

EARLY HISTORY OF THE TOWN OF WEBB

(Reprinted with permission from the Town of Webb Comprehensive Plan, June 2002)

In 1792, Alexander McComb purchased one of the first series of land patents granted in northern New York State following the American Revolution. The vast two million-acre wilderness was virtually unexplored except by Native Americans and white fur traders.

John Brown, a successful Providence, Rhode Island importer, acquired nearly 210,000 acres of property in McComb's Purchase in 1798. Brown hired surveyors who were the first to map the region and divide the Tract into eight townships. To encourage settlers to buy land, Brown built a dam on the middle branch of the Moose River, a gristmill, and a sawmill.

Following John Brown's death in 1803, his son-in-law, Charles Frederick Herreshoff, tried his hand at settling the Tract. He cleared over 2,000 acres for farming and commissioned a 17-mile bumpy wagon trail southwest of the settlement into Oneida County. The "Brown's Tract Road" became the primary access route into the region for the next seventy years. Near the site of his substantial manor house, Herreshoff mined iron ore and built a forge near the dam. The climate was too harsh for farming and the ore of poor quality and too expensive to process. Deeply in debt, he took his own life in December of 1819, but the settlement was from then on known as the "forge" and eventually the hamlet of Old Forge. The series of eight lakes within the Middle Branch of the Moose River were named the "Fulton Chain of Lakes" in honor of Robert Fulton who surveyed the region in 1811.

The first family to establish an enduring tradition of hostelry in the region was that of Otis Arnold from Boonville. They moved into the old Herreshoff manor without benefit of deed or title in 1837. The Arnolds raised twelve children and boarded travelers until Otis's death in 1868. Family members later discovered Otis's life savings of \$10,000 in an old trunk in the attic. Providing shelter to itinerant trappers, guides, and sportsmen appeared to be a worthwhile endeavor.



Herreshoff Manor - Fulton Chain

The Brown family descendants were finally divested of their lands in the Tract by the mid-19th century. The largest new landowner was Lyman R. Lyon of Lewis County who made his fortune in the tannery and lumbering businesses. Following the Civil War, a new era of growth and prosperity swept across the country. The Adirondack Mountains provided a healthy respite from the hectic pace of disease-ridden cities. A number of wealthy industrialists built "Great Camp" retreats and hired local craftsmen, carpenters, cooks, caretakers, and guides.

Brown's Tract Guides attained legendary reputations beyond the Park for their knowledge of the woodlands and ability to track game. Among their clients were former Presidents Benjamin Harrison, William McKinley, Teddy Roosevelt, Grover Cleveland, Warren Harding, and a long list of other notables from all over the country. Off-season, these hardy forefathers built permanent structures - many later became world-famous rustic hotel retreats. They banded together to help each other on construction projects, school their children, establish the region's first churches and share each other's joys and hardships. Before the turn of the century, they formed the Brown's Tract Guides Association and fought collectively and nobly for better wages, conservation of natural resources and the integrity of their profession.



Adirondack Guide

Fishing and hunting clubs purchased large tracts of land. In August of 1890, a group of influential men acquired more than 100,000 acres in Townships 2, 5, 6, 7, and 8 in Brown's Tract and formed the Adirondack League Club. The Club's purpose, as stated in Article II of their constitution was threefold:

- preservation and conservation of the Adirondack forests and the proper protection of game and fish in the Adirondack region;
- establishment and promotion of an improved system of forestry;
- maintenance of an ample preserve for the benefit of its members for the purposes of hunting, fishing, rest and recreation.

The construction of the Mohawk Railroad by Dr. William Seward Webb in 1891-1892 through the heart of the Adirondacks remains, even today, an epic achievement in the history of American railroading. Cold, hungry, bone-weary travelers no longer emerged from the woods from the Brown's Tract Road looking for "Arnold's Place". Hotels and boarding houses sprang up all along the railroad corridor and Fulton Chain of Lakes. As many as eight to ten trains a day brought passengers to the rustic mountain stations during the peak summer season. The railroad hired engineers, trackmen, and ticket agents. The logging companies now had access to thousands of acres of virgin timber.

New mills sprang up to meet the building demands and employed hundreds of people.



Dr. William Seward Webb

In 1896, the northern-most township in Herkimer County, the Town of Wilmurt, was divided and renamed Town of Webb in honor of Dr. William Seward Webb. High priority was given to building schools and improving transportation, particularly roads, within the township. In 1903, the hamlet of Old Forge incorporated as a village and faced the daunting tasks of providing water, sewer, fire, police, street lighting and maintenance, electricity and even a health officer

for its nearly 200 residents. A great deal was accomplished, but the incorporated village debt reached \$100,000 by the early 1930's and village government was dissolved in 1934.

At the beginning of the 20th Century, large tracts of land were sub-divided into small parcels and purchased primarily by seasonal property owners. William Thistlethwaite's Adirondack Development Corporation sold off hundreds of lots along the north shore of the Fulton Chain, in the Big Moose region, at Rondaxe Lake, and in the hamlet of the Old Forge. The Gawanka Corporation, formed by Lyon deCamp, a descendent of Lyman Lyon, developed the Okara Lakes and Hollywood Hills regions. Howard G. Weller sub-divided his property in Eagle Bay, put in a water system and created Eagle Bay Park. Creative marketing plans brought thousands of new buyers into Webb, though many of these land transactions failed during the depression years.

Struggling to find new ways to boost the local economy in the 1930's, the residents made a concerted effort to expand the tourism industry beyond the traditional summer season. The Town government, in partnership with civic organizations such as the Central Adirondack Hotel Association and The Winter Sports Association, leased lands around the hamlet of Old Forge to develop winter recreational opportunities. To encourage tourism, voters supported proposals to acquire and develop the McCauley Mt. Ski Center in the 1950's and to fund the Town of Webb Health Center. Residents "still cling to a fine old heritage which descends from their woodsmen founders -- that of a quick, unselfish cooperation in every wholesome local enterprise and a considerate interest in the well being of its individual members," wrote Joseph Grady in 1933, former publicity director for the Town of Webb. The same principles continue to guide Webb's citizens today as they face new challenges for the township in the 21st Century.