

LAKE PLACID

YOUR WEEKLY GUIDE TO THE LAKE PLACID REGION



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AARCH: Preserving the human heritage of the Adirondack Park

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KEESEVILLE — "The Adirondacks" means many things to the many people who love this part of New York state. To some, the Adirondacks is a network of state-sanctioned wilderness areas, a haven from "the things of man," a place of wild, silent refuge in Nature's sanctuary. Others, however, view the Adirondacks through a wider lens. Without discounting the region's natural beauty, they also honor the story of its settlement and human development. It is for them that Adirondack Architectural Heritage, or AARCH, was formed in 1990. Today AARCH works from its Keeseville office to awaken Adirondackers to their own heritage, present all around them in the ordinary architecture of this extraordinary region. This is AARCH's story.

APA's Master Land Use and Development Plan required that, once these camps were given to the state, they be included in the Forest Preserve - and, once a part of the Forest Preserve, they had to be razed. Nehasane and Fox Lair were torched by the state. Topridge was auctioned off, despite laws against selling Forest Preserve land. Colby was used by the DEC as an Environmental Education Camp. The Sagamore Institute was allowed, by a constitutional amendment, to trade 200 acres of private land for the 10 acres of state land where historic buildings were located. That left Santanoni. In 1990, a group of high-profile preservationists trying to save the Santanoni Preserve came together to form Adirondack Architectural Heritage. At the nexus of this group was Howard Kirschenbaum, who had just retired as executive director of the Sagamore Institute. "We got the idea to form AARCH because there was a need for regional coordination and support among preservationists," Kirschenbaum said in a recent interview. "The urgency of the Santanoni situation made us think that the time was right to launch an organization." AARCH was able to get the APA to reclassify the areas immediately around the Main House and the experimental farm complex at Santanoni as historic areas within the Forest Preserve. That made it possible for AARCH, the DEC and the town

of Newcomb, acting as partners, to restore the buildings and run an interpretive program. Santanoni today draws up to 10,000 visitors each year. "IN THE EARLY days, AARCH was run out of his (Kirschenbaum's) home," recalled Steve Engelhart, AARCH's current executive director, in a recent interview. "He dedicated two to three days a week to the organization on a volunteer basis." "In the first year, we were totally run by our volunteer board members," Kirschenbaum said, "and we had no members to speak of. A foundation gave us a \$10,000 grant to fund a membership campaign. We were able to put together a nice brochure and buy mailing lists, and that gave us 300 members right from the get-go." AARCH's first paid staff member was Mary Hotaling, who worked for several years as a part-time program coordinator. Still a very active member of AARCH's board of directors, Hotaling now directs a local preservation organization called Historic Saranac Lake. Then came the full-time staff members. AARCH hired Engelhart as its executive director in 1994. Administrative Assistant Bonnie DeGolyer came on board in 1997, followed by Program Director Paula Dennis in 2000. Together, the board and staff of AARCH conduct an incredibly wide array of activities. Their programs are aimed not only at the preservation of "high end" historic camps and buildings in the Adirondacks, but at educating everyday Adirondack people about the everyday history of the ordinary "built environment" around them - the architectural heritage of their families and their communities. "The kind of work we do is admired and envied by other preservation groups across New York state," Engelhart said, a claim backed up by a recent award. The Preservation League of New York State gave its Excellence in Historic Preservation Award to Adirondack Architectural Heritage last year. The citation said, "This award recognizes AARCH's sustained achievement through 10 years of advocacy, saving historic sites and educating the public about preservation's central role in revitalizing communities in the Adirondack region." "We take a balanced approach," Engelhart said. "It isn't all advocacy; it isn't all education; it isn't all packaging National Register (of Historic Places) applications. "Some preservation organizations always seem to be in a confrontational mode, going to public hearings and the courts. There may be communities where that's what's called for," Engelhart continued, "but that's not the Adirondacks. "If I were to identify our primary goal, it would be this: We want to make preservationists out of people by changing their hearts and minds." "We want to give them the tools to understand what's in front of them," Dennis added.



The "new" bridge through Au Sable Chasm, built in 1932, as seen through the rainbow haze of the outflow from a 19th century hydroelectric plant. It is part of AARCH's tour of historic bridges.

THE CREATION of AARCH was a historical necessity - an essential product of the conflicting forces at play in the Adirondack Park in the 1970s, '80s and '90s. On the one hand were a half-dozen Adirondack Great Camps - Nehasane, Topridge, Sagamore, Fox Lair, Colby and Santanoni - that had been acquired by the state. On the other were the two agencies responsible for administering the state's 6-million-acre Adirondack Park, the Department of Environmental Conservation and the Adirondack Park Agency. A strict interpretation of the

tremendous satisfaction of being involved in restoring a significant historic structure. Gil Barker, the supervising architect on that project, encouraged me to pursue a career in historic preservation." Engelhart went back to college, finishing his history degree at Plattsburgh State before earning his master's degree in historic preservation from the University of Vermont. Engelhart spent 10 years as director of housing and historic preservation for Friends of the North Country, in Keeseville, and was a founding member of AARCH's board of directors before becoming its executive director nine years ago. "While I was in grad school, I had to do an internship," Engelhart said. "They sent me to the Fayerweather Island Lighthouse, in Bridgeport,

Conn., probably because of my background as a stonemason." The lighthouse, decommissioned in the 1930s, had been severely vandalized. The area was a mess when Engelhart

arrived in 1983. "They wanted me to spend my 10-week internship planning what to do the following summer." See AARCH, page 21



Steve Engelhart, AARCH executive director, leads a tour group through the Main House at Camp Santanoni.



Guests on an AARCH tour listen to Rick Rollinski as he stands in the mouth of Adirondack's 1854 "new" blast furnace, explaining its historic significance.



"Cactus Flats" in the abandoned Land of Melchiorville is the focus of preservationists inspired by AARCH.



St. Patrick's Catholic Church, a stop on AARCH's tour of Port Henry and Elburgh township.

ENGELHART is now in his 10th year as AARCH's executive director. "I've always been interested in history and architecture," he explained. "After high school I decided to become an architect, but when I got to architecture school I found out I wasn't really interested. "I didn't finish college then. I became a stonemason, and that's what I did for six years. "I worked on a couple of historic buildings, including the Kent-DeLard House in Plattsburgh, and that's where it all clicked," Engelhart said. "The

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