

Chapter 2

The Hamlets In Time

The story of the birth and evolution of Adirondack hamlets is a fascinating chronicle of unusual events and the boom and bust cycle of the frontier carried forward to the present. Unique to the settlements of this region is the large number of hamlets which have experienced major periods of growth and decline in their short histories. From small pioneer settlements, to stagecoach stops, bustling mining and mill towns and resort enclaves of the wealthy, no Adirondack community has remained untouched. While settlements were experiencing these transformations, forces outside of the Adirondacks were also affecting their growth and evolution. These forces included wealthy investors, state government officials, and unscrupulous land speculators all of whom figured in the histories of Adirondack settlements. Realizing the influence of these forces which shaped settlements in the past will lead to a better understanding of the Adirondack settlements today.

Early Settlement

The early development of the Adirondack region, described as the "Great Northern Wilderness," was markedly late compared to the rest of the Northeast. This late settlement was due to both a general ignorance of the region and the formidable barrier the mountains and forests presented to the first settlers. For many years following the arrival of the early French explorers, the only people in the region were trappers and hunters seeking game. In fact, as late as 1830 much of the interior of the present-day Adirondack Park remained largely unknown.

Military Communities

The first permanent settlements in the Adirondacks were military communities established because of the area's strategic position between Canada and the eastern coastal settlements. The years of conflict between the French and British and later the British and the American colonists generated the need for military forts to defend transportation corridors between Canada and the American colonies. For example, the transportation routes on Lake Champlain and Lake George led to settle-



Samuel D. Champlain's early military encounter

ments at Ticonderoga and Crown Point. Similarly, by the time of the Revolution William Gilliland had planted the settlements of Willsboro on the Boquet River. He hoped to establish a large, inland empire and constructed several major buildings in a growing community of settlers. The increasing traffic on the lakes also brought the appearance of early ports-of-call such as Bessboro (later Westport), Essex, and Sabbath Day Point. These earliest settlements were all destroyed during the last years of the Revolutionary War by various armies.

New York Fever

Many veterans of the colonial armies received government land grants as payment for their wartime service. The grants included most of the land along the western shores of Lake Champlain where, as soldiers, many had earlier seen tall stands of virgin timber, fertile land and abundant fish and game. This influx of New England settlers became known as the "New York Fever Rush" of 1783. Hundreds of pioneers, especially from Vermont, deserted worn-out farms and moved west to the much talked-about lands and riches of the Adirondacks. They settled the shores of Lake Champlain, spreading west on the lowlands north of the Adirondacks, and turning south to the flatlands of the Saint Lawrence country. Vermonters using oxen-pulled sleds crossed the frozen lake and became the first citizens of many farming communities in the Lake Champlain Valley.

