

Touring historic Newman

by Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, October 22, 2004

NEWMAN — Newman? Where the heck is *Newman*?

Surprise, surprise: Newman is right here.

For many years, Newman was the name used for the lower section of Lake Placid — the section where the Lake Placid News currently makes its home.

Centered around Mill Pond, Newman and its early industries were crucial to the development of the village that came to be known as Lake Placid, and before that to the settlement of North Elba.

Mary MacKenzie, the late local historian, did the groundbreaking research that unearthed the complete story of Newman, from the first decade of North Elba's settlement at the beginning of the 19th century, through the demise of the Newman Post Office in December 1936.

Using MacKenzie's research, we've put together a historic walking-and-driving tour of Newman that may lend a new perspective to your understanding of Lake Placid.

The 'Newman' name

The very first homestead of the First Colony established at

North Elba was located in Newman. The town's original settler, Elijah Bennet, built his home near Mill Pond in 1800.

The area did not come to be called Newman, however, until 1891.

A post office for the growing village of Lake Placid was established at a site on Mirror Lake in 1883, but it was quite a walk for the daily mail from there to the lower village. Residents of the lower village put together a peti-

tion to the U.S. Postmaster General, asking that a second post office be established.

Fortunately for them, gentlewoman farmer Anna Newman had grown up with the Postmaster General. Newman, who came to Heaven Hill Farm in 1872 from Philadelphia, penned a note of support for the new post office that was included with the petition.

"The response was immediate," MacKenzie wrote. "By 1891, the lower end of the village had its own post office, bearing the name 'Newman' in honor of Anna.

"It was only a matter of time before the entire area came to be called Newman, as though it were a separate village."

1) Power Pond dam

The first stop on our tour of Newman is at the Power Pond dam, just above the village's



The fountain at Mill Pond, the heart of old Newman in Lake Placid.

electric plant.

To get there, drive 1.5 miles down Sentinel Road from the traffic light at Main Street. Turn left on Power House Lane. Cross the bridge at the bottom, and park at the pulloff on the right.

Standing at the bridge, looking upstream on the Chubb River, you will see the Power Pond dam from which the village Electric Department gets its power. That dam was built at the same site as the very first dam built in North Elba, in 1809.

That first dam provided mechanical power for the small industrial complex associated with the Elba Iron Works, located below the dam and just across the bridge from where you've parked. Two forges, a sawmill and a grist mill were among the operations here between 1809 and 1817.

The Elba Iron Works faced two challenges. First, the ore from its Cascade Lakes mine was contaminated with pyrite, making it necessary to haul high-quality ore in from Clintonville, nearly 30 miles away. In 1814 a new road was cleared over the Sentinel mountain range, connecting North Elba to Wilmington, a dozen miles downstream on the River Sable.

Just two years later, however, a climatological disaster struck the young settlement. Ash from a tremendous volcanic explosion in the South Pacific spread through the atmosphere, drastically reducing the amount of sunlight reaching the Earth in northern New York and New England. The year 1816 became known as "the



The Lake Placid railroad station.

year without a summer," when snow fell in every month of the year. Almost all of the farmers in North Elba abandoned the settlement to avoid starvation.

The following year, the Elba Iron Works shut down, too.

If you stand in the pine grove planted in 1940 on the foundry's former site, and kick your toe into the duff, you may discover something the Iron Works left behind two centuries ago: a chunk of "scoria," or iron-ore tailings, looking like a reddish piece of hardened, bubbly lava.

2) Railroad depot

To get to our next stop, go back out to Sentinel Road, turn right, and drive about a mile to the intersection of Station Street, just before the Chubb River bridge. Turn left. Park at the railroad station, just past the first intersection.

The railroad finally made its way to Lake Placid in 1893, but it was 10 years before the as-yet-

unincorporated village got its own depot. The train station has not been altered in any significant way since it opened in 1903, although commercial rail service ended more than 30 years ago. In 1967, the building was acquired for the Lake Placid-North Elba Historical Society, which now houses its museum there. The new Adirondack Scenic Railway also uses the depot for one end of its tourist-train service between Lake Placid and Saranac Lake, 11 miles away.

