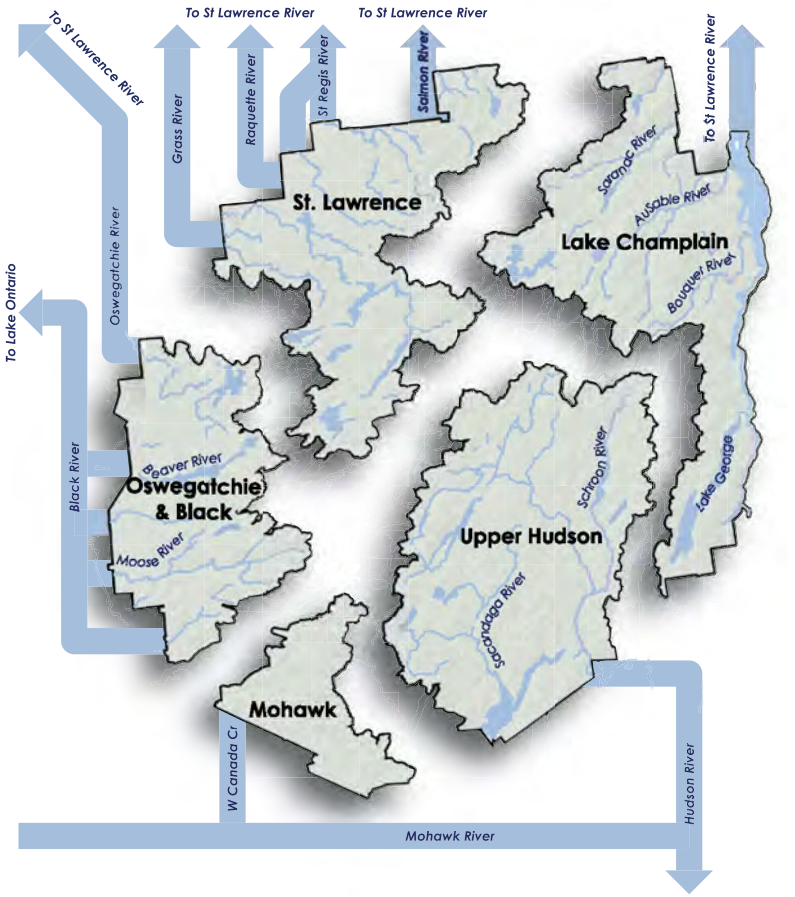
Settlement in the Adirondacks

The shortest, oft-repeated version of the development of the Adirondacks divides it into two sequential periods: first, the exploitation of the region's natural resources; and second, tourism. While this is largely true, the stories and patterns of permanent settlement in the regions now comprising the Adirondack Park are more complicated, and more interesting. In the Adirondacks, geography is destiny. It determined settlement patterns; consequently, different parts of the Park developed at different times in different ways, for different reasons. This shapes both the distinctive characteristics of place in the Adirondacks and its architecture.

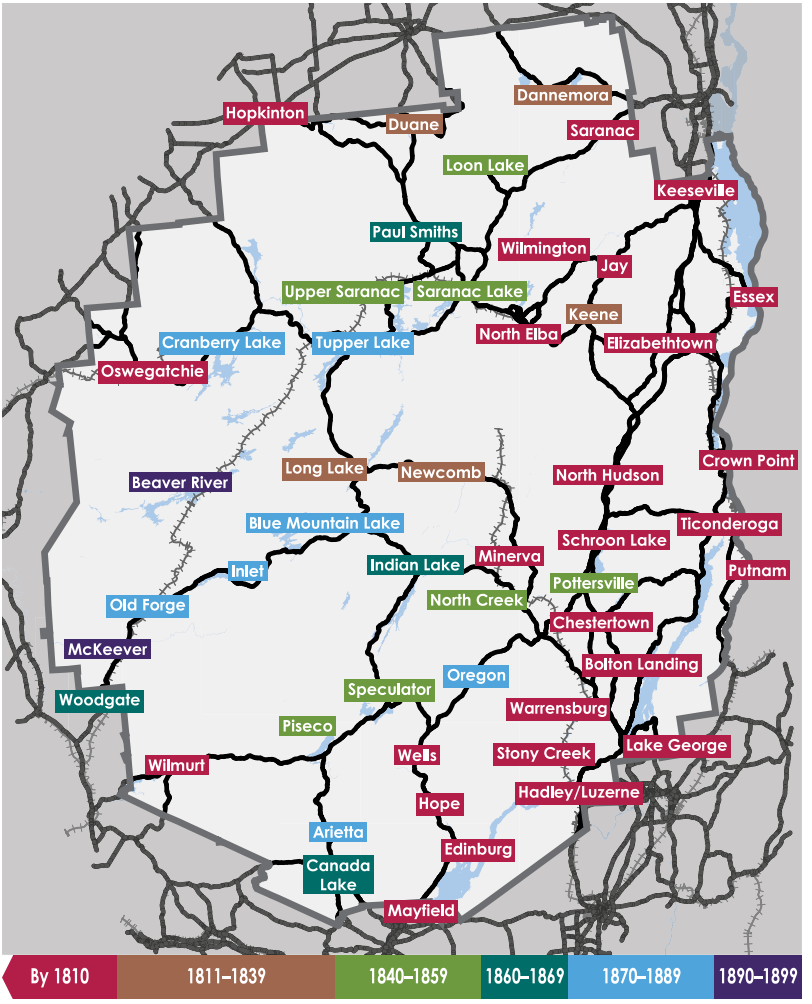
The flatter areas and foothills on all sides of what became the Adirondack Park were naturally settled first, starting around Lake Champlain and Lake George in the mid-18th century. Soon after the American Revolution, migration from the Mohawk Valley moved into the river valleys in the southern Adirondacks. By contrast, the bulk of the Adirondacks is characterized by higher elevations and mountains covered, at that time, by dense forest that was barely interrupted by streams, rivers, and lakes. The region is roughly shaped like a dome, with water flowing down from the top in all directions, eventually reaching either the St. Lawrence or the Hudson River. Much of the interior was still labeled as empty "wilderness" on mid 1800s maps and the region was not even surveyed until the 1870s. But settlers began to penetrate the interior by the 1820s. Their paths generally



