



Adirondack Daily Enterprise 75¢

Touring Eagle Island

*A look inside
a once
and future
summer camp*

By ADAM ST. PIERRE
Staff Writer

UPPER SARANAC LAKE — Some experienced a blast from the past while others were offered a glimpse to the future as the public toured Eagle Island's historic camp Sunday and Monday.

This marks the first time the former Girl Scout summer camp was open for public inspection since it closed in 2008. It's the next major step in public outreach for Friends of Eagle Island, a non-profit organization formed in 2011 to reclaim the island and preserve its historical value. FEI bought the island in 2015 with the help of a large, anonymous donation.

A pontoon boat filled with curious visitors launched from Gilpin Bay Road Monday for an "open island" community day, where they would tour the property and learn about its history and ongoing renovations. The boat skimmed across Upper Saranac Lake, passing islands nicknamed by Girl Scout campers in the 20th century.

"That rocky-looking object covered in seagulls over there, campers called Little Watch, the one in the middle is Big Watch, and the one with the dinosaur-looking crooked tree over there was Tick Tock," said Kathy Gilroy, one of hundreds of volunteers who are referred to as "friends" of the island.

The camp is on the National Register of Historic Places and one of five great camps of the Adirondacks that are designated National Historic Landmarks.

Renovation updates

FEI President Chris Wubbolding explained recent renovations to passengers as the boat navigated toward the island's sailing pavilion and boat-house. She said the items on FEI's to-do list before the island's provisional "soft opening" as a summer youth camp in 2018

include improvements to its water systems and repairs to a dock and two damaged roofs.

"Right now we're focused on water; we still don't have any of that on the island" Wubbolding said. "The well drillers are coming in about two weeks. We have two locations where we had a

hydrologist surveyor come to assess, and we're hoping we hit water in the first one."

The camp previously relied on the lake for its water infrastructure, but Wubbolding said the filtration of water would most likely be cheaper if pumped from a well into a new barrel for the anti-

quated water tower. Pending funding, these renovations wouldn't be finished until next year, she said.

Two buildings must also be stabilized and leveled before the group fixes degradation and leak-

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A walkway is seen Monday at Eagle Island, a former great camp and Girl Scout camp in Upper Saranac Lake.

(Enterprise photo — Adam St. Pierre)

People take a tour Monday of Eagle Island, a former great camp and Girl Scout camp in Upper Saranac Lake.

(Enterprise photo — Adam St. Pierre)



Eagle Island

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age in their roofs. A boat-house dock damaged by winter will also be repaired.

Wubbolding said recent inspections determined the electrical and septic systems on the island to be intact and functional. Old wires hung from trees for the former electric system were then removed by volunteers to reduce hazards.

The renovations are being supervised by Carl Stearns, a preservation architect who was hired by FEI to ensure they preserve historic quality of the lodge as they improve it for future generations of campers. The 11-building complex was constructed in 1903, designed by renowned Adirondack architect William Coulter.

On the island

A group of FEI volunteers broke into song as the boat approached one of the island's two boathouses. This song was the first thing Girl Scout campers heard when they arrived on shore, now repurposed to welcome the groups of visitors.

Groups traveled along wide herd paths cushioned by a layer of needles and leaves from the hallway of trees connecting sections of the summer camp. The first stop was the Mariner Boathouse, a large building suspended above shore with log support beams and trusses, an architectural theme of earthy elegance found in most of the island's buildings.

The tour opened up to the camp's main campus: a series of lodges, cabins and facility buildings where campers previously dined, washed clothes and showered. Volunteer Wendy Cohen, a former camp resident and staff member, was directing foot traffic and sharing her fondest memories of the camp.

"I was not quite 10 years old when I started," Cohen said. "Years after it closed, any time I was up in the Adirondacks, I would come and just stand at the dock and look at the island, and all the memories of the fun I had here flooded back. We want to pass that love on to future generations."

Among the buildings was the Main Lodge, where a collection of exotic taxidermy filled the walls and a descendant of the island's early 20th-century owners explained the camp's history. It was Buzz Graves, a "friend" of Eagle Island and the great-great-grandson of Henry Graves, a wealthy New Jersey man who bought the camp from former U.S. Vice President Levi P. Morton and sold it to the Maplewood-South Orange New Jersey Girl Scout Council in 1938.

"My great-grandfather and his brother both died the summer of '21, and (Henry) had envisioned this as a place his kids and his grandkids would run around," Graves said. "He got really demoralized losing both sons in the same year, and that prompted him to want to sell the camp."

Friendly future

Another tour of the island will be hosted by Adirondack Architectural Heritage sometime in August. The group used to give similar tours before the Girl Scouts declared the land off-limits, Wubbolding said.

FEI members said the camp would not be co-ed, but they mentioned the possibility of switching between young girls and boys periodically. The primary goal of the group, according to FEI volunteer Chris Hildebrand, is to preserve the spot as a place to foster youth appreciation of the outdoors.

"If kids from urban centers and the suburbs don't get to come up here and experience the wilderness, and experience the beauty and the magnificence of the forest and Adirondack wild, that's going to be lost to an entire generation," Hildebrand said. "And those kids are going to have different priorities, and they're going to be our leaders of tomorrow."

"The private camps for very rich kids are flourishing," she added. "But the less expensive camps, the camps for less privileged kids, are being sold off in massive numbers by these nonprofits because they can't sustain them."

FEI will rely on grants, pledges and an annual campaign to fund its renovations of the island. Wubbolding said she hopes to test the island out with small family camping trips next year. She said the camp will eventually offer sailing, canoeing,

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Letters to the Editor

Praise and a correction for Eagle Island article

To the editor:

I was thrilled to see Adam St. Pierre's front-page article "Touring Eagle Island" (July 12). I was an Eagle Island camper from New York for five years and was volunteering at this past weekend's two open houses. St. Pierre captures the grandeur of the island's natural and architectural beauty. He also has his fingers on the pulse of the energy and enthusiasm driving the restoration efforts and the reopening plans of its new owners, the Friends of Eagle Island.

One correction: While Henry Jr. and Florence Graves originally put the island up for sale, they ultimately gifted it to the Girl Scouts in 1937, to provide a camp where children would always play and thrive.

As I saw a group of young children from the lake community plunge into the clear water at the Eagle Island waterfront, I saw the happy campers of the future.

Yours sincerely,
Emily Sue Rosner
Florence, Italy

(Editor's note: The Enterprise regrets the error.)