

Historic Saranac Lake, New York

A Brief History of Saranac Lake

Walk back in time

A self-guided walking tour of
historic downtown Saranac Lake



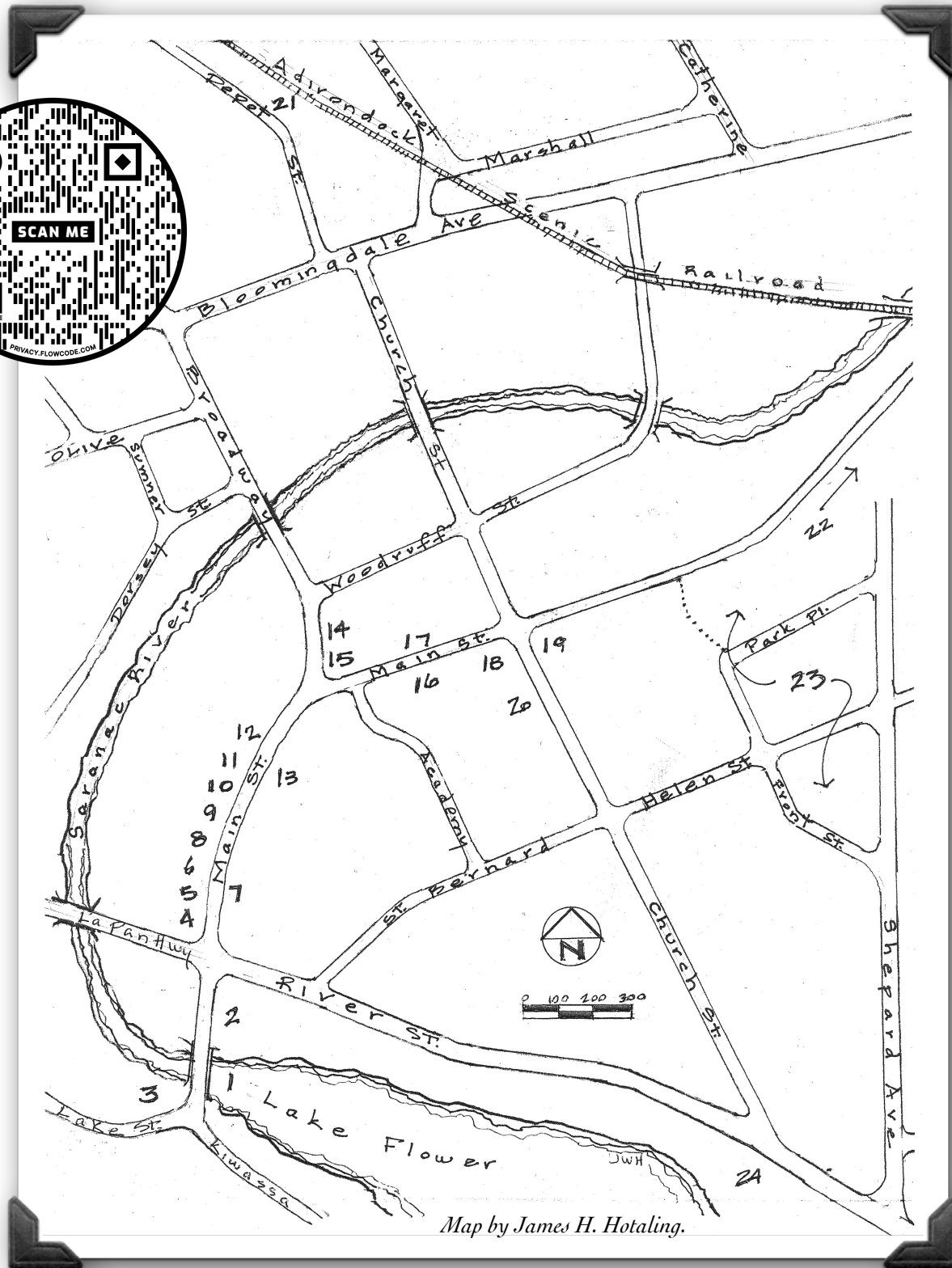
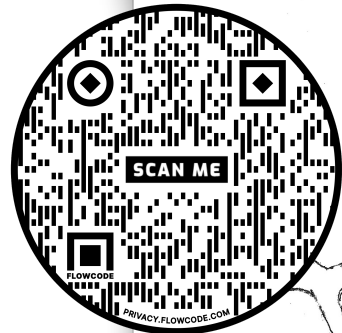
Set in a remote mountain valley, Saranac Lake offered land and seclusion to the pioneers who came to this area in the early 1800s to cut timber and farm. When guidebooks publicized Saranac Lake and the Adirondacks, wealthy city men came to hunt and fish, and hired local residents as skilled guides. Towards the end of the century, people began to come for their health, and a new industry was born.