Watersheds of the Adirondacks

followed the rivers. The easiest travel paths were along the waterways, the best farmland lay along the banks, and the water provided power for the mills of nascent communities and industries.

For 200 years after Champlain's "discovery" of Lake Champlain in 1609 the Champlain Valley was a crucial trade route as well as a frequent battleground. The primary early commodities were furs, traded south by the Iroquois to Albany; and lumber and potash, exported to Europe via Canada. The Iroquois used the Adirondacks as hunting grounds but no permanent Native American settlements in the region are known. The value of trade in the Adirondacks and the Champlain Valley translated directly into strategic importance, giving rise to persistent conflict. Native Americans fought each other over the fur trade; then in the 1700s the French and Indians fought the British for control of the Champlain Valley in a series of wars. French forts at Crown Point and Ticonderoga were lost to the British, and subsequently lost to the American colonists during key battles of the War for Independence fought over the same territory. The conclusion of the Revolution finally brought enough stability for settlement.



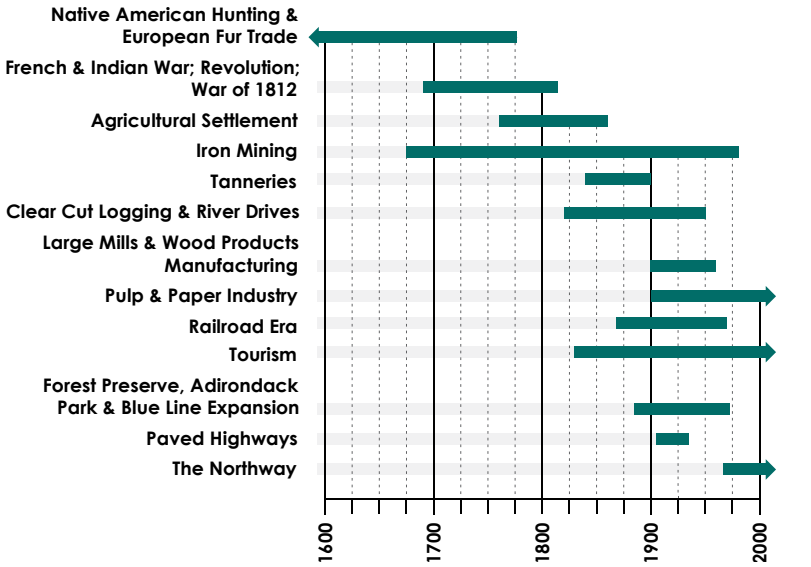
Periods of Adirondack Settlement

By 1810 the eastern section of the Adirondacks (coinciding roughly with the area currently east of the Northway) was mostly cleared and farmed, and the current communities established. After the Hudson River, Lake Champlain was the second body of water traversed by regular steamboat service (1809), facilitating commerce and an influx of settlers and visitors. Following the Revolution, farmland was also cleared and settled in the river valleys of the Hudson and Sacandaga in the south and the Saranac and Ausable in the northeast. Collectively, these areas proved to be the viable limits of commercial agriculture in the Adirondacks. Nutrient-poor soils and a very short growing season led settlers who tried farming other areas to abandon it as soon as an alternative livelihood became available, or simply to decamp to the Midwest via the Erie Canal.

