


[CONTACT US](#) [FAQ](#) [CART](#)
[HOME](#)
[MAGAZINE](#)
[PHOTO CONTEST](#)
[EVENTS](#)
[SUBSCRIBE](#)
[ADVERTISE](#)
[MARKETPLACE](#)
[AT HOME IN THE ADIRONDACKS 2017](#)

Eagle Island

Former Girl Scouts earn the ultimate badge with the rescue of their beloved camp on Upper Saranac Lake

BY CHRISTINE JEROME

“Own a legit, Honest-to-God, Adirondack-Style Girl Scout Camp” read an August 4, 2011, headline in the online housing magazine *Curbed*. “Here’s something different,” the accompanying text went, “a full-fledged Girl Scout camp offered up as a prime piece of real estate meat.... Camp Eagle Island boasts a stone-and-timber main house—with 10 bedrooms, 14 bathrooms, nine fireplaces, and 47,153 square feet.... The 31-acre property sits on scenic Upper Saranac Lake in upstate New York.... The Girl Scouts operated the camp from 1938 until 2009, when they were forced to shutter it; there’s currently a group of former Scouts trying to raise enough money to save it. Doing so, no doubt, will earn them all a mighty huge badge. As for the sum they need: \$3.75M.”

That huge badge was ultimately earned, but the jaunty real-estate listing belied a struggle that had begun earlier, in 2008, and would last four more years before the Friends of Eagle Island, Inc., gained title to their beloved camp in November 2015. It’s a tale of persistence and passion on the part of women who as teenagers had acquired a set of skills and core values during their Upper Saranac summers. Did they realize at the outset what a struggle it would be to acquire and reopen the camp? “If people knew how hard things would be,” says board member Rowain Kalichstein, “they wouldn’t even try. Now we’re applying the resoluteness and pluck and grit we learned at Eagle Island!”

Located just below Upper Saranac’s narrows, on Gilpin Bay, Eagle Island was one of the Great Camps designed by William L. Coulter and contains some of the architect’s finest rustic work. Designated a National Historic Landmark in 2004, it was owned by Levi P. Morton, vice president under Benjamin Harrison and later New York governor, and was constructed between January and June of 1903. Most of the original structures are unostentatious service buildings hidden behind the main event—the family quarters, main lodge, and dining pavilion connected by a shared veranda, a walkway, and by the elaborate patternwork of cedar poles and posts that screens the gable ends. The interiors of all three structures are just what you’d expect of a Great Camp, with lofty ceilings, baronial fireplaces, peeled log trusses and posts, and taxidermied hunting trophies. Water views are now occluded by trees, but the prospect from the original boathouse includes a stunning view of Ampersand and Stony Creek Mountains.

In 1910 Morton sold the property to the banker Henry Graves Jr., a sportsman who liked racing his speedboat *The Eagle* down the lake. After the tragic deaths of two of his sons, Graves donated Eagle Island to a New Jersey Girl Scout council in 1937 as a place “where children may always play.” The following year the property began a new chapter as a camp for girls eight and older, a tenure that lasted 70 years. Traditions were established and deep bonds formed as young women shared platform tents and learned to canoe, sail, swim and backpack, acquiring skills and confidence that have served them well in their adult lives. Allie Weill, a former camper now pursuing a doctorate in ecology, says, “It’s such a special place. It’s on an island and you can explore the whole thing, but it’s also small enough that you can feel it’s your place. There’s almost no place like the Adirondack Park. I went back after eight years and walked around, and I knew every rock and tree along the trail. There’s no place else like that in my life.”

Alas, change happens. In 2007, leadership of the Girl Scouts of the USA was revamped and the organization began selling off summer camps as scouting’s mission morphed from outdoor activities to more contemporary concerns: science, technology, mathematics and social service among them. At the same time, councils across the country were merging. In New Jersey three councils, one the owner of Eagle Island, consolidated in 2008 as Girl Scouts Heart of New

Recent

Remains of the Days
Behind the Lens: Ice Patterns, Loon Lake
From the Land
Two Sides of Mount Marcy
The Bark Eater

Subscribe to adirondacklife.com by email

Enter your email address to subscribe to this website and receive notifications of new posts by email.



© Nancie Battaglia

Jersey. Two of them had no stake in the camp, and a new CEO recruited from industry was unsympathetic to the concerns of former campers about its future. Even before the merger, in 2007, two sets of sisters—Chris Hildebrand and her sister Ginny, and Rowain and her sisters Gail and June—had become alarmed at the Girl Scouts’ program of divestment and began building an ad-hoc organization of former campers to try to dissuade the council from selling Eagle Island. They labored long and hard to build support by tracking women down through the camper grapevine and high-school yearbooks. Calling themselves the Friends of Eagle Island (FEI), they amassed a 1,000-name database to alert former scouts to the looming threat and to raise funds for needed repairs.

