for the exhibit. These pieces honor the tradition of Adirondack furniture, but also take the design in a new, modern direction. In 2006 the museum invited six modern architects or art directors and six Adirondack rustic furniture makers to collaborate and build a one of a kind piece. These pieces were built to benefit the museum from proceeds earned after they were auctioned in 2009. Quotes from each of the architects and furniture makers revealed an excitement in being involved with such a collaborative project. Film art director Thomas Cardone reveled in the challenge of “trying to take a futuristic look at a tradition that has such a strong connection to its past.”59 Self taught craftsman Jay Dawson found the history the most appealing part of the process. He said, “Being an Adirondack native, history is an important part of my life. The thought of leaving behind furniture that tells a story about someone is also very important to me. Being involved with this project allows me to be part of history right here and now.”60 This exhibition revealed the ways that the rustic furniture making tradition continues in the present while honoring the spirit of the past. According to the individuals featured in this exhibit, contemporary craftsmen have been very much influenced by the past and by tradition.


It is difficult to know the exact direct impact of the Adirondack Museum on the Adirondack rustic revival and vice versa, but it is easy to argue that there is some correlation between the museum exhibits, rustic fair, and increasing popularity of rustic design. The label introducing a 2008 exhibition of rustic furniture at the Lake Placid - North Elba Historical Society in Lake Placid reads, “In 1976, the Adirondack Museum hosted the first exhibition of rustic furniture collected from all over the Northeast, sparking a revival of interest in this almost forgotten style.” This label makes a strong claim about the role of the Adirondack Museum in fostering the 1970s rustic revival. It is very possible that the museum exhibition was at the forefront of an increased interest in rustic furniture and brought additional attention to the style.

The Commercialization of Rustic Furniture

Jack Leadley represents one type of contemporary craftsmen, but for every Jack Leadley there are countless artisans who build rustic furniture for profit and are immersed in the business of rustic furniture and design. Leadley seems to operate within a folk tradition. Only someone living in the Adirondacks and applying themselves to the variety of things the old guides and carpenters did, could be said to work within the folk tradition. Establishing a mechanized commercial furniture company is not operating in the folk tradition of Jack Leadley. For every craftsman trying to operate in a folk tradition, there are several hoping to move rustic craftsmanship forward into the twenty-first century. Not every artisan eschews technology the way Leadley does and, for many

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62 Jamie Welsh, the director of the Lake Placid - North Elba Historical Society at the time and curator of the exhibition is also the son of current Adirondack Museum director, Caroline Welsh, and former curator Jack Welsh so it is possible that his parents and upbringing had a large influence on the exhibit’s assertion.
craftsmen or rustic furniture companies, craft is a very lucrative business endeavor. They have been able to tap into appetites of a population eager to forge a connection to the past and a connection to nature. The dual desire to experience nature and feel a connection to the past is the driving force behind the popularity of rustic furniture today as it was the driving force behind the back to nature movement in the late nineteenth century that contributed to the popularity of the Adirondacks as a resort destination.

Since Adirondack rustic furniture is in demand nationally, it is easy to see that many Adirondackers have figured out how to respond to these tastes and appeal to the wealthy in order to bring money to individuals and businesses in the park. It would be easy to see this as a story of locals appealing to the tastes of the wealthy in order to survive. Yet there is more to the story and, while the idea of class oppression might have some bearing on the evolution of rustic furniture in the park, it does not tell the whole story. The rustic style may have originated by appealing to the desires of wealthy urbanites and camp owners, but over time local Adirondacks residents began also to identify with the style and it became representative of the entire park. Adirondack craftsmen bring their own creative intuition to their work and they enjoy what they do. The process of working with natural materials and working close to the land is sacred to most craftsman. While much of rustic furniture was created for a wealthy client, the very idea of building something from natural materials collected from the land is something that is a life giving and even spiritual experience for craftspeople. Brant Davis, a rustic furniture craftsman and founder of Gone Wild Creations, Inc., a business that now has over ten employees expressed a desire to hire someone to run the business in order for him to return to the shop and actually making furniture. He spoke about furnishing an
entire Colorado home in 2009 and while he wished for the old day of working directly with the materials, he had entered the national market.\footnote{Conversation with Brant Davis, September 12, 2009.}

The popularity of rustic furniture continues to grow both within the park and outside of it. With the popularity of the Adirondack Museum’s Rustic Fair, other parts of the country have also held large fairs showcasing rustic furniture. In 2008, Blair and Suzette Anthony organized the first annual Lakeside Living Expo in Gilford, New Hampshire. The event’s website boasted that the expo was the largest event of its kind in the United States and the second annual event grew substantially from the inaugural year. With a tagline stating, “A celebration of lake homes, Adirondack rustic décor, boating and outdoor adventure,” the Lakeside Living Expo aims to promote a specific lifestyle in the Lakes region of New Hampshire, an area with 273 lakes and more than 1,000 miles of shoreline.

It is also important to note that the press for this expo utilizes the term “luxury” living. The website tries to attract exhibitors by providing attendee demographics that showcase the wealth of the region. For example, attendees are “predominantly 35-64 years of age with a household income of \$125,000+” and “97% own their principle residence valued at over \$550,000.”\footnote{The Lakeside Living Expo: Demographics, accessed November 2, 2009, \url{http://www.lakesidelivingexpo.com/LAKESIDE_LIVING_EXPO_DEMOGRAPHICS.html}.} It is interesting to see how the “living Adirondack lifestyle” is marketed outside the park because of the way it is aimed towards the second homeowner and individuals with above average amounts of disposable income. While in some ways rustic furniture can democratize the Adirondacks and allow a large number of people to bring a little piece of the park home, in another way the ability to buy and
decorating a home with Adirondack rustic furniture is often something only the wealthy can do.

Events such as the Lakeside Expo may reveal a gap between rustic artisan and purchaser, a fact that is very similar to the cabin dwelling craftsman making furniture for Vanderbilt, Rockefeller, or Morgan camps. The contemporary rustic revival reveals a lot of similarities with the first wave of rustic furniture. Changing attitudes towards nature and a greater reverence for nature have influenced the popularity of rustic design. An increasing appreciation for the natural environment in the 1870s and the 1970s resulted in the discovery and rediscovery of natural looking furniture. Both the first and second wave of rustic furniture was a direct result of changing attitudes towards the natural environment. There is an ongoing connection between people and the natural environment, which the rustic Adirondack style helps to facilitate. The transformation of nature into art is a clear interpretation by the artist. It is possible that in the future materials may grow scarce, but until then rustic furniture does not show any sign of losing influence. Exhibitions continue to recognize the impact of the rustic style and the Adirondack Park remains primarily known to outsiders on the basis of its chairs.
CHAPTER FIVE
GREENSCAPING THE ADIRONDACKS:
REGIONAL MUSEUMS IN THE ADIRONDACK PARK

Figure 26 – Roderick Nash quote in the Adirondack Museum’s “Woods and Waters” exhibits, Blue Mountain Lake, NY, 2009

“We cannot teach our children what is special about our history on freeways or in shopping malls... Protecting the remnants of wild country left today is an action that defines our nation. Take away wilderness and you diminish the opportunity to be American.”
–Roderick Frazier Nash, 2001

The rustic style has played a major role in the formation of an Adirondack regional identity that extends beyond furniture. The word Adirondack brings to mind a certain decorative style evoking images of bark-covered furniture, the camp experience, the scent of pine trees, and scenic vistas, which are all things that relate to the outdoors and the experience of becoming closer to nature. Both inside and outside of the park, these common images represent the Adirondacks and are reinforced in many ways. Certainly, stores and gift shops across the park realize the popularity of this identity and perpetuate the style by what they choose to sell. Yet the widespread acceptance of the
rustic as the Adirondack style, despite the fact that vernacular architectural and design styles exist within the park, has influenced even more than retail shops and artisans. In many ways the rustic style has become fused with the environmental stewardship of the region, making the history of the park and the recreational history of the region seem to be the major stories of the region’s past, pushing aside the heritage of the local working folk and an earlier history of pioneer agriculture and subsistence living. While revealing the storied landscape of the park, Adirondack regional museums have at times pushed aside the vernacular story for the environmental one.

Once the park became a recreational destination for the wealthy, the area’s original settlers frequently began to work for the summer residents and rely on this income for economic survival. Similarly, today’s residents also depend on the income from tourists and summer residents to keep the region’s economy afloat. This dependence often creates a gulf between the local story and the regional story, which manifests itself in many ways and has been the source of conflict throughout the region’s past and present. Ultimately disagreements about state land regulations as well as general sentiments regarding the value of the park are often are drawn down these residential and class lines. Divergent strands of the region’s history are manifested in the culture, including museum exhibits throughout the region. The story of insiders versus outsiders has been repeated over and over in Adirondack history and it reveals an important divide perpetuated by the interpretive direction of the area’s regional museums. Adirondack regional museums tend to cater to an outside audience, while local museums cater to their communities. For example, The Adirondack Museum recently replaced an exhibit about
the local mining industry with one about outdoor recreational opportunities within the park. Increasingly over the past thirty years, Adirondack regional museums have interpreted the region through an environmental lens with a focus on the destruction, use, and preservation of Adirondack lands. This has reinforced a regional identity that is decidedly environmental in emphasis. As a result, an environmental interpretation of the region has overtaken the small, quieter stories of settlers and residents attempting to survive and work on the land.

Many visitors come to the Adirondack Park to hike and rush straight into the woods and waters to experience the park’s natural landscapes. The natural and cultural history of these landscapes are overshadowed by the appeal of nature, but museums in the park provide visitors with information that could enhance and inform their outdoor adventures and relationship with nature. There are two major regional museums in the Adirondack Park, but the Adirondack Museum, the region’s cultural history museum that first opened in 1957, is the elder and more prominent of the two. The second museum, The Wild Center, the Natural History Museum of the Adirondacks, opened in 2006 and reveals much about the trajectory of regional museums in the park. Although The Wild Center is still working to find its identity as an institution, the mere creation of this museum reveals much about the importance of the park’s natural history to the museum’s creators and the region. Museums can be important indicators of the way a community deals with the past and the realization that the park needed an institution to explore and interpret its natural history reveals a growing awareness of the importance of the environment.
While both major regional museums in the Adirondacks approach Adirondack history differently, they nonetheless, follow a similar interpretive direction that has become distinctly environmental. The Adirondack story at The Wild Center begins with the region’s geology and the glaciers that formed the Adirondack Mountains 10,000 years ago, while interpretation at the Adirondack Museum utilizes the first settlers in the park as a starting point. Native Americans are mentioned sporadically in exhibits and the bulk of the story takes place after white settlers and urban vacationers have entered the park. As the Adirondack Museum matured, the stories of early Adirondackers faded and the creation of the park in 1892 became the benchmark from which the rest of the region’s history has been considered. Since the legislation to create the park was part of a nationwide environmental movement around the turn of the century, the focus on the park’s creation automatically asserts an environmental focus. Yet, while this environmental benchmark has been an underlying component of exhibitions at the museum, it was not strongly and openly emphasized during the museum’s first decades. The later emphasis on environmental themes is a reflection of both the influence of the museum’s leaders and a growing awareness in the larger culture of the impact of human activity on the environment. The Adirondack Museum initially maintained solely a historical focus, but the museum’s mission now includes an environmental component that is inseparable from the region’s history. It reads, “The Adirondack Museum expands public understanding of Adirondack history and the relationship between people and the Adirondack wilderness, fostering informed choices for the future.”1 The Adirondack Museum makes a public attempt to bring people and nature closer together and provide a

Harold Hochschild and the Adirondack Museum

Any discussion of the Adirondack Museum must begin with Harold Hochschild. While other local museums in the park existed in the early half of the twentieth century, a museum dedicated to the region’s history was not seriously considered until Hochschild made it his mission. Hochschild’s relationship with the Adirondacks began as a youth after his father purchased Eagle Nest Country Club on Blue Mountain Lake from William West Durant’s creditors in 1904. Durant had built the country club in 1900 as part of a grander development plan for the shores of Blue Mountain Lake, but most of the construction was never fully realized because of his massive debts. Beginning in 1904 at age twelve Hochschild spent every June through September with his family at Eagle Nest. The Hochschild family traveled by the railroad and steamboat network originally

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3 The Hochschilds lived in New York City and were wealthy due to a successful family business. In 1886 Harold’s father, Berthold Hochschild (1860-1928), founded the American Metal Company, Ltd (later AMAX Corp), which Harold and his younger brother Walter would later inherit and run. See Craig Gilborn, Whose History: A Museum Memoir (Mt. Tabor, Vermont: The Blueline Press, 2001), 4-5.
developed by Durant and both methods of transport fascinated Harold. He began to collect boxes of information about the region’s history and continued to focus on Durant’s role in its development.\(^4\) In 1928 Hochschild went to New York City and arranged a meeting with Durant during which he met face-to-face with the famed developer and obtained information about the region. After this meeting, Hochschild began to speak about the possibility of writing a book on the region’s history and proceeded to spend countless hours researching and developing the book *Township 34*, which he classified as “a history of the Eckford Lakes…to be privately printed for the benefit of my family, a few friends and a few libraries.”\(^5\)

Hochschild devoted a great portion of the book to William West Durant and Durant’s influence on the development of transportation, infrastructure, and rustic camps in the region. Hochschild continued to gather information from personal meetings with Durant and even hosted him for a visit at Eagle Nest. After having been away from the region for many years, Durant returned in 1931 and stayed as a guest in the country club he had developed many years prior. With Hochschild, Durant traveled to his former camps for one last time.\(^6\) The notes and materials from Hochschild’s conversations with Durant greatly informed *Township 34* and when it was published in 1952 the dedication read, “To the Memory of William West Durant.”\(^7\) The relationship between Durant and


\(^6\) Gilborn, *Durant*, 144.

\(^7\) Harold Hochschild, *Township 34: A History with Digressions, of an Adirondack Township in Hamilton County in the State of New York* (1952).
Hochschild greatly influenced *Township 34* and, more importantly, the later exhibits at the Adirondack Museum. While Durant’s influence and impact is undeniable, Hochschild’s work enshrined him as the Adirondack pioneer.

At over 600 pages and weighing over seven pounds, only 600 copies of this mammoth book were ever printed. The book was rare in Hochschild’s lifetime and could command a price of $700. In 2010 a copy was for sale at an online bookseller for over $2,000.⁸ After the museum opened, *Township 34* was revised and re-released as a series of pamphlets first published in 1962.⁹ Each pamphlet focuses on a specific topical area such as Durant’s influence, logging, mining, steamboats, railroads, leisure activities, and resorts. While at least some of Hochschild’s work remains easily accessible, the scope of these revised extracts is minimal and they cover only a portion of the original text. They have had a larger printing and have remained continuously in print, for a longer time span, but the booklets are not as thorough or complete as Hochschild’s original work, whose merits were recognized with a citation from the American Association for State and Local History.¹⁰

Because of the small printing size and Hochschild’s intention to write the book for family and friends, it seemed unlikely that a book with such a limited printing would have a lasting impact. Yet the book became immortalized in a unique way when Hochschild drew upon *Township 34* and all the research conducted in the process of

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⁹ They were published to supplement the original exhibitions at the museum that were heavily based on the information in Hochschild’s book.

writing it to aid in the development of exhibitions for the Adirondack Museum.

Hochschild played a large role founding the museum and less than two years after the publication of Township 34, plans were set in motion to build a museum just two miles from Eagle Nest on the site of a summer hotel.\(^{11}\)

Plans for the museum were conceived prior to the publication of Township 34. The first record of Hochschild mentioning a museum came in a 1947 letter that discussed a conversation between Hochschild and William Wessels about the potential for a regional museum.\(^{12}\) Wessels, a friend of Hochschild’s who was also interested in the region’s history, owned the Blue Mountain House, which was a summer hotel on the shores of Blue Mountain Lake that eventually became the location for the museum. By 1948 the Adirondack Historical Association, an organization created to govern the future museum, was formed and chartered. Wessels served as the first president of the organization, but little was accomplished towards the creation of a museum until Hochschild assumed the presidency in 1953. Wessels stepped down to avoid a conflict of interest over the sale of his hotel as the site for the museum.\(^{13}\) Hochschild remembers the Adirondack Historical Association asking himself and his wife if they would like to take action on the museum after the project sat for several years. According to Hochschild, “We decided it was something we would like to do particularly because we realized that most of the research to get the museum started had already been done for the book

\(^{11}\) Gilborn, Whose History, 1.

\(^{12}\) Gilborn, Whose History, 6, 19.

\(^{13}\) Tim Keniston, “Preserving Adirondack Heritage for 4 Decades,” Adirondack Daily Enterprise, July 1997, 1. William Wessels decided to leave the hotel business, but retained life use of a cottage on the property.
Township 34 and we decided we would undertake the project and all of a sudden we were it."14 From that point until his death in 1981, Hochschild remained personally and financially involved with the museum.