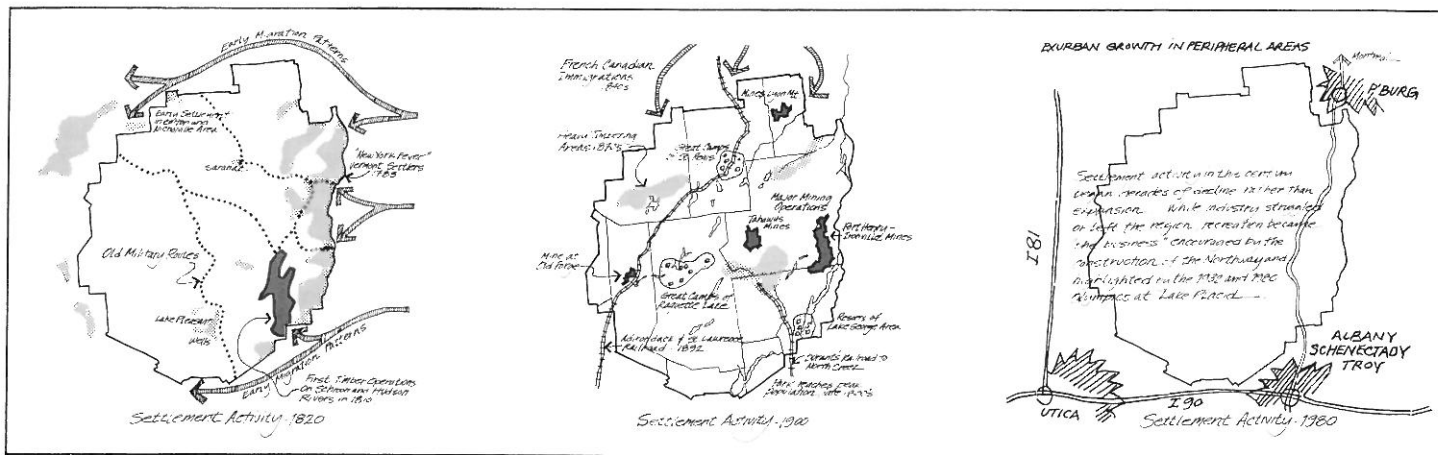
The Cornucopia Never Fills

Arriving full of hope, many of the early pioneers soon experienced bitter disappointment. Much of the land was even rockier than in New England and the short growing season of the Adirondack region made farming a risky undertaking. Farms that did remain and prosper were generally those which raised horses and hay crops.



Saranac Lake in 1880

"It was the lure of the wilderness that brought the first white settlers to the mountains' vastness." (Aber and King, Tales from an Adirondack County)



Two Centuries of Settlement

The horse and horse-drawn vehicle were for many decades the only source of freight-hauling and transportation in the area. Many farms at the end of the 19th Century evolved into small truck farms with the coming of the large hotels and their thousands of guests needing to be fed. Farming, however, never became the economic backbone of the region as the first pioneers had envisioned.

Early settlements continued to remain on the edge of the Adirondacks occupying the flatter lands and avoiding the more rugged interior areas. By 1815 a sprinkling of small villages, including Elizabethtown, Keeseville, Keene Valley and Jay, had appeared in the eastern hill country. To the west and north Boonville, Canton, Gouverneur and Malone emerged as fast growing communities. Five years later isolated settlers were scattered throughout the Adirondack interior, but the population grew very slowly. A visitor to Long Lake in 1841 found only eight or nine families carving out homesteads in the wilderness.

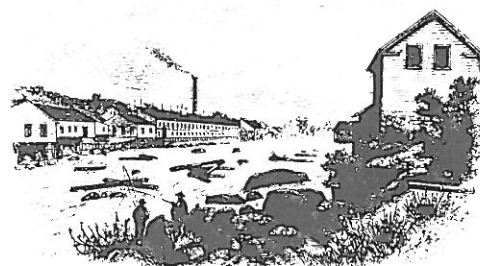
Eyes to the West

The influx of pioneer farm families to the Adirondacks saw a dramatic decrease after the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825. This newly created water highway from New England to the fertile farmlands of the Upper Midwest turned the eyes of land hungry settlers from the Adirondacks to destinations farther west. The dwindling number of pioneers in the Adirondacks gave greater freedom to a growing lumbering industry in the region by reducing the competition for land.

The Quest for Resources: Lumbering

By the first decades of the 19th Century astute businessmen were beginning to recognize the vast potential offered by the great forests of the Adirondacks. These men soon transformed lumbering from a few early saw mills constructed along rushing streams into the first boom industry of the Adirondack region. Lumbering had begun on the Lower Raquette River in 1810 and on the Schroon River in 1813, but the problem of transporting logs to the mills was a major obstacle. This was overcome with the practice of floating branded logs down river with spring flooding. Begun in 1813, this initiated the Adirondack lumbering boom. As early milltowns sprang up at Glens Falls,

Keeseville, and Ticonderoga, lumbering concerns continued to move into the interior of the Adirondacks.



Lumbering in Warrensburg

Settlers from the North

The rapidly growing lumber industry brought the second major wave of immigration to the Adirondack region. Great numbers of French Canadians and Irish immigrants came south in the 1830's and 40's seeking jobs in the lumber camps. Tupper Lake and Saranac Lake emerged out of the wilderness in response to loggers and their families in need of communities. In 1850 New York surpassed Maine as the leading lumber state in the nation. As lumbering techniques and transportation improved, the trees were felled with greater speed and efficiency. By 1885 at least two-

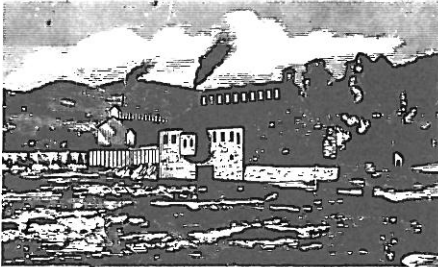


Farming at Morehouse

"Much of Adirondack history is keyed to the ups and downs, supplies and demands . . . from 'outside' as natives say." (Keller, Adirondack Wilderness)

thirds of the entire Adirondack forest had been logged at least once. The most productive years were still ahead. In the peak year of 1905, 750 million board feet of saw-timber and pulpwood were harvested from Adirondack forests. Most settlements, unfortunately, experienced a boom-bust cycle with the coming and going of the lumbering industry. Early prosperity gave way to later decline and economic recession as companies logged their way through the woodlands.