The newly formed council seemed intent on unloading the property, citing declining attendance, the six-hour drive from New Jersey and expensive upgrades needed to meet safety standards. And then, in 2009 and without warning, it canceled the camping season shortly before opening day. The following summer it remained closed. In

October 2010 the council voted to sell the island, and the next July it went on the market for \$3.75 million. “We had offered to buy it in June 2011,” Hildebrand reports, “but we didn’t have anything like the kind of money they wanted.”

Determined to oppose the sale, the FEI formally incorporated in 2011 and the next year filed a lawsuit against Girl Scouts Heart of New Jersey contending, among other things, that selling the property as a private residence violated the donor’s intention that it be reserved for the benefit of children. While the litigation proceeded, FEI continued trying to drum up support for their cause with funding appeals, reunions, publicity, benefit hikes and a demonstration in which members circled the off-limits Eagle Island in their canoes.

To no avail. Early in 2015 the presiding judge ruled against them—it turned out that no paperwork existed attesting to the donor’s wishes. While this blow was softened by the stipulation that the council must use monies from the sale to fund outdoor recreation programming, the ruling was crushing for FEI. The litigation had kept the property off the market, but now all bets were off. And then, in a resolution Frank Capra might have dreamed up, an anonymous donor stepped in with \$2.45 million, and an offer was made and accepted. In November 2015 the long struggle to save Eagle Island Camp had been won.

Now came the hard part: finding the money to refurbish a property that had been shuttered for eight years and that required major improvements to its infrastructure and historic buildings. The Friends wasted no time. While committees began soliciting donations and pursuing grants, the summer of 2016 saw volunteers cleaning, repairing decking, railings and steps, and removing detritus such as old mattresses, bicycles and broken furniture. This year caretaker Todd Hall and his crew have been revamping septic, water and electrical systems and doing foundation repairs and roof replacements; work on the historic buildings is being supervised by the Syracuse firm of Crawford & Stearns, preservation specialists. Skilled and nonskilled volunteers are pitching in on work weekends and throughout the summer, often bringing families and friends to help out. Three Open Island Days have allowed the public to visit the island, picnic, hike the trails and tour the buildings.

The cost of reopening the camp has been estimated at \$1.5 to \$2 million, a goal being addressed by a \$2.5 million capital campaign, grants and individual donations. A milestone was reached last year when the board’s grants committee won a New York State Regional Economic Development Award for \$498,825—a welcome infusion, but these funds can be

used only for the historic buildings, not for new equipment or infrastructure. Other grants, including \$40,000 from the Adirondack-based Cloudsplitter Foundation and \$10,000 from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, have also been critical to moving the project forward, but cash has been short. An urgent appeal was issued in May 2017 by executive director Paula McGovern to raise \$80,000 by August 1. “Although we can see the light at the end of the tunnel, we still have miles to go.... We need to update the kitchen; repair tent platforms; purchase tents and beds; procure boats, canoes and kayaks; and improve the waterfront. The list could go on, but you get the picture.” Nevertheless, Michele Racioppi, who serves on the board’s grants committee, remains optimistic: “I know we’re going to accomplish our goals. Most nonprofits haven’t been able to raise this much.”

The current plan is for a “soft” opening in 2018 consisting of a family camping session in late summer, to be followed the next year by a full season of activities, including the much-loved

women’s weekends and the emphasis on water sports. Details of the new, non-scouting version of the camp are still being worked out, but there will likely be four two-week sessions, possibly for boys as well as girls ages eight and up, with a maximum of 140 campers. Marketing efforts will expand beyond the organization’s original northern New Jersey base and will specifically target Adirondack residents. Former campers hope some of the traditions they loved will be revived, particularly the singing that occurred after meals, on hikes, at campfires and at other gatherings, but they acknowledge that change is inevitable and in fact an opportunity. One camper hopes for a stronger environmental focus, another suggests courses in photography, journaling and arts and crafts using natural materials, not sparkles. Allie Weill says, “I love the traditions we had, but I’m just really happy that it will be accessible to kids again.”

Those who got to experience Eagle Island credit the unusually close-knit community with helping them learn to get along with one another, to leave their comfort zones, and to believe in themselves. Karin Rutledge, fundraising chair, observes, “It was far from where we lived, and it was an island. We didn’t really leave unless we were hiking or canoeing. And there were no devices. You were not encouraged to call your parents, so it helped you learn to solve your own problems. You learned resiliency, independence. That has helped me in my life and work.”

On Eagle Island, meeting challenges was always part of the program, and that tradition continues today. Grants chair Jane Evans puts it succinctly: “We’re a young organization trying to do this big thing very quickly.”

Learn more about Eagle Island Camp at eagleisland.org.

Christine Jerome is the author of An Adirondack Passage: The Cruise of the Canoe Sairy Gamp (2013, third edition). Jerome has contributed to Adirondack Life since 1990.

Tags: [camps](#), [Eagle Island](#), [Girl Scouts](#), [Upper Saranac Lake](#)

This entry was posted on Wednesday, September 27th, 2017 at 12:43 pm and is filed under [Articles](#), [New Online](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can [trackback](#) from your own site.