3) Hurley Brothers

Next to the railroad depot is Hurley Brothers. Today the business delivers fuel oil to heat North Country homes, but when the building was erected in 1909, the three original Hurley Brothers were dealers in grain, hay, wood and coal. The building that stands there today is essentially unchanged; the enormous coal and grain silos built next to it in 1916, however, were razed in 1975.

4) American House site

Across the street from the railroad station and Hurley Brothers is a utilitarian, warehouse-type building covered in corrugated metal. The Lake Placid store of the Hulbert Supply Co. stands on the site of the old American House hotel.

The American House was built by the three Hurley brothers across from the end of the railroad line around 1893, within a few months after train service had been introduced to Lake Placid. It was “a substantial three-story hotel of 30 rooms,” MacKenzie wrote. “Catering to summer visitors, [the Hurleys] often fed 180 guests at a time and lodged 40.” The building “was gutted by fire in the early 1940s and was torn down.”

Standing behind Hulbert Supply is the last vestige of the American House: its former stable, once the headquarters of the

Lake Placid Trotting Association, which sponsored popular winter-time horse races on Mirror Lake in the early 20th century.

5) Mill Pond

Just down the block from the American House site is Mill Pond. Just as the early Chubb River dam at Power Pond was the industrial heart of the first North Elba settlement, so the second dam above it, built in 1855, helped drive the development of what would become the village of Lake Placid. A sawmill stood on the north side of the original wooden dam; later, across the stream, another mill for shingles and lath was built.

The first dam held until 1974, when it washed out. Rebuilt with funds raised by a community group led by MacKenzie, among others, the second dam was washed out in 1998 by high spring floods carrying much

debris from that winter’s disastrous ice storm. The dam was rebuilt yet again in 1999, this time by the village of Lake Placid. The “millhouse” on the north end of the dam is a storehouse for maintenance supplies for the nearby park.

6) Opera House

On the corner of Station Street and Sentinel Road, just downstream from Mill Pond, stands Lisa G’s restaurant, originally built in 1895 as the White Opera House building. The top story, reached by an outside staircase, had a large hall with a stage and space for an audience of 500. On the lower floors (there were three, originally) were a hardware store and a butcher shop.

7) General Store

Across Station Street from Lisa G’s is the newly remodeled and renamed Station Street bar and grill, formerly styled The Handlebar. The building was originally a general store, built in July 1886 by George White. When the Newman Post Office was first opened in 1891, it was located in Mr. White’s store.

8) Newman Post Office

Just one block up Sentinel Road from Station Street, across River Street from the IGA grocery, now stands the Downhill Grill. In earlier days, this building served as the Newman Post Office, from 1915 until the office was closed in December 1936. Before 1915, the building held Hattie Slater’s millinery store. It once played a prominent role as the bank in one of the many “wild



The Station Street bar and grill was built in July 1886 by George White as a general store. When Newman was given a post office in 1891, this is where it was located.



The Newman Opera House, built in 1895 by George White, now a restaurant.

west” silent films shot in Lake Placid during the early 1920s.

9) Lake Placid Synagogue

Going farther up Sentinel Road, up Mill Hill, we find on our left a gray two-story house set a few yards back from the sidewalk. Believe it or not, when this house was built in 1903, it was Lake Placid’s first synagogue, which served the area’s Jewish community for nearly six decades. Eddie Cantor and Sophie Tucker gave a benefit in 1930 in Lake Placid to raise funds for the house of worship. It was closed in 1959 when the new synagogue was completed on Saranac Avenue.

10) Lake Placid News

Next door to the old synagogue stands the red, two-story frame building where the Lake Placid News has made its home since 1975. The rear half of the building was erected in the 1890s, and for many years served

as Pete McCollum’s harness shop. An addition was later tacked on the front.

11) Lyon’s Inn (North Elba House; Stagecoach Inn)

Go back down to the train station, get in your car, and drive on Station Street to the corner of Old Military Road. Turn left. On your right-hand side, past the modern school building on your left, you will see the broad porch and arrayed dormers of the 1½-story Stagecoach Inn. Two or three years ago an attic fire swept through the inn, putting it out of commission.