The site was ideal for the museum because the property itself was historic and the original hotel on the property dated back to 1874.15 Not only had Hochschild written about the Blue Mountain House in Township 34, the property retained several historic buildings including an 1876 log house. The property occupied a small plateau on the shore of Blue Mountain Lake and overlooked three lakes, a spot which showcased fantastic views of lakes dotted with islands surrounded by sweeping scenic vistas of nearby mountains. The site provided postcard worthy views showcasing the scenic beauty of the region. The Adirondack Historical Association realized the draw of the region’s beauty and hoped to incorporate scenic views into the museum experience to entice more visitors to the museum once it opened to the public. By 1954 Hochschild and the Adirondack Historical Association hired Bruce Inverarity to serve as the museum’s first director. Inverarity, the former director of the International Museum of Folk Art in Santa Fe was hired because he had experience building and expanding museums from the ground up.16 Yet Harold Hochschild continued to have an immense


15 The Blue Mountain House was Blue Mountain Lake’s first resort development and initially served as a forty person hotel. Soon Blue Mountain Lake became a popular resort destination and hotels sprung up all along the shores of the lake.

16 Bruce Inverarity was museum director until 1965 when he had a falling out with Hochschild partially regarding Inverarity’s refusal to move to Blue Mountain Lake full time. Inverarity had maintained his primary residence in Connecticut and lived in the Adirondacks seasonally. He went on work as the director of the Philadelphia Maritime Museum. Inverarity was also known as a collector of North American Indian art, which he sold in 1976 to The British Museum for a reported sum of over one million dollars. See Gilborn, Whose History, 51.
influence and by the time Inverarity began the job, Hochschild had already arranged for several of the items that would come to the museum.

**The Adirondack Museum’s Original Exhibitions**

When the museum was still in the planning stages, newspapers reported that “the main theme will be the history of man in the Adirondacks”\(^{17}\) and the museum was to be “devoted to showing the way of life of the early settlers, loggers and resorters in this area.”\(^{18}\) Exhibitions fell under the broad themes of transportation, work, and development while telling the story of how Adirondack people lived. Director Bruce Inverarity did not have prior knowledge of the Adirondack Park, but he used *Township 34* as an exhibitions blueprint for subject matter, artifacts, and illustrations. In a book about independent historical societies, Boston author and museum director Walter Muir Whitehill commented, “The Adirondack Museum is essentially an extra-illustration of *Township 34* in three-dimensional terms, not only with dioramas, but with original objects as large as an 1890 private railroad car.”\(^{19}\) When the museum opened August 3, 1957 it was still a work in progress, but visitors could move along a series of buildings and paths to get glimpse of life in the Adirondacks before the automobile.

As a result of the predominant presence of William West Durant in *Township 34*, many of the museum’s initial exhibits were focused on history related to Durant. The museum was able to obtain many artifacts, photographs, and documents relating to

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Durant. Many donors, including Durant’s friends and family, gave items to the museum because they were familiar with the connection between Durant and Harold Hochschild through the book. One of the original artifacts highlighted at the museum was the locomotive and passenger car from the Marion River Carry Railroad. Hochschild ensured that the Adirondack Museum would receive these cars, which had been sitting dormant and rusting in the woods since the railroad last ran in 1929. Part of Durant’s original transportation network, the Marion River Carry Railroad connected passengers from the Eckford Chain Lakes to Raquette Lake and was the shortest standard gauge railroad in the world at 1300 yards.20 The rail cars were successfully taken from the woods and brought to site of the future museum. The museum displayed artifacts representing the entire transportation circuit Durant pioneered also, including a steamboat and stagecoach, sleighs and guideboats. The collection of steamboats, carriages, and the Marion River Carry Railroad were useful to illustrate the long trip from New York City to Blue Mountain Lake especially to visitors that took for granted the now simple five hour car ride. In the 1870s boat, railway, and carriage were all necessary for the trip that took nearly thirty hours and still took over thirteen hours in 1904.21


21 Showers, X15.
Both local workers and wealthy vacationers were represented in exhibits because Harold Hochschild had documented both in *Township 34*. Even though Hochschild himself was a wealthy summer homeowner in the park, the true heart of his book was his portrait of the “old timers” including woodsmen, wilderness guides, and steamboat hands and the lives and experiences of Adirondack residents were well documented during the museum’s early years because of Hochschild’s interest in local people. In fact, Hochschild’s son Adam read the book as an adult and was stunned by its social sweep documenting robber barons to hermits. He remarked, “The hermits often got more pages than the barons. The book honors the lives of people normally invisible to summer visitors: trappers, surveyors, railway crews.”22 At the same time he garnered respect from the locals. They would shake his hand when he went to the store and call him Mr. Harold as a sign of both class and respect. Adam remembered, “Bizarrely, it must have seemed to these villagers, it was this industrialist from the big city who had made himself the leading expert on central Adirondack history. What had drawn him to the subject? Perhaps his celebrating this vanishing culture, rural and working-class though it was, was a psychological substitute for exploring his own Jewish roots.”23 Regardless of the reason, it seems that Harold Hochschild did not push to orient the museum towards either visitors or residents, summer residents or full time residents. His vision of an Adirondacker was broad and encompassed the entire range of experiences. Although he had been a summer resident for most of his life, Harold Hochschild became a permanent

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23 Adam Hochschild, 193.
resident of the Adirondack Park at age eighty, lived the last ten years of his life at Eagle Nest, and was buried in the town cemetery.

Despite the destruction of the main hotel building on the property, the museum retained the historic 1876 log cabin that used to be a hunter’s hotel and fittingly installed a trapping and hunting display inside. Logging and life in the woods were highlighted by several dioramas that illustrated the process of logging as well as camping and hunting scenes. The dioramas illustrated the use of many of the tools and artifacts on display throughout the rest of the museum.24 In a startling social class juxtaposition, artifacts related to the lifestyle of wealthy vacationers were on display just yards away from the 9’x12’x5’ hut where Adirondack hermit Noah John Rondeau lived near the Cold River for nearly thirty years. By the time the museum began its first full summer season in June 1958, a lavish eighty foot long Pullman car had joined the transportation collections which soon also included the Water Witch, a large sailboat once owned by wealthy camp owners from the St. Regis Lakes.25 The museum also displayed the legacy of the region’s resort hotels through extensive photographs and artifacts on display.26 According to an early report about the Adirondack Museum, it “offers the passing tourist unusually detailed pictures of both the primitive life of the early Adirondack logging camps and the rustic luxury of the vacation camps that succeeded them.”27

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24 Showers, X15.
26 The Blue Mountain Lake location was ideal for an exhibition on luxury hotels since the town had a brief heyday as one of the most fashionable and popular resort destinations at the turn of the century. The Prospect House was the first hotel to have an Edison light bulb in each of its 300 rooms.
The experiences of both resident workers and wealthy vacationers were also represented in the boat collection because the region’s many waterways were integral to both transportation and leisure activity. As the awareness of the museum spread, donations began to increase and with over 200 boats the museum soon had one of the largest historic boat collections in the country. A new building adjacent to the main building was constructed to display the collection with a focus on both the boat users and the boat builders. In August 1965 the new boat exhibit opened displaying all types of boats used and/or crafted in the park including guideboats, wooden canoes, and even award winning racing boats from Lake George. The year after the boat exhibit opened another major construction project commenced. The Roads and Rails Transportation building opened in 1969 with exhibitions focusing on transportation and community life. The building nearly doubled the museum’s display space and was large because Harold Hochschild had wanted to enclose the 80-foot Pullman car and had arranged for the structure to be built around it.28 “Transportation in the Adirondacks” included displays about community life such as a farming gallery, peddler’s wagon, and blacksmith shop in addition to countless examples of tools, horse drawn carriages, buggies, stagecoaches, and even a rail station.

The Expansion and Evolution of the Adirondack Museum

After the three major buildings of the museum were completed, the Adirondack Museum had exhibitions that covered all aspects of Township 34. The museum would now begin to move beyond the book and begin to develop exhibits that included new scholarship and more facets of Adirondack cultural history. To this point, exhibits

28 Gilborn, Whose History, 49.
focused on the nineteenth and early twentieth century history of the region and emphasized the experiences of workers as well as the growth of the region as a resort and leisure destination for wealthy urban dwellers. During the 1970s and the early 1980s the museum continued to evolve and new exhibitions were added including exhibitions about rustic furniture, outdoor recreation, mining, and logging. In 1972 museum curator William Verner remarked, “We’ve got a lot of the technological aspects of the Adirondacks. Now we need to bite off the outdoor story, the impact of wilderness, the hunting, fishing, and camping.”

This was the beginning of the museum’s evolution toward a more environmental story. It was not immediate, but the idea of nature became more present. No longer was the mission to merely tell the story of man in the Adirondacks; new exhibits examined the relationship between man and the Adirondacks.

Exhibits at the museum also began to use the word Adirondack as it related to the park and not just the region. The legislation creating the park served as a tidy framework from which to explore and examine Adirondack history. In the exhibits, the creation of the forest preserve and the park is framed as an environmental success story and provides environmental underpinnings to the exploration of all other topics in the park. For example, logging and recreation are both important to the region, and laws related to the creation of the park mostly dictate where, how often, and to what extent these activities can occur. The creation of the Adirondack Park serves as a benchmark from which all other history in the region is considered.

Opening in 1978, “Woods and Waters: Outdoor Recreation in the Adirondack Park” was curated by William Verner who had already begun to plan the exhibition when

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the above remark was published by *The New York Times* in 1972. According to Craig Gilborn, “he [Verner] knew Adirondack history and the evolution of thinking about wilderness in America, and was part of efforts to prevent large-scale developments in the Adirondack Park, which he did at his own expense.”

Verner brought some of these ideas to the way he considered Adirondack history. The exhibition included a life size camping scene complete with a stream of running water. Fishing poles, snowshoes, hunting gear, and a section with artifacts from the 1932 Lake Placid Olympics capped off the exhibit’s examination of recreation in the region. While new exhibitions begin to explore the relationship between humans and the nature, it was not until the mid-1980s that exhibits begin to examine critically the impact of humans on the landscape.

**A Growing Environmentalism at the Adirondack Museum**

The Adirondack Museum was slowly becoming more environmentally focused in the scope of its exhibitions and the beginning of a more substantial shift can be traced to changes in the leadership of the Hochschild family. The Hochschild family played a very important role in the development of the museum because Harold not only provided the original scholarship for the museum with *Township 34*, but he also supported the museum financially. When Harold Hochschild died in 1981 at age 90, financial support for the museum came from the newly formed Harold K. Hochschild Foundation. The foundation had five directors including Harold’s younger brother Walter who held the reins until his own death in 1983 when Harold’s son Adam assumed the role. Adam was a very

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30 Gilborn, *Whose History*, 70.

31 According to Craig Gilborn’s correspondence with Adam, Harold Hochschild had wishes that the museum should remain an institution financed and controlled by the Hochschild family. By the end of the 1980’s, however, Adam Hochschild wished the museum to become more financially independent.
different man from his father and he had decided to pursue writing instead of working as a corporate executive like his father, uncle, and grandfather. He became a successful writer and has published several books in addition to co-founding *Mother Jones* magazine.\footnote{Adam wrote a memoir about his complex relationship with his father. See Adam Hochschild, *Half the Way Home: A Memoir of Father and Son* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986). In addition Adam’s 2005 book *Bury the Chains*, a historical account of the anti-slavery movement in England, was a finalist for the National Book Award} Once Adam assumed leadership of the foundation he had very specific ideas about the ways he wished to see the museum deal with environmental issues.

The director during this era was Craig Gilborn who was the museum’s longest running director from 1972 to 1992. Gilborn later published a memoir entitled *Whose History?: A Museum Memoir* about the Adirondack Museum and in the book he wrote about his interactions with Adam Hochschild. According to Gilborn, “‘Provocatively’ was Adam’s word for how he wanted the Adirondack Museum to deal with environmental issues. In 1983, in a letter, he cited ‘five cases of old fishing rods’ that said nothing about ‘what acid rain has done to the fish,’ and ‘old buggies and carriages,” that gave no information about damage done by the automobile.”\footnote{Gilborn, *Whose History*, 82.} Gilborn and Hochschild did not always agree and Gilborn noted that while he would like the museum to address the environment, he wanted the museum to remain a history museum and not delve into science.

Gilborn remained worried about the intentions of the foundation and the reliability of continued financial support. In the meantime the museum did become more financially independent, beginning fund raising efforts and introducing a membership program in 1985. Finally in 1999 the foundation awarded the museum a $24 million endowment which ended its financial obligation to the museum. See Gilborn, *Whose History*, 78-81, 111.
Although Adam Hochschild did put some pressure on the importance of the environment in the museum’s exhibits, Gilborn notes that he left much of the initiative to the staff. During the 1980s several exhibits were redone and the museum experienced tremendous growth. Environmental issues continued to creep into the museum’s interpretation and the museum began to branch out to the public in ways beyond the traditional exhibit. Not only did the museum face current park issues and conflicts head-on, it decided to experiment with ways to bring the museum to people living in the park, especially in rural areas. One of the first initiatives was the Parkmobile, a bookmobile transformed into a historical exhibition and classroom on wheels. According to Gilborn, “the Parkmobile is an experimental effort to reach this rural audience, most of whom have been overlooked by state agencies when it comes to cultural services.”

During 1982, the inaugural season, the Parkmobile brought its exhibits to campgrounds, communities, and schools throughout the park. The 1984 Parkmobile exhibit entitled “Acid Rain: An American Tragedy?” was one of the museum’s first projects with a decidedly environmental focus. The exhibit examined the affects of acid rain on plant and animal life in the Adirondacks as well as the sources and possible controls for acid rain. The exhibit promoted an environmentalist outlook and helped push visitors to think about considering the negative effects of human activity on the environment. Because acid rain in the Adirondacks was a result of industry in the Midwest, the exhibit emphasized the interconnectedness and impact of human actions. The majority of visitors to the

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Parkmobile were schoolchildren and in 1984 over 7000 visitors were able to learn about acid rain that might never have had the chance to visit the museum.\(^\text{36}\)

As the museum continued to experiment with different ways to bring history to the public, the museum released a documentary film, which was very much in line with what Adam Hochschild wished to see the museum produce. Entitled “The Adirondacks, The Lives and Times of an Adirondack Wilderness,” the 1987 film explored the issue of land regulation in the Adirondacks by speaking to citizens who were both for and against it. The film won several awards and was screened daily for visitors at the museum.\(^\text{37}\) By exploring current debates and controversies about land use, the museum had entered the dialogue about the park’s future. When tackling environmental subjects in the Adirondack Park, it would be far too difficult to dwell on the past without considering the future.

In the late 1980s the museum decided to overhaul the logging exhibit. This would be the third incarnation of the exhibit, which according to Director of Public Affairs at the time, Ann Carroll, was the most popular exhibit with local residents because so many had family connections to the industry.\(^\text{38}\) This new version of the exhibit provided another opportunity to include environmental factors in the museum’s interpretation. “Work in the Woods: Logging the Adirondacks,” went beyond the traditional exploration of the materials, loggers, and logging camps of the mid-nineteenth century and addressed the influence of mechanization on the logging industry. The entire logging industry in

\(^{36}\) “Parkmobile Well Received,” *Adirondack Daily Enterprise*, November 6, 1984, 3.


the region had changed since the turn of the twentieth century and the logging exhibit reflected those changes.

The final section of the logging exhibit, which was also a new contribution, aimed to get visitors thinking about sustainability. One unit, entitled “Wood: Still a Basic Material” required visitors to think about what a cord of wood could make. The answer included 7.5 million toothpicks, a ton of paper, or 1,200 copies of National Geographic, of which a stack in the exhibit provided a visual representation.39 The next panel, “Preservation and Conservation of the Forest,” raised issues of conservation, scientific forestry, and acid rain. Exhibit labels connected destructive logging practices to the legislation creating the park. One reads, “By 1898, after more than thirty years of continuous cutting, nearly two-thirds of the region’s forests have been logged for softwoods. Wasteful and destructive logging practices as well as fire threatened to destroy what remained.” As a result, the legislation successfully ensured preservation of the forests and watersheds. Yet while the exhibit discussed this victory, it did not mention the connection between the creation of the park and the decline of the logging industry or between the rise of environmentalism and the overall decline of extractive industries in the park. The exhibit did include, however, a video with a variety of individuals such as a conservationist, a Native American, and a land developer who debated land use and the future of the park. The logging exhibit also addressed the issue of forest fires, which were often a result of excessive logging. A life size Smokey Bear in the exit and the original fire tower from Whiteface Mountain outside of the exhibit complement the section on forest fires. Ecological issues seem to appear only at the end.

of the exhibit as opposed to throughout, but they were addressed in this exhibit more directly than any other permanent exhibition at the museum. The ideas included in the panel “The Adirondack Forest: Finite or Infinite Resource” were forward thinking and showed the museum considering the future. What is our legacy and what do we need to do to protect it?

