



Main Street, Keeseville, New York

All Roads Lead to Keeseville: A Thoroughly Awake Little Village

BY ANN RUZOW HOLLAND

The Adirondack Park/Lake Champlain region has been designated an UNESCO "Biosphere Reserve," and Lake Champlain has the added distinction of a special Federal designation for its protection and study. Although there are disagreements about the consequences and necessity of formal designations and any resultant rules, regulations and responsibilities, *all interests agree that the hamlets of the region and the people living in them need and deserve attention and resolution of the issues they are confronting.* Balancing the necessity of preserving open space and protecting the natural resource base of New York's Adirondack Park/Lake Champlain Region with the needs of the people liv-

ing in the hamlets has been the challenge that created and sustains the Friends. (See box on next page.) For open space to be conserved, we believe that *settlements must be preserved and viable, as well as able to absorb the impacts of sustainable growth and development.*

To meet the unique challenges facing these communities, the Friends' holistic community development approach emphasizes comprehensive, sustained, multiple benefit, long term solutions to locally identified problems. This approach also encourages implementing cost effective programs that maximize existing community resources including self help and sweat equity. The Friends' mission reflects this multi-disciplinary approach and is to: *"assist in the provision of housing with em-*

phasis on the needs of poor persons; undertake economic development; identify, designate and restore significant historic structures; and generally act as facilitators in the process of stabilization, growth and development."

Since the Friends expanded their service area beyond the Village of Keeseville's boundaries in 1985, twenty-three communities throughout the Adirondack Park/Lake Champlain Region have asked the Friends to help them develop strategies to overcome their community problems; from the need for elderly housing to developing a new source of drinking water. Six of those twenty-three communities have been working with the Friends for more than ten years. *This sustained partnership occurs because the Friends*

understand the issues, the financial limitations facing small communities and perhaps most importantly, that things take time.

To fulfill their obligations in the partnership, the Friends have developed linkages with a variety of local, State, and Federal entities to resolve local problems and spur revitalization in individual communities and groups of communities. Based on each community's unique needs and resources, revitalization has been accomplished using such sustainable community development techniques as housing rehabilitation, historic preservation, main street revitalization, improvement of infrastructure (water, wastewater, drainage) and recreational/open space development.

The Keeseville Example

The economic and social history of the Champ-Adiron Region may be viewed as a series of periods, similar in nature to the geologists' view of earth's history. These distinct periods include the pre-western or Neolithic (before Samuel De Champlain's visitations starting in 1603), pioneer or early settlement (1600s-1820s), industrial (1820s-1967) and post-industrial (1967-?).

The industrial period was characterized by the boom and bust cycles associated with economic activity dependent upon international events and markets. Throughout the Champ-Adiron Region, settlements grew where natural resources could be conveniently exploited by entrepreneurs. Their goal was to extract as much and as fast as they could in part because the resources appeared to be inexhaustible and because Western culture placed a high value on taming and exploiting nature.

Keeseville was settled and developed in the early 1820s primarily because hydro-mechanical power could be harnessed from the AuSable River's series of waterfalls. In fact, three waterfalls (Anderson, Alice and Birmingham) became the locus of value-adding industries exploiting the timber and iron resources upriver. Combined with this strategic power source was the settlement's proximity to

Lake Champlain. The geomorphology was ideal: gently sloping alluvial valleys allowed products to be easily transported to the Lake where sailing ships provided the major form of transportation to markets. Over the ensuing 150 years, Keeseville naturally grew into a bustling and wealthy community where artisans, inventors, politicians and thespians resided. A lot of money was made and its evidence adorns the superb 19th century architecture. Keeseville was very fortunate to have a 150 year "Boom."

The "Bust" began after World War II when cheap oil took over as the primary source of energy. Thus, the river was no longer a prerequisite for industrial activity. Layered upon this fundamental shift in economic competitiveness was the demise of the regional iron industry due to less expensive forms of extraction and

processing in Michigan and Minnesota. As the iron market slowed, entrepreneurs turned to timber to make up their losses but with mixed success. What timber succeeded in was slowing down the "bust," but not stopping it entirely.

