

# OCCASIONAL PAPERS

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Thomas Gilliland, editor

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Peter S. Paine, Jr., a member of the Willsboro Heritage Society, wrote this piece about the Flat Rock Camp in 2010. Recently he gave us permission to edit and reprint the document as one of our *Occasional Papers*. We hope you will agree that this account details a significant piece of our local heritage.

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A Brief History of Flat Rock Camp  
and the Paine Family Property  
in  
Willsboro, Essex County, New York

Augustus G. Paine Jr. moved to Willsboro in 1885 to take over the management of the local pulp mill, which his father, A.G. Paine, Sr. (who had been born in rural, southwest Maine but ultimately became a New York banker), ended up owning as a result of an unexpected mortgage foreclosure. Shortly thereafter, A.G. married Maude Eustis Potts from Pottsville, Pennsylvania, and moved to a house in the center of town near the mill where the first two of his five sons, A.G. III, and George Eustis, were born. At roughly this same time A.G. began assembling land on Willsboro Point just north of the Boquet River in a series of acquisitions (some by members of his family), which today comprise the Paine family estate of some 1,000 acres.

A.G. bought the first parcel, 18 acres on Jones Point with some 2,000 feet of lake front where Flat Rock Camp stands today, from a local farmer and horse dealer, Highram Jones. The price was reputed to be \$500. Mr. Jones, who was apparently a considerable personality, let it be known around town that he had sold a city slicker a bunch of worthless rock for a fat price, as it was absolutely useless for farming.

Under A.G.'s management, the local pulp mill prospered and it became one of the mills of the New York and Pennsylvania Paper Company, Inc. In the early years of this century, NYPEN was one of the leading paper manufacturers in the country and a major supplier to the Curtis Publishing Company, the publisher of the Saturday Evening Post, Ladies Home Journal, etc.

The Paine family estate today, which is still owned by the heirs of A.G., includes almost 3 miles of shoreline on Lake Champlain stretching northward from the Boquet River, as well as just under 2 miles of river front on the north shore of the River itself from the River mouth to the former pulp mill site. The property encompasses many different land forms; flood plain forests and associated wetlands along the River; some 750 acres of mixed pine and hardwood woodlands under active forest management; about 200 acres of agricultural fields; a now discontinued orchard; extensive interior wetlands; and the unusual flat rock sandstone pavements barrens on Jones Point. The property even contains a 9 hole golf course open to the public and the Willsboro School's athletic fields.

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The whole property is a significant component of the open space character of the Champlain Valley and lies within the boundaries of the Adirondack Park. Though the property has a scattering of year-round residences, summer camps and farm buildings, over 95% remains in open space. This character is permanently protected by a conservation easement covering the entire 1,000 acres donated to The Nature Conservancy by the Paine family over a period of several years starting in the late 1970s. The easement, which was one of the earlier easements given to the Adirondack Chapter covering a large, complex landscape, severely limits the future development potential of the property and provides special restrictions on the Champlain shoreline and Boquet River corridor, while permitting the continuation of present residential, forestry, agricultural, and recreational uses, plus the construction of a handful of additional, new residential buildings in carefully defined locations.

The Flat Rock Camp portion of the property is underlain by a considerable expanse of Potsdam sandstone at or very near the surface of the ground. Polished by glacial action, the flat rock tilts slightly downward in a northerly direction and is covered by mosses and lichens, with outcroppings of trees, primarily pitch pine, in places where deep cracks or accumulations of soil make tree growth possible. Many of the pitch pines are stunted and have a bonsai appearance, so harsh are the growing conditions.

Evidence of glacial action is everywhere, from the glacial erratics scattered on the rock surface, to the striations and chattermarks visible at many points, particularly on the access roads which traverse portions of the flat rock and along the Lake shoreline. These types of pavement barrens are unique and globally rare. The much larger Altona pavement barren, also underlain by Potsdam sandstone, is located in Clinton County north of Plattsburgh, several hundred acres of which are owned by the Adirondack Nature Conservancy as its Gadway Preserve.

Abundant wild flowers grow on the flat rock and in the nearby wetlands created by a series of springs flowing out over thin soils where the impervious rock lies just beneath the surface. There are four places where ram's-head lady slippers (*Cypripedium arietum*) grow, a rare species with only a handful of known locations in New York. Special provisions of the conservation easement protect these lady slipper sites.

Flat Rock Camp in its unusual setting is a fine example of an Adirondack Great Camp estate. Begun about 1890 and constructed in stages over roughly the next 20 years, the Camp was designed by A.G. Paine himself and largely built by Lyman Smith, A.G.'s immediate neighbor to the north. The numerous stone chimneys were erected by Peter Lacey, a noted, local stone mason from Keeseville. The Camp with its surrounding trees and gardens has a distinctly Japanese feeling.