In 1988 Craig Gilborn embarked on a project in response to Adam Hochschild’s desire for the museum that would showcase the intersection of nature and history in a way that he hoped would allow the Adirondack Museum to be “engaging the environment without distorting its historical mission.”

Anchored by a pavilion in a section of the museum property called Merwin Hill, Gilborn developed an Eco-History trail on the museum’s grounds. In the later 1980s the Environmental Pavilion on Merwin Hill was constructed in the rustic style and it was surrounded by woods with an excellent view of the rest of the museum. Various panels and labels at the pavilion were included to identify plants near and around the area. Gilborn planned for the pavilion to be the starting point for a one-mile round trip walk to a pond on the property. The trail would include areas that illustrated the use and context of certain objects as well as examples of good and poor land management. The trail was peppered with snowshoes, sleds, axes, and other tools necessary for life in the Adirondack forests. Visitors were able to understand the use of these items and the way they impacted the landscape. The trail looped around nearby Minnow Pond and a log cabin by the pond housed occasional demonstrations by various artisans. Gilborn left the museum before the project was completed, but the type of project shows how the Adirondack Museum made an attempt

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40 Gilborn, Whose History, 88.
to tap into the increased interest in the Adirondack environment without losing its historical focus.\footnote{Ibid., 88-90, 94.} Although valuable, this type of project was not fully embraced by the museum once Gilborn left and the eco-trail remained open only a few years. Attempts to fuse natural and cultural history in a similar manner were discontinued and instead natural and cultural history remained in separate spheres.

**Wilderness and the Adirondack Museum**

The eco-trail also illustrated the connection between man and nature, which is something often lost in the discussion of wilderness in the park. Wilderness is a complicated concept to explore accurately in a museum exhibition because the concept of wilderness in scholarship has assumed increasingly layered meanings. It is easy to say that wilderness equals land uninhabited and untouched by man and it is easy to look into the forests surrounding the Adirondack Museum and simply label them wilderness. The romantic view of wilderness promulgated in literature and art for so many years does not hold up to the reality of land inhabited and changed by humans for over a century. The Adirondack Museum has begun to attempt to provide a more complex interpretation of wilderness through a series of exhibits geared towards lessening the inevitable dichotomy between people and nature.

The romantic view was typically the lens through which the museum’s exhibits presented wilderness. Wilderness was revered for its beauty and it existed separate from humans. The museum’s collection of art reinforced this definition by showcasing scenic vistas and only the most beautiful scenes in the park. In the 1990s, however, the museum began to look at wilderness through a more critical eye. A 1993 museum self-study
conducted by a group of scholars emphasized the need to use “new interpretive questions raised by environmental history as the basis for…future interpretive directions that the museum’s future exhibitions might pursue.” A more nuanced definition of wilderness was certainly part of these new interpretive questions and the scholars specifically pointed toward the need to unpack the phrase “forever wild.” Legislation may refer to the land inside the park as “forever wild,” but a closer look at the land reveals that nature and wilderness have been continually made and remade within the park’s boundaries. According to Christopher Clarke, a scholar participating in the study, “Documenting for a public audience the process of social construction—in this case the ways Americans have invented and recreated ‘nature’—is a daunting task in part because the notion itself is abstract.” Yet the Adirondack Park provides tangible evidence of how and why nature was made and remade, and exhibits in the 1990s began to attempt to look at the Adirondack wilderness beyond its mere face value.

One of the first exhibits dealing primarily with wilderness was “A Peopled Wilderness,” which opened at the start of the 1999 season. The exhibit explored the intersection of people and wilderness in the Adirondack Park through an examination of perceptions of the region and industrial and leisure uses of the land. It looked at the repercussions of the logging and mining industry, but also emphasized the fact that many places in the forest have recovered so completely that remnants of these activities have vanished to most observers. The exhibit aimed to tell the human story of the wilderness.


43 Ibid., 132-133.
Curator Kenneth Myers noted, “many people think the beauty or meaning of a physical environment is somehow intrinsic or natural, but the meaning we find in places like the Adirondacks is socially constructed and changes all the time.”

These ideas were very much informed by scholarship on wilderness, namely William Cronon’s *The Trouble with Wilderness*, and Myers attempted to insert the human story into traditional romantic perceptions. As Cronon has argued, Wilderness is not just a natural term, but is also a cultural one, and the Adirondack Museum wanted “A Peopled Wilderness” to explain this concept to a public still closely attached to the romantic.

The physical setting of the museum re-emphasizes a romantic interpretation of wilderness in the ways the museum’s exterior environment showcases spectacular views and attractive rustic buildings. For example, the ever-popular ‘Scenic Overlook’ provides a spot for visitors to look out at Blue Mountain Lake and the Eckford Chain Lakes. Situated on the rear side of the Transportation Building, a deck provides a well-positioned view of the lakes, mountains, and forests surrounding the museum. This is a favorite spot for many museum visitors.

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which is part of the reason the museum decided to take advantage of the scene and install panels to inform visitors about the history of the landscape. Three panels explain changes in the landscape. The land surrounding the museum used to be farmland and what now has a full forest cover was once logged and clear cut for farming. These panels attempt to help visitors better understand the landscape and provide a concrete example of the creation of wilderness. Yet according to museum librarian Jerold Pepper, the response to the addition of these panels was negative. Several complaints appeared in the museum’s log and a family who had always used this spot for their annual Christmas card photo was perturbed that the labels were in the picture. Many visitors were accustomed to using this space to take family photographs and the panels obstructed the view.  

Admittedly the view is the best at the museum, but it is clear that many visitors would rather appreciate wilderness for aesthetic qualities than cultural ones. Even though the Adirondack Museum might try to inspire visitors to take a more critical look at the landscape and understand the meaning of the Adirondack wilderness, visitors are not always receptive and many do not want to give up their romantic perceptions. A general shift and new conception of wilderness has not been totally embraced by the public, but exhibits with a critical eye at the Adirondack Museum are a step towards providing the public with a greater understanding of the Adirondack environment.

**Changing of the Guard – The Adirondack Museum Enters the Twenty-First Century**

By the year 2000 the Adirondack Museum decided that in order to enter the twenty-first century and follow the development of modern museum practices, the

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45 Conversation with Jerold Pepper, October 5, 2007.
museum needed to create more interactive programs and exhibits. The result was a new initiative called Adirondack Live! which was announced alongside the grand opening of a newly constructed visitor’s center and gift shop. The new building was designed in the style of an Adirondack lodge and it became the new face of the museum greeting visitors as they would enter or travelers who would drive past the museum. In addition to the new spaces, the museum placed a heavy focus on interactive programming. According to Ann Carroll, director of public affairs, “When the museum first opened in 1957, people were content with simply having artifacts with labels, now, people want to have a more interactive experience.”\textsuperscript{46} Partially as a way to combat falling admission numbers, the Adirondack Museum designed new programs to provide visitors with ways to interact with Adirondack history.\textsuperscript{47} For example, visitors could build a small boat in the boat building, learn how to carve from a woodcarver in the art gallery, or try rowing an Adirondack skiff in the pond. New workshops, demonstrations, special programs, hands-on games, and occasional costumed interpreters were all elements of the museum’s initiative to create a new learning community for the twenty-first century.

With so many changes afoot, there were bound to be casualties of the museum’s new direction. As the museum has moved further away from Harold Hochschild’s original vision, there has been less of a focus on the Adirondack vernacular story. One of the things the museum lost in order to construct a new visitor’s center was a gallery that introduced visitors to the Adirondacks. Craig Gilborn especially lamented the removal of


\textsuperscript{47} In the 1990s attendance topped 100,000 annually, but the numbers had declined since for various reasons. Interactive programming was a way to attract more children and families to the museum.
two exhibit cases that had featured the history of Native Americans in the region. The museum was already had very little Native American history and artifacts so the removal of these cases further downplayed their history and pre-history in the region. Additionally, the museum no longer possessed an introductory exhibit to provide visitors with an overview of the background of Adirondack history as a region and as a park. Instead, visitors were and still are greeted by the sailboat Water Witch suspended from the ceiling looking majestic with its 40-foot mast fully extended.

A second casualty of the new visitor’s center was the Bill Gates Diner. The museum received the Bill Gates Diner from Bolton Landing, NY and in 1990 added it to the landscape of the museum. The diner was situated near the parking lot, which allowed visitors to make an easy connection between their own travels and this disappearing symbol of roadside culture. It had been a diner for over forty years and before that a trolley car that had operated within the park. Not only did the diner showcase a popular Bolton Landing landmark, it illustrated the adaptive reuse of a method of transportation no longer utilized in the park. The ability to adapt and reuse resources is an important environmental concept that could have supplemented the institution’s environmental story had the museum chosen to tell it.

Unfortunately in 2000, the museum removed the diner and permanently loaned it to the Champlain Valley Transportation Museum in Plattsburgh suggesting that it was more suited to that museum. There was a sense in this decision that perhaps the diner


49 The diner was a gift from Robert Wolgin who had purchased it and never used it. See Richard J.S. Gutman, *American Diner: Then and Now* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2000), 220-221.

was not “Adirondack” enough because it did not fit the bark covered rustic styled regional script. The diner was not directly related to the artifacts typically displayed at the museum. It was not part of traditional Adirondack leisure activities or a forest industry or the rustic style. It is true that a diner such as this one could have appeared all over the country as a symbol of American roadside car culture. While it is possible that the museum saw the mundane, ordinary nature of the diner as a reason to remove the display, the diner represents an important element of small town life in the Adirondack Park. As Adirondack historian Amy Godine states, “We have to celebrate what sets us apart, but also what we have in common with the world outside the Blue Line…it’s the history that keeps us connected. It’s the lifeline to the world.”

Craig Gilborn, the museum director who had initially accepted the artifact, joined Godine’s disappointment in this decision.

The diner had a broad connection and an appeal to the experiences of the masses in a way that the Water Witch sailboat could not have. While many museum visitors have likely eaten in the diner, it would be rare for a visitor to have experienced sailing on a boat like the Water Witch. The boat represented the lifestyles of the wealthy, something that is unattainable for most museum visitors. Therefore, the Water Witch is viewed almost as a work of art and while plenty of people visit museums to see art, the Adirondack Museum remains a cultural history museum and one might question their decision to rid itself of the ordinary. Through this decision, the museum reaffirmed the

51 Lee Manchester, “Adirondack historian meet for ‘how-to’ workshop,” Adirondack Daily Enterprise, July 15, 2006, 8. The Blue Line is a commonly used term in the Adirondacks and it represents the blue line drawn on maps outlining the park borders.

52 Gilborn, Whose History, 101-102.
choice to present a narrow regional story above stories or artifacts relating to daily life in the small towns and hamlets of the Adirondack Park.

When a museum grows and matures, it is unlikely that every exhibit remains unchanged or remains at all. Of course, many exhibits are temporary with an expected lifespan of one or two seasons, but changes to long-term exhibits are particularly noteworthy and reveal a lot about the priorities of the museum. The decision to not just change, but also actually remove a long-term exhibit reveals even more about the interpretive direction of a museum. This happened at the Adirondack Museum in 2005 when the mining exhibit closed in order to make room for “The Great Outdoors: Adirondack Play and Adventure”, an interactive family friendly exhibit now occupying the former mining building. It is interesting to note that an exhibit review of the mining exhibit a few years after it first opened in 1983 emphasized the fact that the exhibit would appeal to a broader group of people. The reviewer wrote, “The museum provides an amiable and reassuring view of the region as a backwoods summer retreat. However, the L.L. Bean perspective adopted at Blue Mountain Lake has obvious limits. For instance, one wonders whether the year-round inhabitants earning their living in the Adirondack feel much kinship with this museum.”53 He concludes that the mining exhibit “overcomes the museum’s predilection for dealing with artifacts merely in aesthetic terms and for either ignoring local working folk or, conversely, enshrining them in mythic lore.”54 This reviewer was pleased with the way the exhibit covered both the


54 Ibid., 290.
technological and cultural dimensions of mining and was able to utilize photographs and folk songs to address the social costs of an industry in decline. However, the mining exhibit did not address the environmental costs of mining and perhaps that is why the museum chose to remove it.\textsuperscript{55} Unfortunately, it appears that with the exhibit’s closure and the type of exhibit that replaced it, the museum has begun to place less emphasis on the experience of local working folks in exhibitions.

The museum director when the exhibit opened, Craig Gilborn, expressed sadness at the removal of the mining exhibit in his memoir and indignation at the quality of the exhibit which replaced it. He mentioned an encounter with the archeologist of the Green Mountain National Forest who was very disappointed to find the mining exhibit removed when he took students to the Adirondack Museum specifically to see it.\textsuperscript{56} Instead of finding an educational exhibition at the mining building, visitors now find what the museum touts “a learning experience” with what appears to be an emphasis on experience more than learning.

\textsuperscript{55} Adam Hochschild was not overly enthusiastic about the exhibit. Because his father and grandfather had run the American Metal Corporation (later Amax), he knew and had seen the ill effects of mining on miner’s health, mining communities, and the environment in the US and in Africa where the company had major holdings. He rejected the family business and later published a book about the exploitation of colonial Africans.

\textsuperscript{56} Gilborn, \textit{Whose History}, 101-102. The museum did not totally ignore mining and after removing the exhibit, they installed a panel entitled “Mining in the Adirondacks” to the exterior of the building. The panel examines the role of commercial mining on the growth and settlement of the Adirondack Park.
“The Great Outdoors: Adirondack Play and Adventure” includes very few artifacts and little historical content, but there are countless hands on activities. The exhibit is geared towards families with children because there are things to “do” and touch even though the participatory elements are largely related to contemporary recreational activities. For example, visitors can try on snowshoes, sit in a tent, climb a small portion of imitation rock face, pretend to cook over a campfire, or sit in a kayak. There are a few exhibit cases and historic photos lining the walls, but everything else in the building is a hands-on experience.

While it does not explicitly state as much, this exhibit speaks to the experience of visitors to the park. Tourists are going to contribute more admissions than local residents and the museum does need to increase revenue to remain functional, but this does not fully explain why a cultural museum chose to bypass history. Everything in the exhibit deals with leisure or activities that are common for Adirondack vacations including camping, hiking, fishing, mountain climbing, boating, and winter sports. Each station in the building includes a blue dial labeled “The Flip Side” that reveals the consequences of recreational activities on the environment and atmosphere in the park. For example, the dial entitled “Snowmobiling Scene” states that snowmobiling brings essential tourist dollars to communities, but also causes noise and air pollution. The dial for “High Peaks Hiking” notes that the high peaks contain wonderful hikes and summit views, but excessive foot traffic has caused trail erosion and damage to native plant species.57 “The Great Outdoors” encourages responsible use of the land, and continues the trajectory of

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the museum addressing environmental topics in exhibits including sustainability and use issues. This exhibit transformed the goals of the 2000 initiative Adirondack Live! into a permanent exhibit. While the exhibit has successfully entertained both families and children, others believe it was a step in the wrong direction for the museum’s historical integrity.

The museum has had more success providing a historical yet informed perspective on land use issues with a recent makeover of the exhibit about historic Adirondack recreation, “Woods and Waters: Outdoor Life in the Adirondacks.” Many of the exhibit’s original panels and artifacts have remained and, while the concept remains the same, the exhibit was updated to include more recent issues and discussions. In this case, research by Adirondack historian and scholar Philip Terrie, author of *Contested Terrain: A New History of People and Nature in the Adirondacks*, supplemented the exhibition. The changes to the exhibit take the museum’s interpretation of wilderness a step further to consider the idea that land previously farmed or logged can become wilderness. The exhibit panel reads, “The Adirondack forests have been significantly altered by human settlement, recreational use and logging. The great forests have been allowed to grow again, “re-wilding” lands that had been used for farms and timber.”58 Re-wilding is a recently explored concept in scholarship and it provides an element of wilderness that deviates from the idea of a pristine, untouched landscape.59


With the changes, the exhibit now illustrates a greater awareness of the finite nature of the landscape and the importance of preservation. The exhibit labels even advocate for the preservation of the Adirondacks. One reads, “If this great Adirondack experiment is to continue, both those who hike in the woods and those who find solace in just knowing those marvelous woods exist will need to be ever more devoted to defending New York’s wilderness treasure.”

Another panel in the exhibit brings up the issue that is paramount to the intersection of recreation and preservation: Is the Adirondack Park too successful? The park was created because logging and commercial activities threatened the forests. It was created to be a park for the people to enjoy, but does overuse threaten the very atmosphere visitors seek? These questions are posed to visitors who are forced to confront the park’s uncertain future. Through this exhibit the Adirondack museum is asking visitors to consider their personal responsibility to the environment and, more importantly, their personal responsibility in preserving the Adirondacks for the future. While the exhibit grows out of the region’s history, it provides a way for the Adirondack Museum to advocate for preservation and illustrate the extent of environmental themes now present at the museum.