The core of this building was once thought to be Iddo Osgood’s Inn, first built no later than 1833. Mary MacKenzie’s research, however, convinced her by 1995 that this was definitely not Osgood’s, but a completely different hostelry: Lyon’s Inn, also known as North Elba House.

The confusion arose from the fact that both inns stood on land

originally owned by Elba pioneer Iddo Osgood. Osgood sold that land to Earl Avery in 1851, and Martin Lyon bought it from Avery in 1864.

Lyon expanded one of the houses on the former Osgood land, turning it into the North Elba House — but not the house that had served as Osgood’s Inn, according to Martin’s grandson Henry Lyon. Henry remembered the Osgood buildings standing to the east of his grandfather’s inn — and he remembered that they were demolished early in the 20th century. The house that became the original part of Lyon’s Inn is shown on an 1858 map on Avery’s land, but it is possible that the house had already been built when Osgood sold the land to Avery in 1851. It is not possible to date the initial construction of Lyon’s Inn any more precisely than that at present.

Lyon’s Inn housed the North Elba post office and was the premiere gathering place for the settlement for many years.

12) Heaven Hill Farm/ Anna Newman house

Continue driving east on Old Military Road until you reach Bear Cub Road. Turn right. Go a couple of miles down this country road, until you see the sign for Heaven Hill Farm on your right.

The core of the greatly expanded and altered home currently standing at the end of the long, long driveway was built in the 1840s by Horatio Hinckley, a farmer who came to North Elba from Lewis, another township in Essex County. It is thought to be

the oldest building still standing in the town of North Elba.

The house and farm were purchased in 1875 by Anna Newman, “a wealthy, benevolent and extremely eccentric Philadelphian,” MacKenzie wrote, “who fell in love with the Adirondacks, made North Elba her home until her death in 1915, and became one of the town’s chief benefactors.”

13) Old White Church

Heading back down Bear Cub Road, make a right on Old Military Road. After driving 0.4 miles, look carefully on your left for the private lane that runs between the Jewish cemetery and the North Elba Cemetery, for that is the drive down which the town’s oldest church, known affectionately as the “Old White Church,” was relocated in the 1990s.

The North Elba Union Church was completed in 1875. Just 10 years later, however, the Baptists and Methodists that had formed the “Union” separated, each congregation building their own churches in Lake Placid. Anna Newman paid to keep the White Church open and maintained until her death in 1915. It stood empty until 1930, when the local Grange bought it, removing the steeple.

The future of the White Church was in doubt fairly recently, but community efforts succeeded in getting the structure moved from its former site, on Old Military Road at the corner of Church Street, to its present location.

14) Little Red Schoolhouse

Coming back out to Old Military Road, make a right-hand turn back toward Lake Placid. Go 0.7 miles to Johnson Avenue, on your right, and turn there. Go through two intersections, Winter and Summer streets, then look for No. 27 on your left, a 1-1/2-story frame house, white on the bottom, green on top. This private residence was once North Elba’s “Little Red Schoolhouse,” the oldest of the town’s surviving one-room schoolhouses.

Built in 1848, “Little Red” was part of North Elba’s second wave of settlement. There being neither church nor municipal building at the time, the schoolhouse served both those functions, too. When North Elba township seceded from the town of Keene in 1850, it was Little Red where the new town’s orga-

nizational meeting was held.

Classes were held in the schoolhouse until 1915, when automobiles had become common enough to transport students in to the village from the outlying areas served by one-room schools. Ten years later, the building was sold to a private party, who moved it one block over from its original site at the east end of Summer Street.

Today, almost 80 years after its move, Little Red is the home of the James Wilson family. Without a photo in hand of the old schoolhouse, it may be difficult to see Little Red in the Wilson home. The house today, however, has the same roof lines as the old school, and the enclosed porch corresponds pretty clearly to the old open porch of the one-room schoolhouse.



From 1915 to 1936, this building served as the Newman post office. It now houses the Downhill Grill.