Photo courtesy of the Adirondack Museum



Early mills at Keeseville

Mining

The mining of iron ore quickly followed on the heels of lumbering as a second major industry in the Adirondacks. Iron ore had been discovered early in the area and some mining along the shores of Lake Champlain was being carried out at the time of the Revolutionary War. Early forges and furnaces were a common sight in many of the small settlements. Communities such as Old Forge and Lake Placid originated from such humble industrial beginnings. The news of vast ore deposits in the Adirondacks wetted the appetites of eastern investors and many engaged survey teams to explore the area. By the end of the 19th Century over two hundred iron mines and forges had been worked in the Adirondacks, although few were still operating at that date.

The mining town of Lyon Mountain



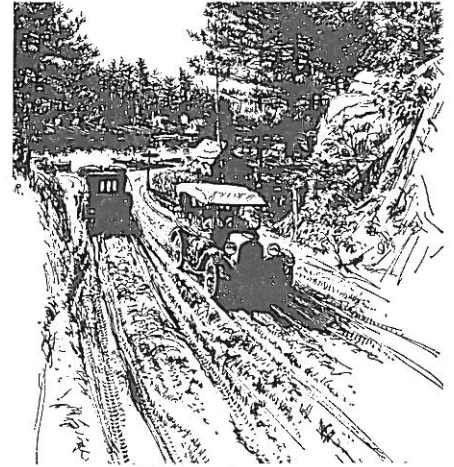
Photo courtesy of the Adirondack Museum

The Tale of Adirondac

The story of the McIntyre Iron Works along the headwaters of the Hudson in the central Adirondacks is a tale of a community which lived and died with the fortunes of the mining industry. With the discovery of major ore deposits in this area in 1826, Archibald McIntyre and Duncan Martin from New York City quickly bought up 24,000 acres of surrounding land and established a major mine and forge operation. The small village of Adirondac soon grew up around this industrial center. But the problems of transportation, distance from markets, and lack of water made the operations questionable for many years. Finally in 1857 the operations at the mines and forge shut down making the small community of Adirondac with its church, school, bank, stores and homes an early Adirondack ghost town.

More successful mining operations to the east and north created longer lasting communities. Major iron ore deposits in the Town of Moriah brought about hamlets like Port Henry, Witherbee, and Mineville while other deposits in Clinton County created the hamlet of Lyon Mountain. These communities were representative of a growing phenomenon in the Adirondacks. As they moved into an area to exploit its mineral and timber resources, large mining and lumber concerns constructed their own communities or company towns. Among others, the hamlets of Newton Falls, Piercefield, Mineville, and Lyon Mountain began in this way. Unfortunately this practice created a total dependence of the village and its inhabitants on the company. As a reporter for the Syracuse Herald American observed in 1967:

The Village (Lyon Mountain in the 1950's) was simply an extension of the mine. Republic Steel Corporation owned the houses, the fire department, the water company, and the stores. If a child grew ill, the company doctor was called; if a light bulb burned out in the kitchen, the company supplied a new one.

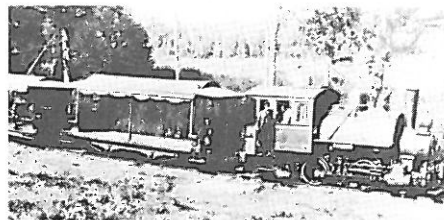


The mud season

With such a limited economic base, these communities have experienced very difficult times in recent years as mills and mines have shut down their operations. Nothing could have been further from the minds of Adirondack settlers of the 1830's and 40's. At that time the growing lumbering and mining operations seemed to present a great industrial future to the region if only the perennial problems of transportation could be solved.