The Wild Center

With the increasing environmental focus of the Adirondack Museum and the increased desire for knowledge about the natural world in the broader culture, the creation of a natural history museum in the Adirondacks followed a logical trajectory. The desire for a natural history museum in the Adirondacks began building long before 1998 when founder Elizabeth “Betsy” Lowe first decided to take action. In a 1958 article

written for *The New York Times*, Bruce Inverarity, the first director of the Adirondack Museum, noted that because of its location in a popular hunting and fishing area “there is constant pressure to have us include stuffed animals, birds, other wildlife, and partly to become a natural history museum.”\textsuperscript{61} The Adirondack Museum resisted the pressure and stuck to its cultural roots, but the idea for a Natural History Museum of the Adirondacks remained present.

Although the idea had been batted around for years, no one took action until the 1990s. The creation of the museum can be traced Betsy Lowe who worked in public affairs for the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) for nearly twenty years. Lowe, an Adirondack resident since 1985, was deeply invested in the region and had family ties to the area that went back a century.\textsuperscript{62} Lowe began to brainstorm museum ideas while working to create educational displays at the DEC about the 1995 microburst and the 1998 ice storm that had caused severe damage in the region. According to Lowe, “The Adirondacks is such an incredible place, with so many unique natural features…it struck me that we needed our own natural history museum.”\textsuperscript{63} The Adirondacks needed a place to showcase the finite nature of the park’s natural resources. The severe damage caused by these two storms inspired Lowe to work to create a permanent location that would illustrate the delicate balance of Adirondack ecosystems and the need to protect them. Lowe took a leap of faith and left the DEC in 1999 to plan the museum full time.


Lowe and partners decided that the museum would be located in Tupper Lake, NY, a town that was desperately in need of economic development and uplift. The location was selected when a referendum supported by the Tupper Lake School Board donated school district land to the museum. In 2000 the first educational programs were developed and after years of fundraising, construction crews broke ground for the museum on July 11, 2004. Although the outdoor trails and some interior exhibits were unfinished, The Wild Center: Natural History Museum of the Adirondacks opened on July 4, 2006.

The museum received a lot of support from elected officials and individuals. Governor George Pataki and Senator Hilary Clinton both visited the museum and promised millions in state and federal funds. Because the state of the natural environment has been an increasing publicized concern during the past decade many people and corporations were willing to support the museum and its mission. Funds to create The Wild Center came from many and varied sources. This is a very different development model from that of the creation of the Adirondack Museum, which was initially funded by a single family. Environmental concerns continued to grow with the dawn of the twenty-first century and private citizens, corporations, and the government were all willing to contribute to an institution that would educate the public about the natural environment. From the start, the mission of the museum proclaims the desire to: “Ignite an enduring passion for the Adirondacks where people and nature can thrive

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65 In 2007, the museum dedicated the main hall to former governor George Pataki because of his efforts on behalf of the museum that resulted in $14 million in state funds. See Noelle Short, “Name Recognition,” *Adirondack Daily Enterprise*, August 28, 2007, 1.
together and set an example for the world.”66 The museum strives to encourage visitors to become responsible citizens who respect and care for the natural world. The relationship between humans and nature is illustrated here as something that is changing and developing. The relationship is dynamic and integrated; not two worlds apart. The importance of nature and nature preservation throughout the park’s history took center stage with the development of this museum and through its active stance on conservation and stewardship in the park.

The Wild Center includes both indoor and outdoor exhibits. The indoor exhibition hall consists of a large circular loop that begins with a glacial ice wall and discusses the formation of the Adirondack Mountains. Walking around the loop visitors are able to experience the “Living River Trail”, which highlights a variety of different Adirondack habitats including a marsh, a bog, a stream, a deep lake, and the summit of an alpine peak. Several animal species are featured along the loop including turtles, frogs, fish, insects, and otters. At the center of the loop interactive video screens fill the “Find

![Figure 30 – An illustration of the glacial formation of the Adirondacks, Tupper Lake, NY, 2010](image)

![Figure 31 – A re-creation of the summit of a high peak, Tupper Lake, NY, 2010](image)

Out Forest” media exhibit. The screens show countless short films following wildlife in the park, showing unusual places, or providing a front row to outdoor experiences such as a rafting adventure through the Hudson Gorges. The museum aims to provide visitors with an experience of the outdoors even if they never climb a high peak or canoe a lake. In fact, once visitors are finished with the indoor exhibits, the museum encourages visitors to explore outdoor trails.

The indoor exhibits were installed when the museum opened, but the outdoor exhibits and trails have undergone a considerable transformation since 2006. The outdoor component of the museum is striking and the thirty-one acre complex includes two miles of trails that lead past both man made and natural bodies of water. The museum developed a series of outdoor interpretive trails that circle the man made Greenleaf Pond abutting the museum and lead to a viewing platform overlooking a nearby oxbow in the Raquette River. Wild Center staff can lead visitors on interpretive trail walks during both the summer and winter months. Yet with the exception of the Raquette River, the rest of the outdoor experiences were manufactured solely for the museum. While this might cheapen the experience of nature for some, for many this represents a small-scale section of the wilderness lands within the park, which were similarly created by legislation.

What was bulldozer tracked dirt on the shores of Greenleaf Pond when the museum opened in 2006 is now full of native plant and animals. By 2008 a series of interpretive labels circled the pond in order to explain the ways the museum was designed with the natural world in mind. To the naked eye Greenleaf Pond looks as if it had been

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there for years in the same way that the much of the Adirondack wilderness looks as if it existed for thousands of years as opposed to the reality of just over one hundred years. The first label on the pond loop trail informs visitors that the museum and pond are located on a former sand pit. It reads, “With the goal of returning a little more wildness to this corner of the Adirondacks, clearing a new site wasn’t a viable option. That decision means that with each passing year this place grows a little wilder.” 68 Both indoor and outdoor exhibits are able to give visitors a better understanding of the science of the park and the different plant and animal species that inhabit the park. This helps to educate park visitors and residents with an underlying aim to promote support for preservation and conservation in the park. The museum encourages visitors to become informed global citizens.

In addition to the exhibits and walking trails, the museum space includes an amphitheater that screened Carl Heilman II’s film “The Wild Adirondacks” continuously.

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68 The New Path. “10. This Old Site” The Wild Center, Tupper Lake, NY.
for the first two years. “The Wild Adirondacks” provides panoramic shots of photographs Heilman has taken throughout the park. It is important to note that each shot is beautiful and portrays an environment devoid of humanity. There is no evidence of the human impact on the landscape, which is something that is essential to understanding the true nature of wilderness and the true mission of the museum. The video also shows photographs of only the most beautiful scenes. While the museum’s mission states the hope that people and nature can thrive together, this video removes people from nature and contributes to a false dichotomy that all too often separates nature and culture. There is a danger in promoting a desire to preserve only what is beautiful because many areas with ecological or historical significance may be less aesthetically pleasing but no less worthy of preservation. While the Adirondacks is truly a beautiful region, and the region depends on that beauty to attract visitors and vital revenue, the museum missed an important educational opportunity when it stuck solely to the script of a romantic wilderness devoid of human activity. Perhaps a video that represented the true physical aesthetic of the Adirondacks would help visitors and residents conceptualize a broader definition of wilderness in order to truly understand and support preservation and conservation initiatives in the region.

In 2008, two years after opening, a second film was added to the rotation that included narration and more substance. Entitled “A Matter of Degrees: The True History of the Adirondacks,” the film narrated by Sigourney Weaver covers the ways climate has formed and changed the life in the Adirondacks. The film focuses on the region’s glacial history and the science behind the formation and retreat of the glaciers. This film adds a dimension of environmental alarmism with its warning of fossil fuel induced climate
Storms, extinctions, and insect infestations are all things that result from climate change and the film made a clear statement that current climate change is the result of human processes. The film also moved beyond the Adirondacks to explore changes in current glacial formations and the speed of glacial change in Greenland. Two University of Maine geologists spoke about their research and the speed of glacial melting. By creating and showing this film, The Wild Center has taken a clear stance on a hot button issue and it is a stance that is completely in line with their mission.

It is interesting to note that with all of the emphasis the Adirondack Museum has on people there is still an opportunity for the museum to include the natural environment and its affect on people. On the other hand, The Wild Center has not yet fully achieved a similar balance because museum’s original exhibits rarely emphasize the impact of human activity on nature within the park. Despite the museum’s wish for people and nature to thrive together, many of the permanent exhibits do not mention the human impact on changing ecosystems and animal populations in the park. While the impact of acid rain on certain fish is briefly mentioned, there is not an explanation of the reasons why acid rain is affecting the Adirondack Park. Even a panel about beavers, a species that was nearly eradicated from the park due to over-hunting, does not mention the reason for such a population shift. With the exception of a panel discussing the impact of hikers on alpine plant communities in the high peaks, the impact of humans on ecosystems in the park is downplayed. As the museum continues to define and redefine its identity as an institution including information about the ways humans have impacted the natural environment would more fully support The Wild Center’s mission.
One step in this direction is “Return of the Wild,” which was introduced in July 2010 and includes exhibits, movies, and presentations designed to illustrate why animals such as fish, moose, and ravens are returning to the park. In one of the only places in the country that is wilder today than 100 years ago, “Return of the Wild” is able to illustrate the ways nature is constantly in flux. “Return of the Wild” does an excellent job integrating both human and natural reasons why different species left the park and why they began to return. The exhibit explains, “Wild returns to the Adirondacks because there is more room here, and more diversity, and often because people lend a helping hand.”

New films about the return of the moose and the ways scientists track it in the region now alternate with the museum’s previous two films. In the film, Return of the Wild, Heidi Kretser of the Wildlife Conservation Society states, ”Humans have altered the landscape and the reintroduction of moose and other species coming in shows to me that wilderness and humans can co-exist and to me that is a good thing.”

More than any previous exhibit or panel, “Return of the Wild” tells a story that includes the impact of the human presence in the park and looks at the relationship between people and nature. It begins to explore

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69 “Return of the Wild,” The Wild Center, Tupper Lake, NY.

70 The Wild Center, Return of the Wild, (film) 11 min. 2010.
the role of humans in wilderness the same discerning way as several more recent wilderness exhibits at the Adirondack Museum.

Since it opened in 2006, the Wild Center has been one of the most popular places in the park. It immediately became a destination and over 25,000 people visited in the first thirty days, which is an impressive number considering the population of Tupper Lake is approximately 6,000.\(^{71}\) In fact, visitor numbers from summer 2007 topped the Adirondack Museum by 14,000. This certainly shows that the Adirondack environment is a topic of interest to many people. Environmental issues go hand in hand with the regional identity of the Adirondack region and the immediate success of the Wild Center is a testament to a growing environmentalism in the park. As the Wild Center continues to grow and evolve, it has begun to play a larger educational role by working with schools and hosting special events for students in order to develop a greater understanding and appreciation for the region’s resources. After hosting the first annual Adirondack Youth Climate Summit in November 2009, museum executive director Stephanie Radcliffe said, “We specifically focus on equipping the next generation to do a better job than we have in co-existing with nature. Connecting them to their surrounding environment is the bedrock that will inspire positive action and personal responsibility.”\(^{72}\) Organizers and museum personnel worked to instill a sense of stewardship and responsibility in school aged youth. Aiming to create future stewards in order to ensure


the park’s future, the Wild Center continues to seek ways to educate visitors and engage the public with the natural history of the Adirondacks.

The regional Adirondack story as interpreted and presented in regional museums has increasingly become an environmental story. From a growing environmental focus at the Adirondack Museum to the creation of the Wild Center: Natural History Museum of the Adirondacks, things are becoming greener in the Adirondack Park and regional museums are one indication. In many cases a focus on the environment at the Adirondack Museum and the Wild Center have come at the expense of the region’s human history. At the Adirondack Museum, exhibits with an emphasis on the regional environmental story have taken precedence over local stories like the Bill Gates Diner or mining; stories that are similar to stories from small towns across the country. Exhibits that fit the regional Adirondack script and include a sense of the rustic or have an environmental bent now have primacy. Similarly, the Wild Center: Natural History Museum of the Adirondacks nearly ignores the impact of humans on the environment and focuses solely on the plants, animals, and the various habitats throughout the park. Yet humans do play a role in Adirondack ecosystems and could at least exist in the peripheries of Wild Center exhibits. An increasing focus on the impact of climate change, however, shows that the museum is beginning to deal with these issues. Still exhibits that deal with the experiences of local Adirondackers are often overlooked in place of exhibits that appeal to vacationers and visitors to the region. Will this alienate local residents? Or will this change the trajectory of Adirondack history? In a sense it already has changed the trajectory as regional museums continue to “greenwash” Adirondack history while local museums have an altogether different focus.
CHAPTER SIX
WHERE ART THOU ADIRONDACK?:
LOCAL MUSEUMS IN THE ADIRONDACK PARK

A visitor touring the Penfield Homestead Museum in Ironville, NY would soon discover that the word Adirondack was nowhere to be found. He or she might search every label, every image, and listen to every word from the tour guide without discovering any evidence indicating the museum was located inside the Blue Line boundary of Adirondack State Park.¹ A visit to the Ticonderoga Historical Society would reveal the same thing as would a visit to the Minerva Historical Society and so on. It becomes quickly apparent that the identity of these small towns and hamlets throughout the park are very different than the Adirondack regional identity so commonly seen at the Adirondack Museum. The rustic architecture and distinctive furniture adorning buildings and storefronts throughout the park area gives the impression of a strong regional aesthetic and identity, yet the public history institutions found in many of the small towns celebrate a uniquely local identity that often runs counter to the popular image of the region.

An awareness and concern for the environment and the threat of a changing climate has become the dominant feature of the Adirondack regional story and, as a result, there has become little room at the Adirondack Museum for local stories like the

¹ The “Blue Line” refers to the line drawn on a map around the borders of the Adirondack Park. Blue ink was first used when the lines were drawn on state maps.
Bill Gates Diner. Yet for many within the park this outdoorsy, environmentally conscious, rustic Adirondack aura is not a primary component of community identity. The small towns and hamlets that populate the park have an identity that is not solely tied to the creation and governance of the state forest preserve land and the park as a whole. Instead, they possess a local community identity that is not regionally specific and may resemble the identity of countless other small towns all throughout the country. Local history focuses on the landmarks, milestones, and important figures of a community’s past. Yet even among Adirondack local museums, there is a distinct difference between museums in small insular communities and museums in tourist locales. While regional Adirondack institutions as well as exhibits outside the park may primarily focus on the legislatively created Adirondack Park, the environmental aspects of Adirondack history, and the distinct nature of the region, local museums within the park most often lack an awareness of regionalism or regional character. It is often difficult for a museum to find the appropriate balance between a national, regional, and local context, but the total absence of the word Adirondack begs the question, “Why do local museums in the park lack the sense of the regional identity so apparent at the Adirondack Museum and The Wild Center?” Probing this question reveals important insights into the often-troubled relationship among local residents, local communities, and the park.

The Adirondack Park includes institutions that cover a large variety of topics and highlight the varied history of the region. In local Adirondack museums it is important to take note of ideas left unsaid and subjects not broached by the exhibits or public programs. What is not on display often reveals more about the relationship between the
local community and its history than what is present. Because of local ambivalence toward Adirondack regional identity, the identity expressed through rustic craftsmanship, the preserved Great Camps, and at Adirondack regional museums is frequently absent at local museums. There are many examples of local resentment towards the state bodies governing the park including the Adirondack Park Association (APA) and the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and many battles have been fought over disagreements regarding land management and property rights. By looking at local public history institutions it will become clear that these resource conflicts stem from fundamentally different identities that divide local residents from seasonal and downstate users. Exploring local history museums can provide an opportunity to examine the differences between local and regional identities as well as the differences in environmental consciousness between local residents and outsiders who both have a stake in the park’s future. It also provides a means to examine the discrepancy between the ways lawmakers and those in power wish the region to be portrayed and the way local grassroots communities wish to portray themselves. Standing in contrast to the increasing prevalence of environmental themes at The Adirondack Museum, local Adirondack museums reveal a different kind of history – one that portrays the rich diversity of the region.

**The Nature of Adirondack Local Museums**

Volunteers and local residents who have a stake in their local communities run most local museums within the park. Museums and local historical societies create displays and exhibitions, but many also hold fundraisers and community days that attract local residents and generate a sense of community and shared history. Unlike their larger
cousins, The Wild Center and The Adirondack Museum, most local museums commission little to no advertising to attract visitors and, as a result, they have a different audience than those larger institutions. Local museums welcome all visitors, but they are not common tourist destinations like the larger museums; instead, visitors are the result of a chance discovery by passing motorists, repeat visitors to a town, or most especially, primary school groups and long time local residents.