The pulp and paper industries in AuSable Forks and the furniture manufacturers in Keeseville were on the downward slide by the 1960s. It was only a matter of time before they, too, went "belly-up." By the mid 1960s, the J&J Rogers Company in AuSable Forks, the Prescott Furniture Manufacturer in Keeseville and the Georgia Pacific Mill in Willsboro had closed, leaving many of the working poor without a livelihood. Then, as if to make it even worse, the Prescott Mill burned in a spectacular fire leaving Keeseville's central business district blackened and burned.

The supporting transportation infrastructure of rail and shipping companies were also feeling the effects of the economic slow down. At the same time the local industrial base of these settlements was eroding the federal government was planning a superhighway from Albany to the Canadian Border as part of the Eisenhower Interstate System. Expo '67 would be in Montreal and the need to connect the US and Canada was a driving force. Truck transport was rapidly replacing rail and shipping as the preferred method of moving goods. Which side of the Lake to put the superhighway must have been quite a political debate in the 1950s! The decision was made and the interstate plan called for the superhighway to be situated just west of New York's Routes 9 and 22. These routes were the main arteries of North-South transportation. Commerce and settlements based upon these routes would soon face the impact of the new interstate system.

The opening of the Adirondack Northway in 1967 was a mixed blessing for the region. Keeseville benefited from the commerce associated with the construction of capital improvements and their multiplier effect. After construction, the increased volume of visitors from the Montreal and New York City Metropolitan areas, now

Friends of the North Country

Ann Ruzow Holland is the founding director of the Friends of the North Country, Inc. and was the first grant and community development specialist with the Essex and then the Clinton County Planning Offices in 1977. She was responsible for planning and implementing both Counties' first community development circuit rider program. Keeseville requested and received from the Planning Offices intensive technical assistance to address problems identified by the Village Board, including mandate compliance for their aging infrastructure. What started as a relationship between one person and a Village Board blossomed into an enduring affiliation that caused the Village Board to help sponsor the creation of the Friends of Keeseville. In 1990, the Friends of Keeseville became the Friends of the North Country, Inc. The Friends have been working with rural communities in New York State's Adirondack Park/Lake Champlain Region for the past 18 years. They were incorporated in 1981 as a New York not-for-profit whose mission was holistic rural development. Under the guidance of an eclectic Board of Directors, comprising community representatives, the Friends' focus has enlarged from a single community (the Village of Keeseville) to providing comprehensive technical assistance to communities throughout the Adirondack Park/Lake Champlain Region.

within one day's drive, also helped to soften the economic impact of the mill closures. Keeseville, before the Northway, was a regional center, providing retail and hospitality services of the highest quality. Keeseville, after the Northway, was eclipsed by Plattsburgh as it became the regional center for retail and hospitality services for the now larger region. This shift was the final blow to Keeseville's economy and landed the community at the bottom of its spiral of decline with a definitive "thump."

The Adirondack Northway opened up the North Country and fundamentally changed the way people live, work and settle. The term "region" shifted from river valley or lakeshore to the whole watershed. The shift away from iron ore and timber plus the change in geographic scope and impacts of the Northway create the threshold to "Post-industrialization."

In the late 1970s, the Adirondack Park Agency (APA) was spearheading the effort to bring recognition and assistance to the 135 hamlets in the Park so that revitalization could occur. Keeseville enthusiastically embraced the State Government's efforts to provide resources and attention to its work and became one of the earliest and most ambitious of the Adirondack Hamlets to help itself improve. Keeseville's economic state was horrible but Keeseville's leadership was inclined to believe that hope and optimism could lead to a better future for Keeseville. There was no apathy or complacency in Keeseville even in its darkest hours.