In 1884, Dr. Edward L. Trudeau founded the first successful sanatorium in the U.S. for the treatment of tuberculosis, establishing a model of treatment based on the value of fresh air, rest, hygiene, good nutrition, and a positive outlook. Ten years later, Dr. Trudeau built the first laboratory in the country for the study of tuberculosis. For seventy years, Saranac Lake was known as a world-wide center for scientific research and patient care until the discovery of TB-killing antibiotics in the 1950s.

The downtown business district grew quickly to cater to TB patients and their families. Taxi operators, laundries, furriers, and pharmacies were in demand. Specialties such as cure chairs and hot water bottles called stone pigs were marketed to patients here.

The “cure” dominated Saranac Lake’s economy from 1884 to 1954, providing both employment and opportunities for entrepreneurs. The care of patients required many “cure cottages,” distinguished by porches, awnings, and overhanging trees. The construction industry boomed as a result. The vast majority of the town’s private sanatoria were run by women, providing a good livelihood for widows and unmarried women. Young people worked as tray boys and tray girls, carrying meals to the sicker, bedridden patients. By 1920 there were at least 166 cure cottages in Saranac Lake - and possibly many more.

With the advent of the antibiotic treatment for TB, Saranac Lake faced the need to reinvent itself. A world famous research facility, two colleges, a regional hospital, and recreational opportunities gave new life to the bustling village. Historic preservation efforts identified the distinctive “cure cottages” and promoted their restoration. Saranac Lake continues to look to the future while respecting its past.



Map by James H. Hotaling.



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Made possible, in part, by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature.

1. Lake Flower: The village started here, where the river was dammed to power a sawmill in 1827. The logs were sent down the river to Lake Champlain. The pond was renamed from “Mill Pond” to “Lake Flower” after NY Governor Flower, who authorized the funds to clear the lake of stumps.

2. Riverside Inn: This hotel stood where the park and bandshell are today. Mark Twain sat on the veranda during his visit in 1901. Many TB patients checked in here when they first came to town. It was torn



down in the mid-1930s.

3. Power and Light Building: Built by Paul Smith’s son, Phelps, in 1927, on the site of the town’s first electric company. A businessman and guide, Paul Smith built an elegant hotel on the site where Paul Smith’s College stands today. Paul Smith’s Hotel was the most fashionable of the many great Adirondack hotels.

4. Harrietstown Town Hall: The first town hall burned in the 1920s. Today’s tower is modeled on Philadelphia’s Independence Hall tower. Note the traffic light on the top. Legend says it was once used to alert village police to call in case of an emergency.

5. Tousley Building (Madden’s): Built with an elevator that fits two cars, it became an important storage facility that allegedly held the Crown Jewels of Luxembourg. It has a fur storage vault, and once held microfilm copies of valuable records of many major U.S. companies.

6. Milo Miller Store (Owl’s Nest Pizza): Built in 1867 by early resident Milo Miller, this is the oldest commercial structure in the village. The second empire style mansard roof can still be seen.

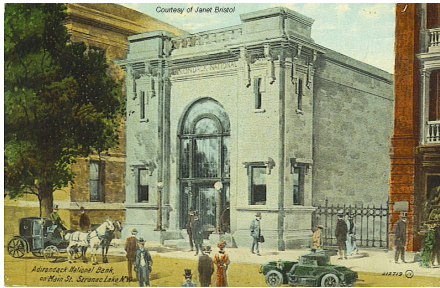
7. Charlie Green’s Store (Ampersound): Charlie Green came from England with TB, and like many others, stayed on after his cure. He ran this grocery store for over 60 years. One famous patron was Jack “Legs” Diamond, who ran liquor from Canada during prohibition. Legs’ brother Eddie cured in the village.

8. Post Office Pharmacy: This was the town’s first library building. Robert Louis Stevenson was a patron in the winter of 1887-8. It became a pharmacy in 1936, and was the last of the town’s nine original pharmacies when it closed in 2019.

9. Donaldson Block (China Jade): Owned by Alfred Donaldson, a banker, TB patient, and historian, who wrote the two volume *History of the Adirondacks*.

10. Haase Block (Adirondack Bank): Owned by the prominent Haase family. Mrs. Haase helped start the Village Improvement Society which founded many local parks, including the Riverwalk. She also sponsored a summer tent theater behind the building, where Rosalind Russell got her start in 1929.

11. Adirondack National Bank: The original facade (left) was covered by brick in 1963. It was built in 1906 on the site of guide Reuben Reynolds house, where Dr. Trudeau stayed when he first came to the village.