There are over forty local museums throughout the Adirondack Park, but most are located in the vicinity of the park’s more populous towns and villages (See Appendix A). Geography plays an important role in the location of local museums because population centers and settlements have clustered near major waterways and must exist outside of the forest preserve lands that cover over 40% of the park. Many museums are in close proximity to Lake Placid and Lake George, but there are no museums in the northwestern section of the park, which includes the park’s westernmost counties: Oneida, Lewis, St. Lawrence, and Herkimer.² This area is one of the least developed and least populated within New York State and the only attractions that draw visitors to the area are the numerous trails for hikers and the many easily navigable lakes for paddlers. Miles of sparsely marked trails and remnants of old growth forest contribute to the backwater feel of the Northwestern Adirondacks.³ Yet there are a collection of small communities and hamlets that exist along the one major roadway traversing the region. Certainly the geography, including the lack of major roads and the general remoteness, is a reason why

² This is true with the exception of Old Forge, which is located in the Eastern most portion of Herkimer County and is considered part of the Central Adirondacks.

there are less people and no museums in this section of the park and it is useful to see how geography impacts local identity. A local history museum can often reveal the way a community expresses its identity, but in this case, the lack of a local history museum reveals the impact of geography on the Northwestern Adirondacks.

Despite a common location within the Adirondack Park, many of these museums and historical societies vary greatly in size, scope, and staffing. While some have professional websites, others are invisible on the web and difficult to discover without physically driving past or having local insider knowledge. Budgets and local support play a big role on the offerings at the museum and the museum’s role in the community. Some organizations have paid staff with museum training, while others rely solely on volunteer support. It is often difficult to analyze the interpretive decisions of small museums because some museums do not have an organizational pattern and include rooms full of artifacts with little to no explanation about the meaning or provenance of each item. On the other hand, there are also local museums that boast professionally done exhibits and highlight rotating exhibits each year. The goal here is not to condemn or praise the quality of each museum, but to examine the subjects selected (or available) for display and interpretation at these sites.

Many historians have written about the practice of local history and their writing often focuses on common mistakes and the ways to improve local history institutions throughout the country. There is often a concern that local history can lack context and become colloquial or boosterish. Since history and, especially local history, is very accessible to non-specialists, it is susceptible to participation by almost anyone and many local historians do not have training in historical methods. At one time the term amateur
historian was almost interchangeable with local historian and indicated the less than professional status of local historians. It is possible, however, that a narrow focus can result in the failure to recognize or identify a connection to the history of other nearby communities.

Many local history museums in the Adirondack Park illustrate the potential pitfalls and common limitations that historian Carol Kammen seeks to address with the suggestions in her book *On Doing Local History*. According to Carol Kammen, “If local historians and those who run historical agencies recognize the complexities inherent in their work—if we appreciate the reasons for the existence of those problems—then we will become better, more thoughtful historians.”

She encourages local historians to address conflicting narratives and explore the layers of the local past because they can provide very useful streams of historical inquiry. Local history presents the opportunity to study and consider a community’s history from many vantage points including, the social, cultural, religious, economic and intellectual. Documents, artifacts, architecture, tools, local products, as well as oral, literary and statistical sources are all elements of the local historian’s palate that can assist in understanding a specific community. An intense focus on local history may not include the regional or national context, but it can provide a means to study all aspects of a community’s history, even those that do not fit with or are ignored by the larger regional or national picture. Many topics and artifacts at local museums in the Adirondacks are ignored by the regional paradigm. The lack of any evidence of a clear connection to the Adirondack Park in many local museums is not a

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4 Carol Kammen, *On Doing Local History* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003), 7.
surprise, but it reveals much about the priorities and identity of the people in each community.

Public history institutions in small Adirondack towns can help these communities understand their past and the origins of the town. Work and transportation are common themes represented by images and artifacts at these museums and, while the land is integral to common topics such as railroads, farming, mining, and lumbering, the idea of environmental degradation and preservation as a result of these industries is not commonly included. For example, the Schroon Lake – North Hudson Historical Museum includes a wall devoted to “Living off the Land” and “Making a Living” in its main exhibit. Consisting of images and a few artifacts the sole focus is on farming, fishing, lumbering, and the people who did it. Before assuming this is an oversight or a failure by the museum to address important issues, it would be wise to consider the impact of heritage in local history museums.\(^5\) In his book *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* historian David Lowenthal explains, “What heritage does not highlight it often hides.”\(^6\) He discusses a similar issue where animal rights activists opposed a proposed museum about British hunting because they felt that this part of their heritage should be eradicated and not celebrated. Lowenthal states, “They did not mean to delete hunting from history; its evils had to be chronicled. But to

\(^5\) Many historians have discussed the meaning of the word heritage and how it differs from history. Michael Kammen said it best when he wrote, “The heritage syndrome...[is] an impulse to remember what is attractive or flattering and ignore all the rest.” See Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 626.

museumize hunting implied approving it as heritage.” Similarly, the communities of Schroon Lake and North Hudson likely recognize that logging cause environmental damage, but they instead chose to celebrate the work of local men and the creation of the communities that resulted from the availability of logging jobs for local men. Whether or not museums should address purposefully forgotten or controversial parts of the past is something that is always subject to debate. Yet in small Adirondack towns, the local museum exists as a way to express community pride in a shared history. These choices also illustrate a common attitude in the Adirondacks – one that sees the land not in terms of its scenic beauty, but it terms of its ability to provide and serve as a resource to live. It logically follows that Schroon Lake and North Hudson do not want to embrace environmental degradation as integral to the community’s heritage.

Local history museums are able to allow individuals to learn and process the long term realities of their time and place in order to better understand, love, and deal with the reality of the community. The inclusion or exclusion of less desirable parts of the past is only one element of the way local museums reveal and shape community attitudes. Local history can create many opportunities for learning in a local community. David Kyvig and Myron Marty mention that local history “provides necessary underpinnings to preservation efforts, and it capitalizes on interests in folk arts and crafts. Exploration of the nearby past complements enthusiasm for photography—taking pictures, studying them, and preserving them.”

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7 Ibid., 160.

interests in order to promote history and provide an impetus for locals to become engaged with their communities. This has become even more common since the 1976 bicentennial when, Carol Kammen argues, “historical societies, long dormant, saw that they had something important to offer their communities.”

She continues, “[l]ocal history participates in community life with the result that community members now expect it to be there.” Evidence of community engagement at this time is visible in the Adirondacks where local museums such as the Penfield Homestead Museum and the Indian Lake Museum continue to prominently display a bicentennial quilt with each square crafted by a different member of the community. Local history can also provide an opportunity for a local community to market their history to draw cultural tourists. Locals may not visit their local museum, but they do have a certain expectation and place importance on their shared history whether it appears in a museum or an alternative media such as a newspaper column, a preservation battle, or a local celebration.

**Off the Beaten Path: Small Museums Serving Local Communities**

It is within the walls of the local history museums deep in the heart of the Adirondacks that visitors will find a disconnect between Adirondack history and local history. While some historic attractions focus on the history of the locality before it became part of the Adirondack Park, others have a narrower scope and focus on local people or places. These museums reveal the way history provides an impetus for community interaction. Public programming and annual events often bring together the community to support their shared history. These small museums are able to create community by providing programs for local schools, information for genealogists, and

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events for social gatherings. All throughout the Adirondacks nearly forty small historical institutions such as the Ticonderoga Historical Society, the Indian Lake Museum, the Minerva Historical Society, and the Penfield Homestead Museum exist to promote local history for local residents.

Located in the same town as Fort Ticonderoga, the Ticonderoga Historical Society is based in a donated historic home where the interpretation devotes considerable attention to the decoration and furnishings of the home. This building, called the Hancock House, was built in 1926 as a reproduction of John Hancock’s eighteenth century Boston home. The original home was built from 1737-1741 in Boston’s Beacon Hill neighborhood for John Hancock’s uncle Thomas Hancock. It was later torn down in 1867 to make room for the expansion of the state house.

Local philanthropist Horace Moses used the original architectural drawings to build this house as a place for the New York State Historical Association to house its headquarters, which it did until 1939. The Ticonderoga Historical Society currently manages the museum and research library, which is open the entire year. Because the building is a replica of an eighteenth century structure, much of the historic interpretation at the Ticonderoga Historical Society is focused on this era. A self-guided tour brochure provides information about each room and informs visitors that the house “was erected to further the interest of the people of northeastern New York and the Lake Champlain and Lake George valleys in history and fine arts.” The first floor parlor and second floor bedrooms include labels that interpret the house and the subsequent furnishings as they would have looked in Boston in the mid-eighteenth century.

10 The original home was built from 1737-1741 in Boston’s Beacon Hill neighborhood for John Hancock’s uncle Thomas Hancock. It was later torn down in 1867 to make room for the expansion of the state house.


century. The colonial period is the interpretive focus of these rooms and similar to the nearby forts, the focus is on the era before Ticonderoga became part of the Adirondack Park.

The Indian Lake Museum exists simply to display the history of Indian Lake and the people who settled the town and lived there. A town of nearly 1500, Indian Lake is located in the central Adirondacks and the sign in front of the Indian Lake Museum is visible to anyone traveling through town. The museum is easily accessible for locals because the Civil War era home where it is located is next to the local school and across the street from the health center. Although the museum’s hours are limited, town historian and director, Bill Zullo, runs a bed and breakfast only a couple of houses down the road and often opens the museum for school groups and public programs. Zullo is a volunteer, but unlike many other local Adirondack local historians, he has had academic training. He cultivated the skills to lead walking and bus tours while a graduate student at SUNY Albany.

Unsurprisingly given the name, the first settler in the Indian Lake region and on the shores of Indian Lake was an Indian - a man named Sabael Benedict who was a member of the Penobscot tribe. The museum focuses on his history and the history of his granddaughter through the display of photographs and artifacts. Museum artifacts

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13 The town of Indian Lake also includes the hamlets of Blue Mountain Lake and Sabael as well as the hamlet of Indian Lake, but the museum tends to focus less on Blue Mountain Lake and more on the other two hamlets. Since the Adirondack Museum is located in Blue Mountain Lake, director Bill Zullo figures that hamlet has their history covered by the larger museum.

14 William Zullo, Interview by Maria Reynolds, Indian Lake, NY, October 3, 2008. Zullo was born in Indian Lake, and his family has been in the town for many generations. For many years he lived near Albany, but he returned and now lives in his grandparent’s former home.

15 Sabael came to Indian Lake from Maine where the Penobscot tribe was located.
include countless arrowheads found by local residents as well as many tools, clothing items, photographs, and other artifacts that fill all rooms in both of the museum’s floors. There are few labels or descriptions with these artifacts making it difficult for an outsider to draw any larger conclusions from the display. Without pre-existing knowledge of the context of these artifacts, the meaning might be lost to outside visitors unless the director would be around to provide a tour.

The museum plays an important role in the way local history is taught at the Indian Lake School. School children can visit the museum throughout the year, but the trip is especially important during the school’s annual Heritage Week. The story of Sabael Benedict is most commonly taught to local schoolchildren, but Zullo mentioned that many kids are also interested in what they can relate to their own family heritage. School children make up the bulk of the museum’s visitors each year and these classroom visits are ideal for students to be able to understand the shared history of their town. Moreover, to supplement school programs, director Bill Zullo also tries to reach out to the Indian Lake populace.

Public programs have been integral to Zullo’s efforts and to commemorate the town sesquicentennial in 2008 he led seven bus tours. These popular trips emphasized historic spots around town and while most attendees were local full time residents, Zullo reported that they were generally transplants who grew up elsewhere and moved to Indian Lake later in life. Like Zullo himself, many of these individuals have adopted Indian Lake as their hometown and they feel a stake in their community. This illustrates another potential role of the local history museum. Museums like the Indian Lake Museum can help turn outsiders into locals. By providing new Indian Lake residents
with information about the town’s founders, these individuals are able to forge a place connection and share a knowledge base with local residents that distinguishes them from others unfamiliar with the town’s history.

Zullo also has an interesting perspective on the relationship of long time Indian Lake residents to the museum. He mentions, “As usual…the older, long time, born here, went to school here residents are tough to pry out of their homes [and into the museum]… I tried to do a display on gas stations. I try to peak interest of people who’ve lived here all their lives, but I don’t know if anybody even saw it!”

Even though he has people come to the museum and participate in programs, Zullo laments the lack of local involvement. In fact, the town runs the museum because there has not been enough support or manpower to form and incorporate a local historical society. Many local residents may not visit the museum, but they are often familiar with highlights of their local history (Sabael) and the mere existence of the museum is enough to validate this history. Yet despite the lack of manpower and support, Zullo perseveres in his attempt to attract local residents.

Zullo created a pamphlet to accompany the gas station exhibit that detailed the names and places of Indian Lake gas stations from the 1930s to the 1980s. Other pamphlets Zullo created in recent years provide history about various place names and gravesites in Indian Lake. The focus of the museum on the town’s original settlers and the pursuits of local residents both economic and cultural illustrate community pride for the perseverance that eventually helped the original settlers carve out a town in the wilderness. Even if many Indian Lake residents do not engage with the museum, the

16 William Zullo Interview, October 3, 2008.
museum’s relationship with schoolchildren ensures that the story of the town’s settlers is remembered and part of Indian Lake’s collective memory.

In addition to cultivating a relationship with schools, local museums can also connect with local residents through genealogy.17 Most researchers at local Adirondack museums are genealogists whose interest in history results from the personal connection with the past genealogy can reveal. Organized in 1955, the Minerva Historical Society devotes an entire corner of the floor and exhibition space to create a research space for genealogists.18 Minerva is a town of less than 800 residents, but the historical society has remained active since it was formed primarily because of the genealogical interest of many town residents and the zeal of the volunteers who run it.

In 1981 the society opened a museum in their current home, the former Methodist Church in Olmsteadville. Part of the sale to the society dictated that nothing must be removed or destroyed from inside the church and, as a result, the pews are reconfigured to shelve displays and the altar is also integrated into the space with an organ and communion items remaining.19 Only a few of the artifacts on display have labels or identifiers, but it is easy to see why many local residents would not need any explanation. Photographs and artifacts on display include ephemera from the local volunteer fire department, Catholic Church, farming tools and a focus on a few individuals from the town’s past. Many of these items would not have the same meaning for outsiders as they

17 Minerva is hardly alone with the emphasis on genealogy. Even though the previously discussed Indian Lake Museum does not have an internet presence, there is a website that provides genealogical information about Indian Lake families. See http://hamilton.nygenweb.net/towns/indian.html

18 The town of Minerva also includes the hamlets of Minerva, Irishtown, and Olmsteadville.

do for local residents, which is one illustration of the way the museum works to meet the needs of the local population. Even though Minerva appears to be a quintessential small Adirondack town surrounded by wilderness, the museum does not mention the role of Minerva in the park and, instead, Minerva is portrayed as a quintessential American town that could exist anywhere in the country. The focus remains local without a regional or national context. The historical society has a website, but in reality most non-local visitors, if any, end up at the museum because it is across the street from Lil’ Nony’s Bakery, well known throughout the park for excellent sticky buns.

The most commonly visited part of the museum, however, is the corner sectioned off for researchers. A table contains several photo albums of pictures both recent and past that were donated by local residents. Most researchers and visitors to the Minerva Historical Society Museum are interested in genealogy and the most prominent visual in the museum is a testament to the common heritage that connects so many town residents. A large mural known as the Tree of Life mural covers the side walls of the museum / church. Painted in 1980 during the church’s transition into a museum, the mural is a large and extended Minerva family tree. Each tree has a family name on the trunk and each leaf the name of an
individual member of the family. There is even a tree labeled ‘community’ to list all of
the individuals living in Minerva who do not have an ancestral connection to the town.

In addition to the museum and the opportunity to access genealogical resources,
the Minerva Historical Society also gives back to the community by staging an annual
Minerva Day. Although the museum has more appeal to local residents, this certainly
does not mean that outsiders are not welcome. This event began in 1987 when a few
museum volunteers who also owned local businesses decided to make it a tradition.
Minerva Day founder Betty LeMay stated, “We were just so happy with the town that we
wanted people to come discover Minerva, both the business and community sides.”
Minerva Day occurs every Independence Day weekend and coincides with the museum’s
opening day. The museum’s annual opening day, however, is just one minor component
of the event which is filled with entertainment activities. A parade, community potluck
dinner, community softball game, fireworks, and an assortment of children’s games and
activities provide members of the community an annual opportunity to gather. Even
though Minerva’s history is not the prominent theme of the day, Minerva’s local museum
does much more than educate individual visitors; it is able to serve as a catalyst to build
community.

The Town of Minerva Historical Society Museum is not alone in organizing an
annual event for residents. The Penfield Homestead Museum in Ironville, NY is a
historic homestead turned museum with several buildings and grounds large enough to
host an annual Heritage Day for the town. The museum is dedicated to teaching the
history of the Penfield family and the iron industry that thrived in the area during the

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mid-nineteenth century. The Penfield Foundation formed in 1962 in order to preserve the 550 acres of grounds and buildings once owned by the Penfield family. This museum showcases two commonalities of many Adirondack local museums, namely the use of a donated historic house as the museum and secondly the involvement of locals with a long family history in the region. The museum is located inside the historic house built in 1827 and donated by the last surviving Penfield to serve as a museum.