The Impassable Wilderness

Transportation within the Adirondack region has always been a major obstacle to settlements and investments in the area. The problems associated with construction in the rugged terrain and heavy forests have deterred access along everything from one-lane horse paths to railroads and major highways. Early Adirondack travel was both by foot and over a few military roads constructed by the various armies during the war years of the late 18th Century. These early roads were expanded by settlers as they cut paths through the forests in an attempt to join one small community with the next. On the whole, roads remained crude affairs often described as passable enough in winter, impassable in spring and impossible in summer!



Railroad heydays



Road to the high peaks

Resources Bring Roads

The real push to build roads accompanied the demand for good transportation to and from the growing mining and lumber industries. Isolated Adirondack mining operations required dependable transportation to outside markets. Recognizing this fact, iron entrepreneurs played an important role in the building of plank and corduroy roads during this early period.

Land developers also pushed the construction of roadways in order to enhance the value and accessibility of their properties. As stage lines began penetrating the region, many small service hamlets made their appearance along transportation routes. In most cases, an inn or hotel for weary travelers and a livery or blacksmith for care of the animals were among the first buildings in the hamlet. Later the area post office and school were added.

Along the shores of Lake Champlain travel was far simpler. Boats had plied the waters of the lake since the time of the Indian and the ferries connecting New York and Vermont had existed since colonial times. The country's second steamboat, the *Ticonderoga*, began runs up and down the lake in the 1830's. For a short time a flurry of activity along the lake's shore transformed communities such as Port Henry, Essex and Westport into bustling ports-of-call.

Railroads and Steamers

The construction and success of early canals and railroads did not go unnoticed by Adirondack settlers and investors. As the first

steam-powered train in America completed the seventeen-mile journey between Albany and Schenectady in 1831, the demand for railroads and canals through the Adirondack region began to mount. But Adirondack settlers encountered disappointment once again when they realized it would be many years before railroads were constructed in the area. The first came in 1871 when Thomas C. Durant financed a short line between Saratoga and North Creek. Still, it wasn't until 1885 that a line was built into the central Adirondacks. Finally, in 1892 the Adirondack-St. Lawrence Line opened passenger service between New York and Montreal and brought thousands of new tourists to the region.

Along with the railroads came a form of transportation unique to the Adirondacks alone. This was the lake steamer. These boats collected passengers at lakeshore rail stations and transported them to resorts and hotels along the lakes and rivers of the area. The lake steamer remained a colorful part of the Adirondack scene until the early 1920's.

The Gilded Age

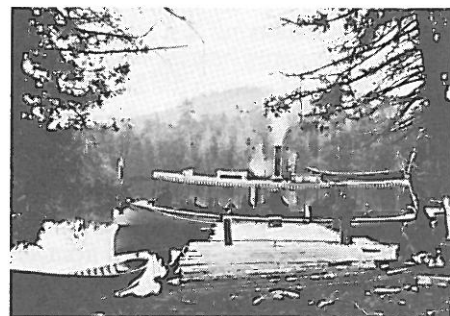
What became the greatest investment industry of the Adirondacks began almost unnoticed by early settlers. This was the magnetic draw of the region to sportsmen and vacationers. In 1818 one of the earliest records of this phenomenon reported that a group of Yale men came into the southwest Adirondacks not for wealth, woods, or land, but for a vacation and some fishing. The lure of the Adirondacks as a vacation-land was not without precedent. The Villages of Saratoga Springs and Lake George had already become great summer resorts for

Photo courtesy of the Adirondack Museum



An Adirondack tourist hotel

the wealthy classes of the east and south. By 1825 Saratoga Springs had accommodations for a thousand guests and the reputation of being "a mixture of society, politics, gaiety, and sin." Trenton Falls, north of Utica on the West Canada Creek, was on its way to becoming a resort of some renown. Vacationers at these playgrounds for the rich began making excursions into the wilderness. There they would find settlers at isolated lakes and mountaintops who would open their homes for overnight accommodations. Keen investors sensed in this activity another opportunity, and by 1875



Steamer at the docks

the remotest areas of the Adirondacks saw the construction of grand hotels. The few rustic inns and private homes of earlier years gave way to magnificent structures as plush and commodious as any urban establishment. A proliferation of railroads and guidebooks encouraged increasing numbers of tourists to visit Adirondack resorts. As a result, during the years between 1870 and 1914 the Adirondacks were among the most fashionable and popular resort regions of the nation — a time which many historians call the "Gilded Age" of the area's history.