The first public "roads" in the Adirondack interior opened during or soon after the Revolution. Though essentially tracks through the woods, they were the first viable land routes through the interior. The Albany Road was the earliest route to cross the entire Adirondack region, running from southeast to northwest, and thence connecting to roads to Canada. The "Old Military Road" from Crown Point also ran northwest and it enabled the establishment of iron mining and an early farming community at North Elba (Lake Placid).

A major legacy of the War for Independence was massive land transfers that virtually gave away the wilderness. The state had gained ownership of the British Crown lands in New York, and wanted to sell it all, to generate both revenue and development. It owned seven million acres in northern New York alone, including the vast majority of the Adirondacks. Absentee owners bought enormous tracts at miniscule prices on speculation. For example, the Totten and Crossfield Patent in the central Adirondacks was 800,000 acres, and the largest, the Macomb Purchase, was more than 3,600,000 acres, including most of the western and northern Adirondacks. Over the following century and more, land deals and defaults, legislative actions, reselling, and subdividing complicated Adirondack settlement and left a Byzantine puzzle of ownership. This convoluted history is echoed even today. For example, in a continuing conundrum over clear titles for a number of "owners" on Raquette Lake, already requiring a statewide referendum to simply authorize negotiations.

Tax sales of state land from 1857–81 gave businessmen the opportunity to buy large tracts for logging and tannery operations, as well as land speculation, proposed railroads, and private preserves. After the land was logged of softwood lumber or the hemlock for the tannery was depleted (usually all hemlock within about 20 miles of a tannery), nonresident owners often simply stopped



Timeline of Adirondack Periods and Formative Factors in Development

paying taxes on the "useless" land and it reverted back to the state. Eventually the state could not sell all the reverted land and it became the core of the Forest Preserve when established in 1885. By intent, the Forest Preserve itself was essentially a land bank to ensure a reliable future source of timber and water from the Adirondacks for New York industries.

Either mining or tanning typically drove the formation of settlements in the Adirondack interior. The iron industry was the dominant industry in the Adirondacks before logging surpassed it, and many new communities in the east and northwest were born around mines. Growing since the Revolution, by 1860 the mining industry was the largest employer in the eastern Adirondacks and one of the largest producers of iron in the country. Also, nationally significant quantities of garnet were mined around Gore Mountain and graphite along Lake George, the latter giving rise to the famous yellow Ticonderoga pencil. While most small mining operations were eclipsed by new technologies and by other areas of the country as the railroads spread westward, major mining continued at a handful of Adirondack sites through most of the 20th century: Benson Mines (iron ore until 1978), Mineville Port Henry (iron ore until 1971), and Tahawus (titanium until 1982). The Tahawus mines were so important as the only major domestic source of titanium oxide during World War II that the U.S. government paid for a new railroad line to the mines from the existing terminus at North Creek. The NYCO Minerals wollastonite mine in Willsboro (1943–) and Barton Mines garnet mine (1878–) at North River are still significant operations.

Logging evolved through phases in the Adirondacks, with varying effects on settlement, and it continues today. The first commercial scale logging began with state legislation around 1825 that designated the Hudson River as navigable and regulated the floating of logs on the river. This meant that the Hudson, and subsequently parts of other Adirondack rivers, became public highways for the purpose of transporting logs. Logging quickly moved up the Hudson, reaching the geographic center of the Adirondacks in the Newcomb area by 1850. Most logs cut in the Hudson River watershed were floated down to the "big boom" that corralled logs above the sawmills in Glens Falls, where many of the timber barons actually lived. Much lumber also continued to be milled and used locally. In general, softwood lumber was cut for construction use in the south central and western regions, and hardwoods in the northeast were logged to make charcoal for the iron furnaces. Cutting timber by hand was a hard job, but driving logs on the rivers was one of the most dangerous jobs imaginable (note the men with spikes in the photo of the log jam). Early commercial scale logging was a transient activity with a largely transient workforce. The industry moved across the landscape and did not generate new settlements, but the tanning industry did.

Breaking a log jam below a dam on the Raquette River, c. 1880, attrib. Seneca Ray Stoddard

Tanning hides for leather in the 19th century required huge amounts of tannin-rich hemlock bark and a river or stream for water power, both plentiful in the Adirondacks. Between the 1840s and the 1890s numerous commercial tanneries were established, primarily in the south and southeast, each consisting of a small village of tannery buildings, houses and boarding houses, and perhaps a schoolhouse for workers' children. A tannery employed from a few dozen to a few hundred workers cutting trees and tanning hides. When the available hemlock was depleted the tannery closed and

some communities vanished. But quite a few current communities in these regions of the Adirondack owe their founding or their early growth to tanneries, including Warrensburg and Chestertown.