Allen Penfield settled in the area in the 1820s and built a small empire based on iron ore mining. Penfield was responsible for the first industrial use of electricity when he pioneered the use of an electromagnet to separate crushed iron out of iron ore in the early 1930s. A marker deems Ironville, the “Birthplace of the Electrical Age” and much of the museum and grounds commemorate that fact. The exhibits and Victorian furnishings in the home focus on the Penfield family and the first floor contains a room dedicated to the history of Crown Point that includes

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21 Ironville is a small hamlet in the Town of Crown Point that consists of a small Historic District with twelve contributing structures (of which most structure are part of the museum).


23 Donated historic homes also house the Schroon Lake / North Hudson Historical Society, the Town of Webb Historical Society, the Indian Lake Museum, the Ticonderoga Historical Society, and more.

countless artifacts donated by locals. Auxiliary buildings focus on the industrial history and display tools and carriages formerly used on the property and in the mine.

While mining has been an important industry in the Adirondacks, the museum does not mention how Penfield’s mine related or compared to others in the region. Yet amidst the photos and artifacts from the mine, there is one interesting inclusion. Several photographs display the state of the mines in the 1970s long after they closed in the 1890s. These images show ruins of the mines and clearly illustrate the way nature has overtaken the mines on land that is now classified wilderness and is part of the state forest preserve. Visitors must infer that the encroaching wilderness is a consequence of state regulations in the park, but the existence of this display is the sole connection between the Penfield Museum and the park in a museum where the word Adirondack does not appear once. These photographs also produced the most reaction from the local town historian and museum board president when I had a tour of the museum. Her disapproval of the inaccessibility of wilderness land was subtle but clear and provided a potential explanation for the way the museum was disconnected from the Adirondacks as a region. Even though the museums in Indian Lake and Minerva did not mention the Adirondacks as a park or as a region, there was not a sense of antagonism towards the state. Yet at Penfield, the policies of the state have erased from the landscape traces of the very history the museum commemorates and this attitude is subtly present in the photographs. The idea of environmental exploitation caused by mining was not part of the local story, which instead focused on the workers, the tools, and the technology integral to mid-nineteenth century mining.

25 Barn exhibit, Penfield Homestead Museum, Ironville, NY
Crown Point Historian and President of the Penfield Homestead Museum Board since the 1990s, Joan Hundson, as well as the staff and many of the volunteers at the museum, are personally invested in the community and have familial ties to the area that go back generations. The museum contains a photograph of Joan Hundson’s great-grandmother and great-great grandmother that she is able to point out to visitors. A visit to the museum also reveals that the museum’s annual Heritage Day is the most popular event at the museum. Held in mid-August, Heritage Day is more about the present community than the past. The primary focus of the event is to allow a space for the local community to gather for food and fellowship. Events held on the museum’s opening and closing days, including a pancake breakfast in June and the Applefolkfest in October, allow the community an opportunity to be involved with the museum and its expansive grounds. Through these public events, the museum has become a space for families to congregate. Although these activities do not integrate history in an obvious way, they establish a sense of community generally limited to locals. More non-residents may attend Heritage Day, but in June and October on the museum’s opening and closing day, there are fewer non-residents since it is the off-season for visitors. Even though these days do not focus on history education, the location of these events at the museum does remind visitors that Ironville was once a bustling and economically successful mining community. That knowledge provides current residents with a useful perspective to examine the economic decline of the community and perhaps resent the presence of forest preserve land for not allowing development and future economic diversification.

26 Hundson shared with me that her family has lived on the same farm since the 1840s. She has been Crown Point historian since 1995 and she works the job not for the meager monetary allowance, but solely because she loves the area and the history.
Although the museum is largely community and locally focused, for a time the museum held out hopes of becoming a state chartered historic site. Board President Joan Hundson acknowledged financial motivations behind the desire because she felt that a state charter would provide more opportunities for grant money while allowing the board to remain the same.²⁷ This illustrates a common issue that surfaces in many ways throughout the park. There may be a general resentment of outside influence, but those outsiders are in fact necessary for economic survival. This is the *modus operandi* of Adirondack tourism and a driving force between many of the resentments and conflicts in the region. Because tourism, visitors, and summer residents sustain the Adirondack economy the “outsider” often feels a sense of ownership in the park despite the fact that many year round residents continue to see them as interlopers. Furthermore, the lack of industry in the park has created an economy where seasonal jobs in the hospitality industry prevail and these employees depend on the health of the region’s tourism to maintain employment. Many local museums do not try to appeal in different ways to either local residents and visitors to the region, but exhibits at these museums often have more meaning to the locals than any other population because they may already have a connection to the people, buildings, and businesses on display. For example, the Morehouse Historical Museum highlights local hotels, the work of a local artist, and celebrates the day in 1953 when Morehouse finally got electricity. An image of a recent community history day shows countless visitors gazing at old photographs from the

²⁷ This comes from a September 18, 2008 conversation with Joan Hundson that occurred before New York State parks and historic sites became particularly vulnerable to closure. In May 2010, several parks and historic sites were temporarily closed due to budget cuts by then governor David Patterson. The John Brown Farm State Historic Site, one of two state historic sites within the Adirondack Park, was one of the sites temporarily closed.
museum to assist in identification. Oftentimes, local residents also have a close connection to the institution because they have donated all of the artifacts on display.

It may be difficult for an outsider to connect with the history at many local museums in the same way that a local resident could. While the Ticonderoga Historical Society, Penfield Homestead Museum, Indian Lake Museum, and Minerva Historical Society most often cater to local residents, the town or hamlet where each is located does not have large resorts or other major tourist attractions. Location plays an important role in interpretation and museums in small areas without a large tourist presence are more likely to create exhibits focused on locals and residents. Stories of local settlers and local businesses are common themes at museums in towns similar to Ticonderoga, Indian Lake, Minerva, and Ironville throughout the Adirondacks and even throughout the United States. These museums have more in common with small town America than they do with the Adirondack Park. Museums in small towns with a major tourist industry, however, differ in nature because the more a town is exposed to the larger world, the more outsiders contribute to the town and its history. Both long time residents and visitors play a role in diversifying the history. The Adirondacks boast a varied collection of towns and hamlets whose historical museums showcase a greater diversity of people and place than is apparent at the regional museums.

**Before the Creation of the Park – Exploring the Eastern Adirondacks**

The Eastern Adirondacks are one specific section of the park where the dominant narrative diverges from the standard Adirondack regional narrative. Because the area was easily accessible by water and because it was an invasion corridor from the 17th to the early 19th century, the historical sites and societies in the Eastern Adirondacks tend to
focus on the history from this era. The settlement of the central and western Adirondack region awaited “Adirondack Murray’s” 1869 missive Adventures in the Wilderness that attracted the masses to the Adirondack region and long before other sizable populations in any other Adirondack region.\(^{28}\) The eastern Adirondacks in contrast boast a recorded history that dates to 1609 and the French explorer Samuel de Champlain.\(^{29}\) Yet the area remained a mystery to many except the trappers who roamed the northern New York wilderness and the Native Americans who often used the land for hunting. Close proximity to several waterways was integral to the formation of this area because the strategic value of Lake Champlain, Lake George, as well as the La Chute River which connects the two.

By the 1750s both the French and the British were looking to expand their territory and French began to build fortifications to protect themselves from the British who controlled the land to the south of Lake George. Throughout the late 18\(^{\text{th}}\) and early 19\(^{\text{th}}\) centuries the Lake Champlain region was integral to several military campaigns during the French and Indian War as well as the Revolutionary War and this era remains the most important and commonly interpreted time period and subject in this region. There are three forts in the area that are presently open to the public and they recall past battles and the region’s history under the French and British. This entire area has a distinct history that differs from other sections of the park and does not fit the historical trajectory common to the development of the rest of the park. Because the Eastern

\(^{28}\) “Adirondack” Murray’s Adventures in the Wilderness brought visitors primarily to the central Adirondacks, but these numbers far surpassed the amount of people in the Adirondacks at any time prior. Although the Lake Champlain region was first popularized in print by James Fenimore Cooper and thereafter by Francis Parkman, a large influx of settlers or visitors did not follow.

Adirondacks played an integral role in the colonial era, the historic sites of the region privilege this era above any other time period.

Fort Ticonderoga occupies that land that overlooks the river that connects Lake George and Lake Champlain. The present site of Fort Ticonderoga was home to several previous forts occupied by the French, British, and Americans that have since been destroyed. The fort played a role in the French and Indian War in addition to serving as the site of an integral American victory during the Revolutionary War. Today Fort Ticonderoga has become one of the most frequently visited historic sites in the Adirondack Park. Incidentally, the fort was also one of the earliest historic sites in the region and it became a destination visited by tourists beginning in the early to mid 19th century. After the Revolution, it fell into disrepair and only ruins remained. In 1820 William Pell, a business owner from New York City, purchased 540 acres of land containing the fort’s ruins in order to preserve them. Pell built a hotel to serve visitors to the region, and succeeded in attracting many to his hotel, but restoration of the fort did not begin until his descendants took initiative in the next century. By 1909 the fort was opened to the public as a historic site and museum, which showcased eighteenth century military material culture. Guides wear period costumes and lead tours as well as rifle and
canon demonstrations. A fife and drum corps was first formed in 1925 and they continue to play for visitors.

The fort focuses on its eighteenth century history, but a recent addition to the museum’s exhibit space explores the twentieth century archaeology of the site and the items left behind by visitors to the fort’s ruins and its restoration. In 2008 a new education center opened in order to provide more modern conference room spaces and educational opportunities at the fort. The new changing exhibit space opened with an exhibit entitled “Face of War: Triumph and Tragedy at Fort Ticonderoga,” which examined the human face of war and impact of war on soldiers and their families. The “Face of War” exhibit moved visitor education away from a battle tactic based interpretation of military history to an interpretation focused on people. The exhibit provides a new dimension to the lives of soldiers and their families at the fort. While new scholarship has been brought into the mix, Fort Ticonderoga has remained focused on military history and has not pursued an environmental interpretation of the fort or the land surrounding the fort.

Another strategic location ten miles further north along Lake Champlain, Crown Point was home to both a French and British fort, but unlike Ticonderoga these forts have not been reconstructed and only the ruins remain. Despite the destruction of both forts, Crown Point was not the site of any major battles. In fact, the French fort was destroyed because the French burned it and fled after getting news of a large force of approaching


British soldiers. The British fort constructed later was destroyed by an accidental munitions explosion that was the result of a chimney fire. A private landowner sold the ruins to New York State and by 1910 the state built a museum. The Crown Point State Historic Site remains under the auspices of New York State and it is currently one of only two state historic sites within the Adirondack Park. Exhibits provide scale models of the forts and explore how each fort was used in the eighteenth century. Artifacts supplement the military focus and occasional costumed interpreters ensure that the colonial era remains of primary importance.

![Figure 37 – Ruins of the British Fort at the Crown Point State Historic Site, Crown Point, NY, 2008](image)

A third fort in the Eastern Adirondacks, located in Lake George, NY, about twenty-five miles south of Fort Ticonderoga, was also reconstructed to provide visitors with a physical representation of the original eighteenth century fort. Fort William Henry was originally built on the site of the British and Mohawk victory in the Battle of Lake George and after the British built the fort it was the location of a prolonged siege during the French and Indian War. The British surrendered on the promise of a safe departure

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from the fort, but Algonquin and Huron warriors killed many soldiers and their families in what became known as the Massacre of Fort William Henry. Although historically inaccurate, James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* is loosely based on these events. The first accounts of the event proclaimed over 1,500 casualties, but most historians now agree that the Indians killed less than 200. Public memory of the massacre remained strong because of heavy propaganda during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as well as Fenimore Cooper’s treatment of the event, which secured its place in American lore. The fort was burned and the ruins remained for over a century. Meanwhile the Fort William Henry Hotel opened adjacent to the ruins in 1854, which attracted tourists to the shores of Lake George. In 1952 the hotel had new owners who decided to reconstruct the fort and plan a new museum. Headed by businessman Harold Veeder of Albany, the group who purchased the hotel, The Fort William Henry Corporation, worked to reconstruct the eighteenth century fort as historically accurate as possible. By the summer of 1955 visitors were wandering the grounds following costumed interpreters who spoke about the Battle of Lake George and demonstrated how to shoot muskets.

The Fort William Henry of the 20th and 21st centuries often feels more like a theme park than a historic site because artifacts and exhibitions are few inside the fort walls. Instead the fort is filled with statues of soldiers and their families portraying scenes in sections of the fort such as the officer’s quarters, fort jail, and surgeon’s office. It appears these old statues and scenes have not changed since they were installed in the 1950s. Newspaper advertisements for the Fort have often appeared near ads for theme parks.

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parks, which was the case in the August 8, 1968 edition of the *Essex County Republican*.

The ad’s emphasis on a large cartoon-like cannon fit in with similarly drawn and sized ads for the Enchanted Forest and the Land of Make Believe, both theme parks in the Adirondacks.\(^35\) Events held at Fort William Henry tend to have a popular appeal that trumps the role of historical scholarship and public education at the fort. Since the 1990s, the fort has hosted evening ghost tours and in 2010 the fort also capitalized on the popularity of the novel and numerous film adaptations of *The Last of the Mohicans* and hosted The Last of the Mohicans Outdoor Drama, Inc. a non-profit group that performs an outdoor theatrical performance based on James Fenimore Cooper’s novel. Yet, again, there is no mention of the Adirondack Park in the activities at the fort.

Ideally, visitors to these forts are transported to the past through the artifacts, dress, and reconstructed battlements. From the authentic ruins at Crown Point to the total reconstruction of Fort William Henry, the visitor experiences a site frozen in the past; a site that exists to represent a single era. In many ways the establishment of the forest preserve is much like the recreation of the forts. In both instances a decision was made to restore the land or buildings to their former state. Fort William Henry and Fort Ticonderoga now resemble their 18th century state and forest preserve land within the park has returned to its appearance before tourists and settlers alike trampled and

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\(^{35}\) “Advertisement,” *Essex County Republican*, August 8, 1968, 12.
changed the landscape. The notion that both the forts and the forest preserve are a time capsule is not a connection that is explained or mentioned at these sites, but it exists nonetheless and impacts the experience of visitors to the region because what visitors see is a place bound by history. Through the interpreters, buildings, ruins, and exhibits, visitors are transported to the eighteenth century and remain there for their entire visit.

These forts illustrate the idea of contested lands, which is an important theme in Adirondack history and one that weaves through all threads of regional history whether it be environmental, economic, or in this case, military. The contestation commemorated at the forts, however, is very different from the contestation central to the rest of the park. Visitors may or may not make the connection between lands contested in a military way and land use disputes throughout the rest of the park, but the Eastern Adirondacks remains a distinct region with little connection to the park as an entity. In many ways the lack of a connection to the Adirondack Park is easy to understand because this land was added to the park a few decades after its creation. Even though this area has been part of the Adirondack Park for sixty years, a local identity was established long before the land was included inside the Blue Line. The border of the park has continued to expand since its creation in 1892 and, as a result of a 1931 constitutional amendment, the park increased in size by 1.5 million acres, which included the areas bordering Lake Champlain.36 The Adirondack border initially encompassed about 3 million acres, but it now includes 6 million acres. Because some areas were late inclusions to the park, there is some antagonism about the park’s expansion that results in a strong local identity and a fairly weak regional one.

Enter the Romantic: Historical Societies in Tourist Towns – Lake George, Lake Placid, and Old Forge

It is not uncommon for visitors to the Adirondacks to have a different image of the region than local residents. While one may see a beautiful mecca for all things wilderness, the other might see the struggle to survive amid a limited economy and long harsh winters. The stories of early settlers and industry in the region that were the focus of the Indian Lake and Penfield museums are less visible in the local museums of tourist towns. These museums often have exhibitions that will appeal to Adirondack visitors and those individuals who choose to vacation in the Adirondacks with a specific image of the region as a place for wilderness tourism and outdoor recreation even if they visit a water park instead of a lake and stay in a luxurious hotel instead of a tent. Lake George, Old Forge, and Lake Placid are the three most popular Adirondack destinations among those who visit the region. All three places have a business district with numerous shops aimed at tourists as well as many other attractions for vacationers. It is only fitting that the local historical museum in each location also explores elements of the history of tourism. Because the development of railroads in the Adirondacks allowed more people to visit the region, transportation is a major theme. Of course, the history museums in these three locations do not forsake the story of founders and the “early days,” but they also look to engage individuals already visiting the area by tapping into the romantic appeal of nature and the history of the region. The Adirondacks do represent different things to both settlers and visitors and, although these local museums do not talk about their place in Adirondack history, they often address topics such as tourism and recreation that would be covered at the Adirondack Museum and have a place in the regional script.
Of all the Adirondack towns, the village of Lake George most closely embodies the characteristics of a resort center. Beginning in 1854 with the construction of the Fort William Henry hotel, countless vacationers have visited the area during the summer months. Since Lake George is in the southeast corner of the park, it is only thirty miles from Saratoga and it is the closest Adirondack destination to New York City. As a result, in the late nineteenth century many luxurious hotels and summer homes were built on the shores of Lake George both in the village of Lake George and the village of Bolton Landing, ten miles north. The influx of people into the village has continued in the present and impacts the way both residents and visitors characterize the Lake George area. With its identity as a tourist town fully in place, the Lake George Historical Association was formed in 1964 with a goal to preserve the old Warren County Courthouse. The organization successfully preserved the courthouse and organized a museum in the building that amidst the press of shops and restaurants continues to enlighten tourists and residents alike about the history of Lake George. The museum’s visible location in the heart of Lake George village near the lake ensures that many visitors and shoppers in the village encounter the museum.