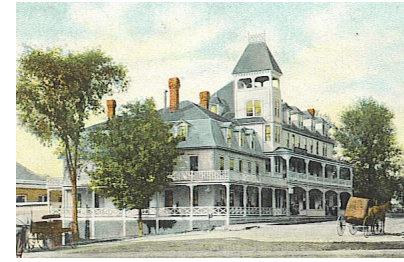


12. T.F. Finnigan’s: Once a candy store, it still has the original cabinetry and woodwork. In 1923, it was bought by T.F. Finnigan and opened as a clothing store. At one time there were ten independent clothing stores in downtown Saranac Lake. Finnigan’s is the only original one still in business.

13. Coulter Block (Liz Company): William Coulter was a master architect who came for the cure. He designed many of the greatest of the “Great Camps,” as well as this office block in 1899. Kollercker’s photography store was in one of the storefronts. The building to the left (Surgical Eye Care) once housed Leonard’s Department Store.

14. Pontiac Theater (Parking lot behind Berkeley Sq. park): During the boom years, the theater played to a full house nightly. It had, at one time, the largest screen in central NY and a \$12,000 organ. Al Jolson performed a benefit here. The world premiere of the 1954 film, *The Silver Chalice* was held here and was hosted by Art Linkletter. It was Paul Newman’s film debut. It burned down in 1978.

15. Berkeley Hotel (park with bandstand): Built in 1875 to house TB patients. It was expanded several times, but burned to the ground in 1981. U.S. President Benjamin Harrison stayed at the Berkeley in September of 1890



when he was in town to dedicate the new high school, where the Hotel Saranac stands today.

16. Hotel Saranac: Designed by local architects Scopes and Feustmann, the hotel was built in 1927 and is listed as an Historic Hotel of America by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. It was taken over by Paul Smith’s College in the 1960s. It boasts a grand ballroom on the second floor which served as the site of dances, wedding receptions, conferences, and other celebrations. It was thoughtfully restored and updated by Roedel Companies and reopened in January of 2018.

17. Saranac Lake Free Library: Founded in 1907, today the library houses an excellent local history collection in the Adirondack Room. Vest Pocket Park was once the site of the Study and Craft Guild, which provided occupational therapy, job training, and enrichment courses for TB patients and the community.

18. Dr. E.L. Trudeau House: Dr. Trudeau’s first house in the village was built on this site in 1884, but was destroyed by fire. This was his second home and the site of 3 generations of Trudeau Family medical practices. E.L. Trudeau’s great-grandson, Garry, is the creator of the comic strip *Doonesbury*. Historic Saranac Lake acquired the home in 2019 and will restore and reopen it as a museum in conjunction with the Saranac Laboratory.

19. Church of Saint Luke, the Beloved Physician: Saranac Lake’s first church, it was designed by architect R.M. Upjohn and built in 1878. The congregation held their first services in the Berkeley Hotel. Dr. Trudeau led the fund drive to complete it, and he served as treasurer and warden for 38 years.

20. Saranac Laboratory: Built in 1894, this was the first lab built in the US for the study of TB, designed by Dr. Trudeau’s cousin, J.L. Aspinwall. It is open to the public as a museum, operated by Historic Saranac Lake.

21. Union Depot: Built in 1904 by the D&H Railroad, the station was instrumental in Saranac Lake’s growth as a health resort. The depot handled 18-20 trains daily, and was the largest station on the line north of Utica.

22. Stevenson Cottage (44 Stevenson Lane): Author Robert Louis Stevenson spent the winter of 1887-88 in this cottage under the care of Dr. E.L. Trudeau. It is now operated as a museum. Call 518-891-1462 to visit.

23. Helen Hill Neighborhood (East of Church St.): The neighborhood with the greatest concentration of cure cottages. Look for the distinctive cure porches.

24. Martha Reben Marker: This marker commemorates the TB patient who sought her cure in the wilderness with local guide, Fred Rice. She is the acclaimed author of *The Healing Woods* and *The Way of the Wilderness*.

Other Sites of Interest

Trudeau Sanatorium Campus (East end of Park Ave.): Many of the grand houses on Park Ave. were built by wealthy families for a curing family member. At the end of the street is the former Trudeau Sanatorium. The property is *privately owned*, but the main road is open to drive through.

Little Red (Trudeau Institute, Algonquin Ave.): The first cure cottage at Trudeau Sanatorium, it was later moved to the Trudeau Institute as a memorial. Trudeau Institute is a *private property*. Call Historic Saranac Lake to arrange a tour.

Bartok Cabin (58 Riverside Dr.): The great composer Béla Bartók spent the last summer of his life here. The cabin is on *private property*, located behind a *private home*. Call Historic Saranac Lake to schedule a tour.

Pine Ridge Cemetery (Off Lake Flower Ave.): A microcosm of the history of Saranac Lake from its earliest settlement, through the village’s busy years as a health resort, to the present day.

Will Rogers (78 Will Rogers Dr.): Once a sanatorium for the vaudeville industry, it has been restored to serve as a senior living community. Call 518-304-5011 to schedule a tour.