Burdick's gracious camp

*"...the villages and farms are flawless, scaled-down representations, clean and white, disclosing nothing of the troubles within."
(Bernstein, The Sticks)*

The Wilderness Cure

The late 19th and early 20th Century brought the popularity of the Adirondack "wilderness cure." People suffering from tuberculosis and asthma discovered the curative qualities of fresh mountain air and sunshine. Soon they were visiting Adirondack resort hamlets for rest and recuperation. Foremost among these resorts was Saranac Lake where under the direction and work of Dr. Edward Trudeau research institutions to combat tuberculosis were established. Saranac Lake's world famous health industry was at its peak in 1922 when more than sixteen hundred new patients came to the village.

The Modern Era: Growth of Tourism

During the last fifty years a period of great change has occurred in the villages of the Adirondacks. Nothing has been more instrumental in this change than the automobile.

With the advent of automobile travel in the 1920's, the entire way of life in the Adirondack region changed. Farming activity decreased as goods became easily transported into the area from the outside. This led to a diminished level of self-sufficiency in the hamlets and villages. As changes occurred regionally, the patterns of travel and tourism of the American family changed nationally. Suddenly not just the wealthy, but thousands of middle class Americans could vacation in the Adirondacks. Auto campgrounds, tourist cabins, inns, and motels began dotting the Adirondack landscape. The more wealthy easterners, tired of the Adirondacks, abandoned the once great resort playgrounds and shifted their summer vacationing to Long Island and Cape Cod. Summer camps for children became a growing industry during this period.

An increased interest in winter sports led to the 1932 Winter Olympics held at Lake Placid. Events that year included nordic ski racing and jumping, speed skating, curling, and dogsledding. This scene was repeated at Lake Placid in 1980 with a much larger field of participants and events.



The mines at Tahawus

The Economy Struggles

During the 1920's the mining and lumbering industries continued to remain in the doldrums. Cheaper lumber and ore in the west made the Adirondack sources less and less economical to market, a problem compounded by the devastating economic depression of the 1930's. Although some of these mines and mills enjoyed a spurt of renewed activity during World War II, prosperity did not remain for long. By the late 1970's the only active mine in the entire Adirondack region was the titanium works operated by NL Industries at its Tahawus location. While lumbering operations are still present in the region, they too are at a less productive scale than fifty years ago.

What has become the "business" and the major economic base in the Adirondacks is the many-faceted industry called tourism. Skiing resorts, sailing regattas on Lake Champlain, and some of the earliest theme parks in the nation are among the attractions which have helped tourism evolve into a multi-million dollar business. In addition, the completion of the New York Northway to Montreal in the late 1960's continued to open up the region to millions of travelers. The resulting dependence on tourism has been both a blessing and a curse for many Adirondack communities.



The Winter Olympics in Lake Placid



The prison at Dannemora

Not only does this type of business tend to be very seasonal, but as one businessman lamented, it is also very unpredictable. "The entire economy of the business and thus of the region can be critically hurt by, say, a long January thaw, a rainy Fourth of July, or a snowless Christmas." (Bernstein)

The Last Decade

New York State has been a major institutional employer in the Adirondacks, including the tuberculosis hospital at Ray Brook, the correctional facility at Dannemora, starting in 1845, and more recently, the conversion of the Veterans Administration hospital in Tupper Lake, now the Sunmount Developmental Disability Service Office. The state Department of Corrections is considering additional development at Lyon Mountain. The State Police, Department of Health, Department of Environmental Conservation, and the Adirondack Park Agency all have major office and service facilities in the region. While state development has historically raised issues of local and regional concern, notably the establishment of additional correctional facilities, the State investment represents an important year-round employment factor.

The establishment of the Adirondack Park Agency in 1973 as a planning and regulatory agency presiding over new developments in the Adirondack Park is regarded as either a boon or problem to the region, depending with whom one talks. Regardless, the environmental regulations and directions for development dictated by the Agency will have an important influence on the evolution of Adirondack hamlets in the years to come.

In conclusion, an historic sketch of settlement in the Adirondacks provides a framework for understanding the region more fully. It is, however, only the first step in a more complete analysis of the settlements of the Adirondacks. In the following pages an analysis of the 135 Adirondack hamlets as they exist today takes place.