The 1850 opening of the Black River Canal, connecting to the Erie Canal, shifted the most extensive logging to the western Adirondacks. By the late 1800s, the railroads became the most efficient and economical way to ship logs out of the Adirondacks and the scale of logging increased dramatically. Private rail lines and whole communities were built for the express purpose of harvesting extensive tracts of timber in as efficient a manner and in as short a time as possible; the Rich Lumber Company town of Wanakena is one example. When the Park was created in 1892 at least two thirds of the western Adirondacks had already been logged at least once. The final growth phase of Adirondack lumbering was the pulp and paper industry, which both developed and waned in the span of the 20th century. The manufacturing of wood products was also a part of this phase. Communities as diverse as Tupper Lake, Corinth, and McKeever boomed and declined along with these industries.

The most valuable and reliable natural resource in the Adirondacks over time has been water, both for local development and for export. Streams and rivers were first dammed for local sawmills, gristmills, and tanneries. New York State then built larger dams for impounding more water to ensure and control water flow for floating logs, for downstream industries, and for the use of the Erie Canal. One result of the extensive impoundments was an unanticipated benefit for recreation and tourism in the Park—many more miles of lakefront. According to *The Adirondack Atlas*, 23 of the 55 most visited or most settled lakes in the Park were either created or substantially enlarged by dams.

Lake George is one of the premier natural lakes. Thomas Jefferson wrote about its beauty in 1791, and by the 1820s the lake was established as an accessible tourist destination, mostly for excursions. Taverns housing guests were joined by hotels in the mid 1800s. After the railroad arrived, hundreds of tourist rooms were built along the lakeshore, alongside private cottages and summer estates. When a paved road was completed along the length of the western shore in the 1920s, many more short-term vacationers arrived, along with accommodations for them. A similar scenario unfolded, with variations, in many Adirondack communities, though slightly later and with smaller numbers of visitors than Lake George. In the interior especially, tourism began later and developed concurrently (not sequentially) with industry. Small camps and clubs for individual hunters and fishermen were some of the earliest buildings, such as the Piseco Lake Trout Club (1842) and Paul Smith's Hunter's Home camp near Chestertown (1852). A few groups of sportsmen, artists, and others also began taking extended excursions into the Adirondack interior before the Civil War, most famously a group of Harvard academics who camped at Follansby Pond in 1858, an event that became known as the Philosopher's Camp. Tourism stamped its physical presence on most of the Adirondacks after the Civil War, greatly accelerated by three developments:

- The resale of former mining, timber, tannery, and railroad land tracts for speculative or other private development
- The publication of numerous personal accounts of the delights and health benefits of a sojourn in the Adirondacks, and
- The connection of Adirondack communities by rail service to the main trunk railroads in the state

Improving the road to Indian Lake, 1924

By the early 20th century the map of Adirondack communities stood essentially as it is today—with the exception of those communities impacted by the two largest man-made developments in the Adirondacks, the Great Sacandaga Lake (1930) and the Northway (1967).

When exploring the communities and architecture of the Adirondacks, the patterns and purposes behind settlement—why people went where they did and how the characteristics of place developed—may not be readily apparent on the ground. Modern roads do not always trace historical development. For example, it seems natural today to drive New York Route 28 all the way through the Park, but historically there was a travel route (including steamboats) from the east that terminated at Raquette Lake and a separate route from the west that ended on the Fulton Chain of Lakes. Driving through on paved roads only became possible in 1930. At the same time, historical and architectural connections between places that once existed may now be severed due to the demise of steamboat or rail travel, or disconnects caused by the Forest Preserve or the Northway. But if one starts with a bird's eye view of Adirondack geography, and considers also Adirondack settlement through time as well as space, then the settlement patterns of the Adirondacks—and the related architecture—will become clearer.

Sources:

Jerry Jenkins with Andy Keal, *The Adirondack Atlas, A Geographic Portrait of the Adirondack Park*, Syracuse University Press, the Adirondack Museum and the Wildlife Conservation Society, 2004

Argus Architecture & Preservation, *Lake Champlain Basin Cultural Resources Planning Needs Assessment*, 1995, The Lake Champlain Basin Program

Barbara McMartin, *The Privately Owned Adirondacks*, Lake View Press, 2004

Image credits:

Courtesy of Chapman Historical Museum: Breaking a log jam below a dam on the Raquette River, c. 1880

Courtesy of Hamilton County Historian: Improving the Road to Indian Lake, 1924

Tour Maps:

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