Some of the State interest in the 1970s was related to the fact that Lake Placid would host the Winter Olympic Games in 1980. There were strong hopes from the corridor communities that some of the economic impact from the

Olympics would spill over into their economies. This incentive to clean house and be presentable when the eyes of the world would be focused upon our region contributed to the excitement and interest in Keeseville. In fact, Will Brady, a local artist, spoofed this orientation towards Lake Placid by creating a new map of the region with Keeseville at its center. Hence the title, "All roads lead to Keeseville."

Main Street Revitalization was in vogue. Corning, New York, had undergone a renovation after floods disfigured the community. Corning had a major industrial backer to its efforts and was able to accomplish miraculous things. Saratoga, New York, was beginning its renaissance. As a larger community, closer to the State Capital, it had many more resources at its disposal to facilitate change.

Keeseville, on the other hand, was sorely in need. It lacked the resources, but possessed the determination to succeed. Never say never!

As a result of its community efforts, Keeseville received funding from several State and Federal agencies to prepare and implement a downtown revitalization program. From 1980-1986, Keeseville spent and leveraged over one million dollars to renovate facades, improve public facilities, preserve historic structures and reverse the economic trends in place since the Northway eclipsed commerce in 1967. The

comeback of Keeseville in this period was so dramatic and regionally significant that it was cited in several award winning publications that showcased hamlets of the Adirondacks.

This spectacular renaissance continues through the present time. Continuing the strategy of involving all sectors of the community; private, public and non-profit, the Village continues to evolve as a thriving, "Thoroughly Awake Little

**Collaborations
between and
amongst
communities
that share not
only a
common
geography but
also a desire to
restructure
their
economies . . .
are a necessity.**

Here is an abbreviated list of Keeseville Down Street projects from 1977-1993 to illustrate the old adage, Things Take Time."

- 1977 Technical Assistance Began
- 1979 Planning Board Organized
- 1980 Downtown Master Plan published
- 1980 Friends organized
- 1981-83 Reclamation of Riverside Park (Phase I)
- 1983 Chamber of Commerce formed Village Comprehensive Plan published
- 1984 National Register Nomination Secured
- 1984 First Historic Walking Tour Brochure published
- 1984 HUD CDBG Grant for Downtown (Phase II)
Seven key downtown properties, water, roads, sidewalks
- 1986 HUD CDBG Grant for West End (Phase III) key public facilities and properties, water, roads, sidewalks
- 1986 Historic District Local Law Passed
- 1987 Bridge reconstruction, Bridge nominations to National Historic Engineering Record
- 1988 Iron Stairs renovation
HUD CDBG (Village Wide Phase IV)
Expanded public facilities improvements
- 1989 Beautification Committee organized
- 1990 Trees/shrubs planted
- 1991 Trees/shrubs planted
- 1992 Sidewalks reconstructed
License to build Hydro project downtown received
- 1993 Three historic structures renovated
Manufacturer locates in Mill building
- 1994-95 Sewer System Renovations
- 1995 Interpretive Signage Installed
- 1996 Regional Map Guide marketed
- 1997 Second Edition Historic Tour Marketed
- 1998 Thematic Nomination for Au-Sable River Bridges
Perry House Restoration
- 1999... Riverbank Hazard Mitigation
Water/Sewer System Revitalization

Village.” Broken sidewalks have been replaced with attractive brick designs. Trees, shrubbery and flowers line the National Register Historic District streets. Streets and drainage have been improved. Keeseville’s public recreational areas were cleaned up and given a face lift. The Village government has been very successful at recruiting citizen leadership for its Beautification, Planning and Youth Committees. These groups work on enhancing the “Quality of Life” in Keeseville through parallel projects such as clean-up days and supportive programs for children.

One must not forget that without the private sector few substantive activities can sustain a hamlet’s revitalization. Keeseville was fortunate in the 1980s to enlist the support and participation of its major property owners, George Moore and Arthur Bailey. Without their engaged participation, the physical fabric of Keeseville would not have been changed. In the 1990s their efforts have been sustained by the second wave of entrepreneurs, such as Kathy Rock and Paulo Magro, who have invested and labored to create a thriving business community.

