

Preserving our Historic Downtown

by Amy Catania and Libby Clark

This is the last of a series of articles by Historic Saranac Lake for the Adirondack Daily Enterprise on the topic of architectural preservation.

Historic Saranac Lake has worked since 1980 to preserve the architecture and history of our community, from Union Depot to the Saranac Laboratory, to the many cure cottages that we have nominated to the National Register. While we care for the history of the whole community, we believe that the part of Saranac Lake that really deserves the most attention is our historic downtown. The downtown district is the economic and cultural heart of our community. Our survival as a unique and close-knit community hinges in part on the degree to which we care for our downtown buildings and cherish the stories that they contain.

It is easy to pass through town without thinking twice about the stories behind the old buildings. When we do stop to think about downtown, we are likely to notice things that need fixing. Downtown Saranac Lake isn't perfect. It isn't as fancy as Saratoga Springs or as busy with tourists as Lake Placid. But we can be proud that we have a real downtown with mostly full storefronts and historic buildings, many which have been well cared for over the years. Downtown businesses include numerous thriving art galleries, an independent family-run pharmacy, new biotech businesses, excellent restaurants, and a community-owned store. The downtown district is increasingly a popular destination for tourists eager to experience a real, historic downtown.

In order to help shine a light on our historic downtown, we recently published a new self-guided walking tour brochure titled, "Walk Back in Time." Published in collaboration with the Saranac Lake Area Chamber of Commerce, the brochure features a hand-illustrated map by Jim Hotaling that highlights 24 sites in the immediate downtown area.

The tour begins where the village began, at the Lake Flower dam, where the river was dammed to power a sawmill in 1827. The pond was renamed from "Mill Pond" to "Lake Flower" after NY Governor Flower, who gave the money to clear the lake of stumps. The Riverside Inn once stood where the bandshell stands today. Mark Twain sometimes sat on the veranda during his visit in 1901. It served as a place for TB patients to check into when they came to town. Nearby is the Power and Light Building, built by Paul Smith's son, Phelps, in 1927, on the site of the town's first electric company.

Beginning the walk up Main Street, you see the Harrietstown Town Hall, whose tower is modeled on Philadelphia's Independence Hall tower. Note the traffic light on the top, which was once used to alert village police to call in case of an emergency. One of the most fascinating buildings in town is the Tousley Building, home of Madden's storage. Built with an elevator that fits two cars, this was an important early storage facility that at one time held the Crown Jewels of Luxembourg. It has a fur storage vault, and once held copies of valuable records of many major U.S. companies.

Continuing down Main Street, you come to the Owl's Nest. Once known as Milo Miller's Store, this is the oldest commercial structure in the village, built in 1867. Across the street, the Artist's Guild building was once Green's Market. 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 patron was Jack "Legs" Diamond, who ran liquor from Canada during prohibition.

The Post Office Pharmacy is a gem of Main Street. This was the town's first library building. Robert Louis Stevenson was a patron in the winter of 1887-88. It became a pharmacy in 1936, and is the last of the town's nine original pharmacies. The large Adirondack Bank building was owned by the prominent

Hasse family. Mrs. Haase helped start the Village Improvement Society which founded many local parks, including the Riverwalk. She sponsored a summer tent theater behind the building, where Rosalind Russell got her start in 1929.

The well-known T.F. Finnigan's, is another architectural wonder. Once a candy store, it still has the original cabinetry and woodwork. In 1923, it was bought by T.F. Finnigan and it is operated by his grandson today. At one time there were ten independent clothing stores in business in downtown Saranac Lake. Finnigan's is the only original one still in business.

Main Street turns right at the Berkeley Green, once the site of the Berkeley Hotel. Built in 1875 to take 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.

These are just some of the many historic sites in downtown Saranac Lake featured on the new walking tour brochure. Brochures are available at the Chamber of Commerce Visitors Information Center or at the Saranac Laboratory Museum, or find the brochure online at www.historicsaranaclake.org/events.html. We encourage you to pick one up today, take a walk back in time, and get to know old downtown Saranac Lake in a new way.



Courtesy of Priscilla Christine Mackay Goss

Image courtesy of Priscilla Goss.