Stretching along the Lake shoreline, the single story Camp comprises a dining room and living room with panoramic views of the Lake and Vermont plus numerous bedrooms, which were added over the years as A.G.'s family grew and his summer guest list expanded. At its height the Camp complex included 7 bedrooms in the main Camp, two separate sleeping camps, called "Grandom" and the "Boys' House," a play house called "Frisco" built for A.G.'s only daughter, Frisky, in the late 1920s; a private chapel with a seasonally resident cleric; a billiard room; shoe shine parlor; ice house; carpentry shop; garage; horse barn, milking shed, laundry and extensive servant quarters. Nearby were located a boat house with a marine railway, a dock and associated canoe shed and a tennis court.

Early photographs show the immediate vicinity of the Camp to have been starker with very little soil than is the case today. Maude Potts Paine was an accomplished gardener who brought in soil to create the original gardens of the Camp. She died around 1918 but A.G.'s second wife, Francisca Warren Paine, whom he married in the early 1920s, continued and enhanced the horticultural traditions of the Camp. Francisca was one of the founders of the Essex County Garden Club and remained a keen horticulturalist all her life, a tradition now followed by her daughter, Frisky.

When the Camp was in its heyday, it could sleep over 30 people supported by numerous household and outside help. In those days, people arrived, often with their own servants, to stay for significant periods of time. Cornelia Otis Skinner, the well known actress, was a frequent visitor. Ethel Walker, the founder of the girl's boarding school bearing her name and a great friend of both of A.G.'s wives, came almost every summer for decades. A.G.'s youngest son, Peter, was actually born in the Camp in 1909; the family doctor having been brought up from New York City for a period of time for the birth and confinement. It is hard to appreciate today the complex of support buildings and the manpower needed to sustain such a large summer camp in those times.

After A.G.'s death in 1947, many of the outbuildings were torn down to render the scale of the camp more suitable for modern living. Almost all of the structures were re-used by pulp mill employees to build or to provide additions to existing seasonal camps on Willsboro Point. Since 1947, the Camp has been lived in by various members of the Paine family and close family friends, a pattern which continues to the present.

In 1914 A.G. built the Willsboro Golf Course. The course was designed by his brother-in-law, Eustis Potts, and was initially used solely by the Paine and Potts families and their guests. In the 1920s the course was opened to the public and today it is run on a not for profit basis to provide public recreational benefits to the residents of the Willsboro area.

Just to the west along the Lake lay another camp about one-third the size of Flat Rock, known as "Sacarappa" (an Indian name from the Gorham/Standish, Maine, area where the Paine family had its roots.) This smaller camp, originally constructed by his brother-in-law, Eustis Potts, was later used for guest and staff housing by A.G. when Eustis built a new camp a mile or so to the north on the Lake. This camp burned some 25 years ago and the only evidence of its existence is the bare rock where it once stood and a capped well.

The two camps were supported by some three acres of vegetable gardens. The Garden Cottage, the original residence of the head gardener (a delightful character named John Nowak who came from Poland after World War I to work for A.G.) is now the seasonal guest house of one of A.G.'s grandsons, Peter, Jr. In addition there was a sizeable dairy farm about a mile inland on agricultural land forming part of the 1,000 acre estate, which supplied milk and a wide variety of agricultural products to the camps. The farm house, a building dating to the mid-19th century, is currently Peter, Jr.'s year-round residence. The cows were milked in the summer months in a milking shed which still stands on the flat rock just inland from the Camp. Designed primarily to support the two camps, the farm was decidedly not a commercial enterprise. One of A.G.'s bon mots was "you may have milk or champagne, they cost the same."

After the turn of the century, A.G. also developed an orchard adjacent to the dairy farm, which operated on a commercial basis for several decades. Rich muck soil was brought in from the Boquet River flood plain to improve the sandy soils of the orchard area. Today the orchard has fallen into disuse, though some trees still produce and the grouse find it excellent habitat.

These camp complexes, which were in many respects self-contained, small communities, were typical of the Adirondacks of the so called "Great Camp Period." This period began in the 1870s with the construction, by William West Durant, of Camp Pine Knot on Raquette Lake and is considered to have ended with the building of Camp Topridge in the 1920s on the St. Regis Lakes chain. Flat Rock Camp, though virtually unknown, shares many of the same characteristics of the far more famous Adirondack camps in the Raquette Lake and St. Regis/Saranac Lake areas, which saw the greatest concentration of these unique, seasonal residences. So far as is known, A.G. never visited any of the Durant camps in the central Adirondacks, but he may have been familiar with those closer to Willsboro.