The Village government has also been very effective in its use of the non-profit sector. The Friends of the North Country, Inc. continue to provide Keeseville with extensive help to locate, apply for and administer funds that the Village uses to keep capital programs affordable to the taxpayers. To date, the Friends have been able to raise for the Village over 8.5 million dollars. The population of Keeseville is just under

2000! Imagine the multiplier in terms of commerce and employment.

Each year more projects are completed and new projects are planned. For example, in 1997 a second edition of the Keeseville Historic District self-guided walking tour was released. This guide received an award in May, 1998 from the Preservation League of New York State and is available free of charge to anyone interested in coming to Keeseville to learn about the industrial revolution in New

Keeseville’s Lessons

Keeseville shares a long list of issues requiring attention with the other 135 hamlets in the Adirondack Park and with rural communities in general. Taking a roll of paper towels and unraveling it down a long corridor might give a good impression of the extent to which a community might need to go to examine its issues and inventory its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. It seems

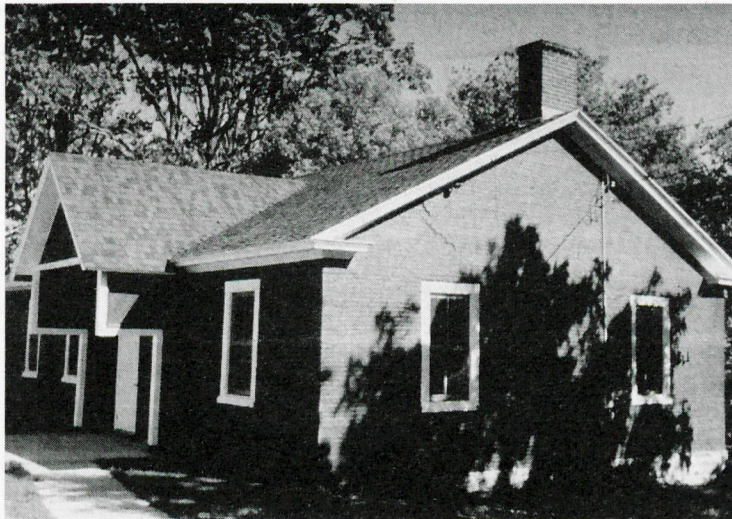
a daunting task for a community to take stock of itself and then self-determine its future. Where do you begin?

These days, the process is called “Community Visioning” and there are people in every region who think they invented the concept. But every twenty years or so it seems that ideas are simply recycled and re-named. In the past, when the Friends began assisting communities in the region to plan and take action for their future, “Visioning” was called “planning for something to happen.” Communities have been starting this process and stopping and starting again for hundreds of years.

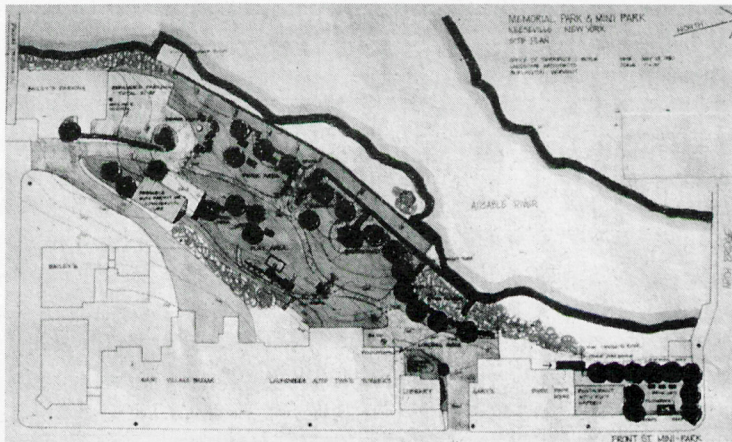
With the assistance of the Friends of the North Country, Inc. and the Adirondack Park Agency Local Government Program, the Village “started again” and prepared and adopted a Comprehensive Revitalization Plan in 1983. As a timeless reference, it directs

the community’s efforts towards self-improvement, but does not substitute for action. From this starting point of taking stock, the hard work begins.