Many of the exhibits are related to water and boats, which is fitting because water recreation has always dominated visitor enjoyment of Lake George and its connecting waterways of Lake Champlain and the St. Lawrence River. A unique antique wooden rowing skiff named ‘Brownie’ is prominently displayed on the first floor of the museum. The label used to describe the boat omits information about the boat’s construction or

37 In actuality the Lake George Historical Association first originated in 1895, but that organization evolved into the New York State Historical Association and the current Lake George Historical Association was formed in 1964 by a group of invested individuals.
builder and focuses instead on the family that used the boat, who happened to be wealthy second home owners in Lake George. A JP Morgan executive from New York City named Russell Leffingwell commissioned the boat as a gift for his wife. The Leffingwells owned a mansion named Erlowest on Lake George where they lived during the summer and spent countless hours boating. The boat was donated to the museum in 2008 and is reflective of the wealthy New Yorkers who populate Lake George during the summer months.

Wealthy New Yorkers, however, are not the only people in Lake George and the museum also highlights the eclectic population of the village with an exhibit on the Kurosaka family. George and Sato Kurosaka were Japanese immigrants who moved to Lake George in the 1920s. They ran the Nara gift ship in Lake George village for many years and once George died and Sato retired after over sixty years at the helm, their son George, Jr donated his parents’ memorabilia to the museum. An exhibit case on the first floor contains items sold in the shop including many figurines and bowls from Japan while the former shop’s signage lines the stairwell. The Kurosakas are the only people individually profiled in the museum and their status as immigrants and minorities may reflect a common tale in the United States, but it is an uncommon Adirondack story considering over 95% of the Adirondack population is white. Both the ‘Brownie’ and the Kurosaka exhibit reveal a diversity within the village of Lake George that is much greater than that of many other Adirondack towns that do not have the consistent

38 “The Brownie,” Lake George Historical Association, Lake George, NY.

39 Jerry Jenkins, _The Adirondack Atlas: A Geographic Portrait of the Adirondack Park_ (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 112. This statistic is from 2000, but this number has remained static for many years.
presence of tourists and visitors. While it may be just a coincidence that these two
unique donations reached the museum and were subsequently selected for display, it does
seem to reveal the fact that Lake George has attracted a variety of populations to live both
full time and part time in the village.

While it was the ease of navigable waterways that originally attracted settlers to
Lake George in the eighteenth century, it was the expansion of railroads that brought
many people to Old Forge during the late nineteenth century. The development of
railroads contributed to the influx of visitors to the Adirondacks and by the turn of the
century railroads serviced a large part of the entire park and transported many individuals
in, out, and around the region. 40 Railroads and transportation are a major focus of the
Town of Webb Historical Association located in the Goodsell Museum in Old Forge. 41

The town was sparsely settled in the 1830s, but became much more populated when the
railroad arrived in 1892. Old Forge remains a popular destination today and an extensive
business district of shops, hotels and attractions line Main Street including Enchanted
Forest Water Safari, a theme and water park that attracts thousands of visitors per year.
The museum used to be in the local library, but when local resident and doctor Robert
Goodsell died in 1994, he donated his historic home to the historical association.
Museum exhibits occupy both floors of the home and they illustrate the history of the
town and provide more context about the Adirondack Park than most other local
museums in the Adirondacks.

40 Ironically, the rail system in the Adirondacks was much larger and more sophisticated in the late
nineteenth century than it is today.

41 Old Forge is a hamlet in the Town of Webb, which is a town of just under 2,000 people. Other
hamlets include Thendara and Eagle Bay, which like Old Forge flank Route 28, the major roadway through
the region. The Town of Webb was named after William Seward Webb who was responsible for many
railroad lines in the Adirondacks including the line that came to Old Forge in 1892.
While the Adirondack Park content in the exhibits is not as overt or comprehensive as in the Adirondack regional museums, the Town of Webb Historical Association broaches topics that are related to the development of the Adirondack region such as railroads, steamboats, summer camps, and lumbering in addition to exhibits about the early settlers. One reason for this may be that the identity of Old Forge is closely tied to the identity of the Adirondack Park. Even the tourism website for Old Forge proclaims, “Many people enjoy this area because of the ‘Adirondack Feeling’ they get here.”

Because the growth of the town coincided with the creation of the park and the influx of vacationers to the park, its development has been closely related to Adirondack tourism. Visitors come to Old Forge to participate in typical vacation activities like shopping, water parks, and boating all the while appreciating the amount of wilderness easily in reach.

The identity of Old Forge plays a role in the way the museum embraces the park, but the inclusion of both a local and regional context maybe also be the result of the museum’s level of resources. The Town of Webb has a historian, but the museum also has a paid director and an assistant. This allows the museum to plan and implement an annual rotating exhibit; something that is often rare among all-volunteer local history museums. The museum is also one of the very few museums in the Adirondacks open to the public year round. The location of the Goodsell house on Old Forge’s main street helps to attract visitors who might want a break from shopping and a bit of culture. The museum has two floors and the upper floor contains the permanent exhibits that include a Victorian bedroom, a recreation of Dr. Goodsell’s doctor’s office, and the Adirondack

room which is filled with hunting, fishing, and guiding artifacts. The downstairs portion of the home provides some local history as well as the annual rotating exhibit. Past temporary exhibits include Adirondack children’s camps, the Old Forge Fire Department, and Adirondack railroads. The annual exhibit has included topics with both a local focus and a regional Adirondack focus, but the local tends to overshadow what might be part of the prescribed regional script. For example, one annual exhibit about mail order Sears and Roebuck homes showcased many of these decidedly non-rustic looking homes that continue to line the streets of Old Forge. This museum may cover some “Adirondack” topics, but it does not include environmental themes and it remains dedicated to presenting the history of the Town of Webb to the public.

Lake George and Old Forge may be popular Adirondack destinations, but even they are surpassed by the popularity and name recognition of Lake Placid. Lake Placid, a village located in the township of North Elba, is the most well known Adirondack location primarily because it hosted the 1932 and 1980 Winter Olympic Games. Lake Placid remains a mecca for winter sports and hosts many national and international tourist attractions.

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43 In the January / February 2010 issue, National Geographic Traveler listed Lake Placid as #3 on a list of Top 10 Winter Towns. The list included both national and international towns. See http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/top-10/winter-towns-traveler/
events each year. As a result, the village, which has about 2,600 residents and 2,000 hotel rooms, is more cosmopolitan than any other Adirondack village. The Winter Olympics were still a relatively small event in 1932 with 252 athletes representing seventeen nations, but by 1980 1,072 athletes representing thirty-seven nations participated in the games.\textsuperscript{44} The Olympics pushed the Adirondacks onto an international stage for the first time and set the stage for Lake Placid’s continued existence as a winter sports capital.\textsuperscript{45} The games are part of the reason that Lake Placid is such an anomaly inside the park even when compared to other tourist towns. In order to host the games in 1980, Lake Placid completed new construction totaling $78 million, which included a new Olympic Village, the Olympic Center for ice events, a luge run, two ski jumps, and an overhaul of many trails and other facilities from 1932.\textsuperscript{46} The rest of the area followed suit and many new hotels and lodging facilities opened in time for the games. The 1932 & 1980 Winter Olympic Museum, located inside the Olympic Center, celebrates the games and Lake Placid’s role in hosting the games. The museum contains exhibits and many artifacts from the events and athletes who competed here such as Sonja Henie and Eric Heiden. The museum provides context for structures that continue to dominate the landscape in Lake Placid such as the Olympic Center, speed skating oval, and ski jumps.

\textsuperscript{44} To compare, the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver hosted 2,622 athletes from eighty-seven different countries.

\textsuperscript{45} Construction of facilities for the 1932 Olympics, namely the bobsled run, was the subject of one of the most heated battles between preservationists and the state. The state planned to build the bobsled run on state land, but the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks opposed this plan and took the conservation department to court. They won when the courts declared that the forest preserve “must always retain the character of a wilderness.” See Terrie, \textit{Forever Wild}, 133-134.

Beyond the extraordinary events chronicled at the Olympic Museum, the local museum located in the village of Lake Placid assumes a more inward looking and local view of Lake Placid history. Unlike the museums in Lake George and Old Forge, the history museum in Lake Placid does not have a visible spot among the shops on the main drag, but since 2000 it has shared a space with the popular Adirondack Scenic Railroad, a partnership which has greatly increased the building’s traffic. The connection between transportation and museums in tourist towns is even more prominent at the Lake Placid-North Elba Historical Society. Since 1967, the museum has been located in a century-old railroad depot. Rail service from Utica stopped in 1965, but the building began to fulfill its prior function again when the Adirondack Scenic Railroad started to provide scenic excursions to Saranac Lake in 2000. The railroad is a popular attraction that continues to grow and offer riders a railroad experience, which is reminiscent of the importance and prevalence of Adirondack railroads over one hundred years ago. This partnership enhances the experience of both railroad riders and museum visitors. Museum visitors are able to witness the operation of a historic rail depot and riders are as well as view historical exhibits that enhance their understand the role of the railroad in Adirondack history. The ticketing and waiting room area provides a space for exhibits including an exhibit entitled “Iron Tracks in the Wilderness”, which informs visitors about the various railroad companies and routes that existed in the region. A map of the entire Adirondack Park reveals the major railroad routes from 1865 until 1944.

The exhibits in this main room were redone in 2008 with input from then director Jamie Welsh. The staff and directors of museums inevitably guide interpretation at their

institution. Historians come with their own set of biases, values, and knowledge, which inevitably impact the selection and execution of exhibits in any historical institution.\textsuperscript{48}

This came into play in an obvious way with Welsh’s impact on the museum’s exhibits. Welsh, the museum’s director from 2008-2009 was hired shortly after finishing his BA in History, but more importantly his mother, Carolyn Welsh, was a long time curator and director of the Adirondack Museum at the time, and his father, Peter Welsh, was an Adirondack author and former curator at the Adirondack Museum. When Jamie Welsh first arrived at the museum he worked on updating many of the exhibits in the train station’s waiting room area. There was a strong focus on the Adirondacks as a park as well as a region, which can be at least partially attributed to Welsh’s upbringing and constant exposure to Adirondack history as a youth.

Many of these panels focused on Lake Placid culture that was geared towards the development of tourism in the town and region. Some of these panels included text and photographs of Adirondack guide-boats and guides and explained the role guides played leading city folk on hunting trips. Another panel examined several grand hotels in Lake Placid. An exhibit panel entitled “Wilderness for Everyone” explored the individuals that began to popularize the Adirondacks and paved the way for an influx of tourists including “Adirondack” Murray and Ebenezer Emmons who conducted the first geological survey of the park in 1837. Another label entitled “The New Wilderness” touched on the car culture that eventually surpassed the era of railroads and grand hotels. The Lake Placid North Elba Historical Society is the rare local museum to use the loaded word ‘wilderness’ in exhibit text, but in this case wilderness simply means uninhabited woods

\textsuperscript{48} The role of the public historian in a project is something that is discussed more at length in Cathy’s Stanton’s work \textit{The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City}. 
and the term is not loaded with baggage that has called scholars to redefine the word and
question the existence of true “wilderness” land. One line of text alludes to the inevitable
clash between full time residents and those hoping to preserve wilderness in the park. It
reads, “In the early 19th century the smallest communities hoped for an industrial destiny.
Certainly there was no belief that the casual stranger wandering amongst the scenery held
any hope for a financial future.49 The label recognizes that both cannot exist and while
industry lost out to scenery, this museum provides panels and artifacts that appeal to both
residents and visitors.

The Adirondacks are also the home to several museums dedicated to the memory
of a single individual. It is interesting to note that these museums are located in close
vicinity to the tourist towns such as Lake Placid or Lake George. Even more than the
local historical societies in these towns, these person-based museums speak to the
experience of Adirondack visitors or summer residents. Since the Adirondacks have
been such a popular destination, it only makes sense that many high profile individuals
have visited the park or temporarily resided within the park’s boundaries. Each museum
is focused on an individual who was not a full time resident of the park, but instead a
temporary guest. There are not museums dedicated to local people whose work as
guides, caretakers, or most strikingly artisans contributed so much to the “Adirondack
experience.”50

49 “Wilderness for Everyone: Industry! Industry!” Lake Placid North Elba Historical Association,
Lake Placid, NY, September 2008.

50 It is possible that there has never been enough funding or support to create this type of museum
while funding from outside the park has been instrumental in the creation and maintenance of the others.
Instead, one will find a museum such as the Marcella Sembrich Opera Museum in Bolton Landing. Open since 1937, the Sembrich Museum is housed in Sembrich’s former summer home and teaching studio. In addition to her career as a world-renowned opera singer who headlined the New York Metropolitan Opera for many years, Sembrich also founded the vocal department of the Julliard School of Music and the Curtis Institute. Because Sembrich, who was Polish, could not vacation in the Alps due to World War I, she decided instead to summer in the Adirondacks.\(^{51}\) There is little that is distinctly “Adirondack” about this music focused museum, but again it reveals the variety of individuals who were attracted to the scenery and natural setting of the Adirondacks.

The museum is dedicated to a wealthy member of the affluent Bolton Landing community and appeals to those residents and summer residents with ties to New York City and an interest in culture by hosting summer concerts, film series, and lectures. The type of public programs hosted by the museum appeals to a distinct class of Adirondackers. Bolton Landing is one of the wealthiest towns inside the park, and because wealth and culture often go hand in hand, the concerts and films hosted by the museum are more popular with summer residents.

Others came to the Adirondacks for healing. Dr. Edward Trudeau popularized the fresh air cure for tuberculosis in 1882 and Saranac Lake became a destination for countless individuals suffering from the disease. *Treasure Island* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* author Robert Louis Stevenson was one of those sick individuals who looked to the Adirondacks for healing when he heard about Dr. Trudeau’s work with tuberculosis patients. During the winter of 1887-1888, Stevenson

\(^{51}\) Folwell and Godine, 87.
spent just over six months renting part of a cottage owned by Andrew and Mary Baker, a
local family who also ran a local guide service. A couple of visitors in 1915 heard about
the cottage’s history and decided to purchase the cottage and turn it into a museum. They
formed the Stevenson Society of America, an international group of Stevenson admirers,
and a group that continues to own the museum today.52 The Robert Louis Stevenson
Memorial Cottage and Museum has several rooms dedicated to Stevenson’s life and
works and frequently hosts international conferences about the author. The museum has
very little to say about Stevenson’s hosts and the cottage has become more a shrine to
Stevenson’s life and works than a chronicle of his stay in the Adirondacks. As a result of
the cottage’s outside ownership and possibly the non-local focus of the exhibits, the
museum is often disconnected from the town of Saranac Lake.53 There has been little
support from the town and the museum boosters have had to work hard for every piece of
publicity and recognition including the roadside signage to lead people to the museum.54

Because both Sembrich and Stevenson have a draw that extends beyond the local
and regional community, the visitors to these museums are often tourists of a diverse sort.
The names of Marcella Sembrich and Robert Louis Stevenson do not immediately bring
to mind the thought of Adirondack connection. They may mean very little to local
Adirondackers. These museums are a different sort of local museum because they

52 Mike Lynch, “Stevenson’s Saranac Lake Connection,” *Adirondack Daily Enterprise*, June 17,
2006, Section B. Among the society’s membership have been many well-known individuals including
Colonel Walter Scott, publisher Sam McClure of McClure’s Magazine, and sculptor Gutzon Borglum who
created a plaque that hangs by the main door of the cottage.

53 A struggle to remove long time resident curator Mike Delahunt resulted in a court case and
some bad blood between the town and the museum.

commemorate individuals who were not native Adirondackers and who spent just a short time in the park. In a sense the Robert Louis Stevenson cottage and the Marcella Sembrich Museum commemorate the history of tourists and visitors to the region and are a testament to the draw of the romantic beauty and healing powers of the Adirondacks. The continued existence of these homes illustrates that visitors have a large place in the history of the Adirondacks and they weave important layers in the fabric of Adirondack history and the legacy of all people in the Adirondacks.

**Essex County Historical Society**

Arguably the most professional and regionally inclusive local museum in the Adirondack park, Essex County Historical Society / Adirondack History Center Museum is an anomaly among local Adirondack museums. It has both a local and regional focus and currently has the most in-depth and professional looking website of any local museum in the park. While not on the same level as the Adirondack Museum or Wild Center, this modest sized local museum provides a space for all types of Adirondackers to gather. The museum is located in Elizabethtown, which is positioned in the northeastern section of the park in the shadow of the high peaks region approximately twenty-five miles east of Lake Placid. It is one of the older museums in the park and was founded in 1955 after local residents from seven towns gathered to form the Essex County Historical Society with the goal to create a museum. They purchased a former schoolhouse and installed exhibits relating to both the Adirondack region and Essex County.  

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County museums possess a different focus than local historical societies and certainly the best ones provide a big picture that places the county’s history in a regional and national context. While all New York counties have a publicly appointed county historian, not every county historical society has a museum with a permanent collection. With the exception of Hamilton County, all Adirondack counties have museums, but the only one located within the boundary of the park is the Essex County Historical Society. With its tagline “Discovering the human face of the Adirondacks,” the museum caters to Adirondackers and tourists alike with exhibits that explore both Adirondack and local topics. Two permanent exhibits on the main floor display artifacts related to two sides of the Adirondack existence. One room displays and interprets the tools used by local settlers to clear the land and make a living. Another room explores sporting pursuits in the Adirondacks including boating, camping, fishing, and hunting. Each exhibit room highlights various individuals who made an impact on the Adirondacks.

The museum consistently hosts rotating exhibits that often bring together local, regional, and national history. For example, in 2000 historian Amy Godine curated the “Dreaming of Timbuctoo” exhibition, which examined a pre-Civil War black community in North Elba. In the 1840s, abolitionist Gerritt Smith decided to give free blacks land to farm so they could meet the property requirement necessary to vote in New York State. According to Godine, this project was able to provide “a view of the Adirondack regions from a freshly politicized vantage, a perspective that yoked Adirondack history to the national scene.”


This community drew John Brown to the region and ensured that the North Elba community was well known among abolitionists. Not only did this exhibit
showcase the importance of the region to matters of national importance, it provided
visitors with the sense that the region did have a history before preservation and the forest
preserve became the major story.

Yet even this museum has some exhibits or rooms of artifacts collections that lack
explanation or context. The Doll Room showcases a large collection of dolls donated by
a summer resident who collected them during her travels around the world. Similarly, an
exhibit about Victorian women’s clothing does not illustrate a convincing connection to
the Adirondacks. Besides a few photographs of women in the Adirondacks, the actual
dresses on display do not connect to the region or provide an explanation of the social
norms for women in the wilderness. While the connection of the dolls and dresses to the
region is tenuous at best, it does show that residents and summer residents have a
connection to the institution through donations. The museum does not appear to have a
larger purpose behind the doll display except for the fact that they were a donation from a
local resident.

Like other local museums in the Adirondacks and even across the country, the
environment is not a component of the museum’s interpretation. The interpretive focus at
the Essex County Historical Society and most other Adirondack local history museums
rely on material culture and do not utilize the natural environment and countless
preservation efforts throughout the years as a means to understand the town or local
community. Writing about the importance of linking environmental history to museums
exhibits, historian Christopher Clarke noted that most local museums tell the story of
local industry, but they do not include the story of the industry’s environmental impact.
He believes that knowledge of environmental history is important not just for
information’s sake, but because “knowledge of environmental history encourages citizens and policy makers to be suspicious of quick fixes and simple nostrums about ‘saving the environment.’”\(^{57}\) This is especially important in the Adirondacks where ongoing conversations about land preservation impact everyone. Museums have the potential to become a public forum for conversations about the environment and, while this is a role that Adirondack regional museums have begun to assume, local museums have not followed suit.

**Conclusion**

While the Adirondack Museum and the Wild Center more fully embrace an environmental mission and continue to address environmental questions head on, such questions are uncommon at the local level. Even though some of these museums often cater to summer residents or visitors, the sense of the Adirondack Park as a wilderness utopia created by late 19\(^{th}\) century legislation is not integral to each museum’s interpretation. By excluding the environment and its impact from museum exhibits and interpretation, these institutions are missing a vital moment to provide a greater understanding about the economic and political factors shaping the community. Did a decline in mining or logging resulting from land preservation statutes force a town to seek a new economic existence? What role did the natural setting of the Adirondacks play in drawing visitors and residents to a town? An understanding of the physical environment and the way that has impacted the development of a town or region allows locals and visitors to gain a greater understanding of the town’s setting and

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economic/political reality. Yet the fact that these local museums lack environmental themes is also revealing. This points towards a potential ambivalence regarding environmental preservation and questions about wilderness in the park.

One of the very few times environmental impact is mentioned at a local museum occurred at The Lake Placid – North Elba Historical Society, where an exhibit about railroads provides a label mentioning the negative impact of logging and the “desecration of forests.” This information provides museum visitors with some insight to the condition of the forests before “forever wild” took affect. While fully embracing the environmental component of Adirondack history could run the risk of ignoring everything else that makes a town or community special and unique in its own right, it is a useful element to present to the public. For most institutions, environmental questions do not come to the forefront of exhibitions that focus on the town’s industrial history or the history of local settlers. Perhaps the environmental questions do not appear important to the history of a town or perhaps there is another reason. It could be a conscious decision for a local institution to avoid a discussion of environmental factors on the development of the town in order to steer clear of angering locals who dislike the state’s intrusions and who see an overabundance of wilderness in the area. No matter what the reason, local museums have not begun to follow the same environmental trajectory becoming so common at the Adirondack Museum and the Wild Center.

Local history museums in the Adirondack Park are not all cut from the same cloth. Museums differ due to many reasons such as size, funding, staffing, and even location. Adirondack local museums, however, highlight the diversity within the park. There are countless nuances to the Adirondacker identity and local history museums.
represent a variety of different local communities and the residents each serves. Some museums have exhibits that cater towards local third or fourth generation residents while others have exhibits that highlight the history of tourism or summer residents. These museums often reflect the desires and beliefs of different communities within the park. From museums that appear to have no discernable connection to the park to museums that have exhibits resembling something that could be seen in the Adirondack Museum, local museums in the Adirondacks are a place where history reveals the intricacies between people in the Adirondacks and between these individuals and the Adirondack Park. Most local museums have a close relationship with the local town and do not self-identify as an “Adirondack” museum. Yet, together as a collection of museums, these institutions make up a regional culture that is more complex and nuanced than the traditional regional story has portrayed.
CONCLUSION

In the Adirondacks, history has been shaped and reshaped to create an ongoing dialogue between the past and the present. In many of these historic places and museums, history has been able to meld nature and culture in a way that is uncommon. By removing the distinct line between the natural and cultural world, public history in the Adirondack Park is helping to promote a new definition of wilderness. Yet, while historians have become aware of these nuances, the ideal of the romantic wilderness is still the dominant narrative for the public. Through museum exhibits, public programs, and debates about the future of historic resources, the history of the park has been discussed and renegotiated in the public arena. Although there has not been a complete paradigm shift, public history in the Adirondack Park has begun to reveal a counter narrative that is gaining attention.

Great camps that are now open to the public for tours or residential experiences reveal the legacy of rustic craftsmanship in the park as well as the role of wealthy urbanites that developed the region by carving out their own private wilderness experience. Even though most nineteenth century great camp owners flocked to the Adirondacks anticipating a romantic wilderness fantasy, today it is possible to look beyond these romantic notions and to knowingly embrace the fact that our images of nature, then and now are largely socially constructed. In the twenty-first century we chose to use the beautiful remains of a Gilded Age fantasy to teach lessons about
sustainability and to deconstruct the illusion of rustic grandeur. The physical remains of the camps built of materials such as old growth spruce and pine also serve to preserve a remnant of the primeval forest that no longer exist in the same quantity or size in the park. Visitors are also able hear and see stories about the local craftsmen and caretakers who lived and worked year round at these camps. Great camps are much more than monuments to Gilded Age aristocrats and those who battled to preserve these camps fought to preserve the storied landscapes that these camps now interpret to the public.

The debate over the future of historic resources on lands designated wilderness also revealed a layered landscape that conflicted with the traditional definition that separates humans and wilderness and ignited the debate between natural preservation and cultural preservation. Although state policy mandates the removal of all man-made structures from lands designated wilderness, the recent reevaluation of individual land management plans has begun to reconsider this policy. The state has approved some management plans that have been adapted to allow historic resources to remain on wilderness lands. These decisions illustrate a new definition of wilderness and present to the public an inclusive vision of the park’s history, which has been molded by both man and nature for many years. In addition, the most recent decision by the state regarding cultural recourses, which re-designated the land containing the St. Regis and Hurricane Mountain fire towers as historic, continues the trend. This decision perhaps reveals the future direction of cultural resource preservation in the forest preserve.

Similar to the rustic craftmanship of great camps, the artisans who built rustic furniture showed a close relationship between local craftsmen and the land. The
popularity of this style illustrated the way the romantic story and the vernacular story have overlapped in the past and the present. Rustic furniture in the Adirondacks was created out of a combination of the romantic appetites of wealthy urbanites and the skilled craftman’s ability and familiarity with the local environment. The renaissance of rustic furniture is a testament to the appetite for wilderness, which continues long after visitors, and summer residents leave the park for the season. The contemporary desire to build rustic furniture and the growing market for it shows a reverence for nature and a connection between people and the natural environment that continues long after visitors have left the park. The rustic furniture market produces material culture elements that tell the story of romantic wilderness, while at the same time sustain local craftsmen who have a very real and unromantic relationship to the landscape. By bringing rustic furniture into the home, Adirondackers and tourists alike continue to see a definition of wilderness that includes both romantic fantasy and vernacular craftsmanship.

Not everyone who visits the Adirondacks will own rustic furniture, but if they chose to shop in the park or learn about the history of the park and visit the Adirondack Museum, chances are they will see many fine examples of it. The rusticity of the Adirondacks has been emphasized and reemphasized through the exhibits and artifacts displayed at the Adirondack Museum. As the museum has matured, it has come to showcase a specific regional identity that at times values one story about the region above others. Decisions by the museum regarding which stories and artifacts receive preference reveals a story that is becoming increasingly environmental. As historian Amy Godine noted, “We learn Adirondack history largely in terms of the rescue and redemption of the
natural landscape by visionary preservationists…[which] has given regional historians a framework that implicitly orders and prioritizes everything around it.”

As the Adirondack Museum moves into the future, social media allows the community to move beyond physical boundaries. Through these channels there are new ways to facilitate the ongoing dialogue about Adirondack history and what it means to be an Adirondacker. The concept of who is an Adirondacker is fluid and contentious and the desire of those living outside the park to also claim the label shows just how many parties have a stake in future of the park. For example, in September 2010 the Adirondack Museum posted a message on Facebook advertising free museum admission for all full time Adirondack residents during the month of October. The museum limited this offer to year round residents who could present a voter registration card or driver’s license as proof of residency. The individuals who responded to the post, however, were part time residents who owned property in the park, paid taxes, and felt that they should be eligible for this benefit. Despite living and working elsewhere, these individuals feel a close connection and belonging to the region and often provide another voice about what is best for the land. Through social media, the museum has provided another avenue to air these ideas, and by using these new channels of communication, the Adirondack Museum continues to facilitate a dialogue between the past and present and creates a space for residents, home owners, and visitors to understand the ways the history of the park impacts the present.

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Finally, local museums reveal a history of the Adirondack Park that cannot be confined to any one storyscape previously discussed in the park. The vernacular story is a narrative that runs parallel to the romantic wilderness narrative. Small museums in the park demonstrate that it is neither the wilderness fantasy story nor the environmental management story that is important to the residents of the towns and hamlets in the park. Even without the resources of the larger regional museums, local museums illustrate the history of local businesses and workers including doctors, lumbermen, hotels, and railroads. The Morehouse Historical Museum, for example, has used newspaper clippings to showcase locals who rescued survivors from a nearby plane crash in 1934. The Morehouse museum tells stories that celebrate local heroes and honor a past that is uniquely shared by their small community. The walls of the small museum proudly display newspaper clippings commemorating the day in 1953 when Morehouse became the last town in the state to get electricity as well as the town’s school bus route, which was the longest in the state. By revealing what is important to local residents of the towns and

Figure 40 – Electricity Comes to Morehouse, Morehouse Historical Museum, Hoffmeister, NY, 2009
hamlets of the park, local museums showcase the relationship between the residents and their surrounding environment. This is a very different relationship than both Gilded Age aristocrats and contemporary tourists have with the landscape and this counter narrative provides an important balance to Adirondack history.

Although the multiple narratives and storyscapes converge within the park, history allows us to see that they do not have to be in conflict. While the heritage of the park both unites all Adirondackers in their love of place, and divides them because of the divergent stories they tell about the place. History attempts to rise above heritage’s emotional storyscapes, by making clear where and why communities can become divided. Even though the conflict between environmentalists and locals with business interests in the park continues, history can provide some perspective on these conflicts that could provide the opportunity to discover common ground. The new understand of wilderness as a concept that embraces both natural and cultural features is providing an important perspective for decision makers in the park and in the state. As a storied landscape, the Adirondacks can impart lessons about environmental stewardship more effectively than a “pristine” wilderness landscape. In the ongoing disputes over Adirondack land use history has injected a model of cohabitation and compromise between people and wilderness that is rare in both the United States and in the world.
APPENDIX A:
MUSEUMS AND HISTORIC SITES
IN THE ADIRONDACK PARK
## MUSEUMS AND HISTORIC SITES IN THE ADIRONDACK PARK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>County</th>
<th>Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1812 Homestead Farm and Museum</td>
<td>Willsboro</td>
<td>Essex</td>
<td>Historic Site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adirondack Museum</td>
<td>Blue Mountain Lake</td>
<td>Hamilton</td>
<td>Regional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adsit Log Cabin</td>
<td>Willsboro</td>
<td>Essex</td>
<td>Historic Site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolton Historical Society</td>
<td>Bolton Landing</td>
<td>Warren</td>
<td>Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camp Santanoni</td>
<td>Newcomb</td>
<td>Essex</td>
<td>Great Camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caroga History Museum</td>
<td>Caroga Lake</td>
<td>Fulton</td>
<td>Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town of Chester Museum</td>
<td>Chestertown</td>
<td>Warren</td>
<td>Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crown Point State Historic Site</td>
<td>Crown Point</td>
<td>Essex</td>
<td>Historic Site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essex County Historical Society</td>
<td>Elizabethtown</td>
<td>Essex</td>
<td>Local</td>
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<td>Forest Industries Exhibit Hall</td>
<td>Old Forge</td>
<td>Herkimer</td>
<td>Other</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Ticonderoga</td>
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<td>Historic Site</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fort William Henry</td>
<td>Lake George</td>
<td>Warren</td>
<td>Historic Site</td>
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<tr>
<td>Great Camp Sagamore</td>
<td>Raquette Lake</td>
<td>Hamilton</td>
<td>Great Camp</td>
</tr>
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<td>Brant Lake</td>
<td>Warren</td>
<td>Local</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indian Lake Museum</td>
<td>Indian Lake</td>
<td>Hamilton</td>
<td>Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron Center Museum</td>
<td>Port Henry</td>
<td>Essex</td>
<td>Local</td>
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<td>John Brown Farm State Historic Site</td>
<td>North Elba</td>
<td>Essex</td>
<td>Historic Site</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lake George Historical Association</td>
<td>Lake George</td>
<td>Warren</td>
<td>Local</td>
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<td>Lake Luzurne Museums</td>
<td>Lake Luzurne</td>
<td>Warren</td>
<td>Local</td>
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<td>Lake Placid Winter Olympic Museum</td>
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<td>Essex</td>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>Marcella Sembrich Opera Museum</td>
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<td>Warren</td>
<td>Other</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minerva Historical Museum</td>
<td>Olmsteadville</td>
<td>Essex</td>
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<tr>
<td>Morehouse History Museum</td>
<td>Hoffmeister</td>
<td>Hamilton</td>
<td>Local</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nellie Tyrell / Rural</td>
<td>Edinburg</td>
<td>Saratoga</td>
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<td>Saranac Lake</td>
<td>Franklin</td>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>Schroon Lake / North Hudson Museum</td>
<td>Schroon Lake</td>
<td>Essex</td>
<td>Local</td>
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<td>Six Nations Indian Museum</td>
<td>Onchiota</td>
<td>Franklin</td>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>Ticonderoga</td>
<td>Essex</td>
<td>Local</td>
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<td>Local</td>
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<td>Trudeau Sanatorium</td>
<td>Saranac Lake</td>
<td>Franklin</td>
<td>Historic Site</td>
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<td>Tupper Lake Historical Society</td>
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<td>Franklin</td>
<td>Local</td>
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