Since the post-industrial period began in 1967, hamlets of the Adirondacks and Champlain Valley have had to recognize and accept that globalization of the



Above: The restored Old Schoolhouse on the Village Green.
Below: The 1980 Plan for Riverside Park.



York State. In 1998 a project was begun to revitalize a key section of riverbank in the central business district and another project was initiated to save and rehabilitate a key historic property in the Historic District. Next year work will continue, and that builds to...MOMENTUM!

United State's economy *and change* are inevitable. As with the advent of television, the world has opened up and become much larger than it was in the past. Economies of individual hamlets are no longer independent, rather they are inter-dependent aspects of an economic web that blankets the area at least from Plattsburgh to Glens Falls. What comes with

These collaborations represent communities reaching out to one another to recognize and resolve common problems. Community based organizations are helping to "baste" together individual communities. For an example in the CVHN, the Friends of the North Country, Inc. provides a collaborative framework between PRIDE of Ticonderoga, the Mori-

Ticonderoga, AuSable Chasm). Combining their individual strengths, skills and resources, community efforts are paying off with faster results and greater success.

Collaborations are one way for communities to capitalize upon their revitalization as they wrestle with economic restructuring in the post-industrial period of their existence. Another lesson to remember is that nothing significant will happen overnight. It took over a century to build Keeseville from a campsite on the AuSable River to a regional center for commerce.

When citizens anywhere in the Champ-Adiron Region are questioned about their vision of community and what it means to them today, many state unequivocally that they want to preserve and protect their small town life; knowing your neighbors, feeling safe and maintaining the character of their hometown. They also want to see their children stay if they so desire because they can earn a decent living. They too want to be able to support their lifestyle.

Citizens as Stewards

Communities resemble their inhabitants in many ways and this makes sense because communities are aggregations of people who share a common geography. Personal growth, for many people, is a lifetime achievement. Community growth should be no less.

It is very easy for people to drive down a street, point and say to themselves (or worse yet, to others), "this needs to be fixed" and then continue driving to the big box retail stores miles and miles away. What communities need today, more than ever before, are for its residents to walk down a street, greet and say to their neighbors, "Let's work together to make things better for ourselves and for our community; when can we get started?" In the old days we called this citizenship and with it came rights, but also responsibilities. We need to reawaken citizenship in our residents and cultivate a sense of stewardship for the finite world. "Think globally, act locally!"



The Kingsland Block in 1986.

this expanded reality, is the need to abandon parochial and territorial thinking, in favor of collaborative and intra-regional cooperation. The sooner citizens are able to make the philosophical shift in their thinking, the better for everyone.

Collaborations between and amongst communities that share not only a common geography but also a desire to restructure their economies in the post-industrial period are a necessity. Two such collaborations exist; the Champlain Valley Heritage Network (CVHN) and the AuSable Valley Corridor Committee (AVCC). The CVHN includes the nine lakeshore towns and villages of Essex County (Chesterfield, Willsboro, Essex, Westport, Moriah, Crown Point, Ticonderoga, Keeseville and Port Henry). The AVCC is a collaboration between the six towns and villages from Lake Champlain to Whiteface Mountain (Keeseville, Chesterfield, AuSable, Black Brook, Jay and Wilmington).

ah/Port Henry Economic Development Zone, the County Planning Office, the Boquet River Association, Cooperative Extension, the Chambers of Commerce, the Nature Conservancy, the Arts Council, and our Museums. This framework is constantly added to with smaller citizen initiatives and special interest groups.

The cooperation results in maximizing the uses of our limited resources to achieve results efficiently (e. g., countryside tourism development and marketing to create complimentary new small business and hospitality venues). A common goal is developing a chain of communities to attract the increasing tourist trade flowing between destination attractions, such as Fort Ticonderoga and Lake Placid. These collaborations are intent at making our region the destination for visitors, rather than tourists coming just to visit specific destinations (Whiteface, Fort