Farther west along the lake shore from Flat Rock Camp on the northern edge of the Paine property, once stood a large, winterized residence known as "Charlcote". This formal, two story building was designed by the well-known New York architect CDH Gilbert who designed AG's townhouse in Manhattan and constructed by A.G. in the winter of 1913/1914 for his mother Charlotte, (known as "Gran" and for whom the house was named) and father, A.G. Paine Sr. (known as the "Colonel" though he never held any military office). With a stucco exterior, a columned porch overlooking the Lake, and a rather formal exterior and interior appearance, Charlcote proved to be quite a contrast from the rambling, rustic style of Flat Rock.

Construction of Charlcote actually occurred under a huge shed during the winter so as to be open for occupancy in the spring. Unfortunately the Colonel died that winter and was never able to live in the house, but his widow resided there spring, summer, and fall for many years until her death in the early 1930s, as did numerous Paine family members over later decades. It was also used as a winter residence by A.G. and his sons

when they visited the Willsboro mill on business, which they did on a regular basis. Following A.G.'s death in 1947, his widow, Francisca, moved into Charlcote where she lived seasonally until her death some 20 years ago. Charlcote proved to be too big to use as a residence in modern conditions and it was ultimately taken down. A cleared area, retaining walls, steps and a ruined dock are all that remain of this once impressive home. However, Charlcote Garage, the original garage with an apartment for the chauffeur built with the same stucco, continues to stand nearby and has recently been renovated. It is now lived in by Abby Paine Taylor, a great granddaughter of A.G.

Just west of the original Charlcote site, Alice E. Cole, a granddaughter of A.G. and her husband, Wally, have recently built "Westwind" for use as a seasonal residence using the "development right" associated with Charlcote retained under the conservation easement. Though a modern structure, Westwind is fully in keeping with the rustic, Adirondack style of Flat Rock and its accessory buildings.

One special feature of Flat Rock was the fact that it was built by an industrialist who, at the time construction began, was working full time in the community where the Camp was located, rather than coming from New York or other urban parts of the North East to a remote, rural area solely for recreational purposes. After NYPEN expanded to include mills in western Pennsylvania, A.G. moved initially to Lock Haven Pa. to work in the mills there and later to New York City where the corporate headquarters was located. Around World War I, A.G. constructed a substantial town house on East 69th Street in Manhattan, however, he continued to use Flat Rock as his summer residence and always considered Willsboro as his real home. A.G. and those of his sons who were active in the family business also visited Willsboro regularly throughout the year to oversee the pulp mill's affairs. Four of the five sons ended up owning houses or camps on or near the Paine family estate. His only daughter, Frisky, currently lives nearby on a farm in Essex.

A.G. always maintained a strong concern for the welfare of the people of Willsboro, extending beyond his industrial and property interests. In the 1920s he founded the local bank, now (Champlain National Bank) which remains a thriving, independent community bank still controlled by the Paine family. Three Paine family members currently serve as Bank Board members. In 1930 he also built the Paine Memorial Free Library in the center of Willsboro also designed by C.D.H. Gilbert, and dedicated to the memory of his parents, the Library continues as a vigorous, local institution, very much a focal point of the town.

South of the Flat Rock-Charlcote area stretching to the mouth of the Boquet River, lie the two other principal Paine family residences: Boquette Farm and Green Bay. These houses were lived in for decades respectively, by A.G.'s youngest son, Peter, and his older brother, Hugh and are now lived in by other family members. Constructed in the early years of the 19th century by two Fairchild brothers from one of the prominent families of the area in the closing decades of the 18th century, these houses replaced the original Fairchild family homestead at the mouth of the Boquet River, which burned during the 1812-1814 War. The brick, like so many similar homes in Willsboro and Essex, is believed to have originated from the kilns that once existed on the south bank of the Boquet River. Both houses were enlarged by Paine/Potts family members in the early to mid years of the 20th century.

This portion of the Paine property was first purchased around the turn of the century by George Bull whose wife, Polly Potts Bull, was a first cousin of Maude Potts Paine. The Bulls renovated and enlarged Green Bay (adding the two clapboard wings) and themselves built another Adirondack Great Camp on Boquet River Point overlooking the River mouth. Known as Boquette Lodge, this camp was similar in size to Flat Rock. The Lodge, the brick houses and surrounding farm lands were later purchased by A.G.'s oldest son, A.G. III, known as Gibson. After Gibson's premature death in the 1930s, Boquette Lodge was torn down as his children all then lived in Arizona and had no interest in the middle of the depression in retaining a vast camp in Willsboro. Today only three outbuildings of this once extensive camp remain. In 2008 Lea Paine Hight, a great granddaughter of AG

and her husband, Ian, built a year-round house at the site of the former camp in a style consistent with the remaining camp buildings, thus breathing new life into this corner of the place.

This southern part of the Paine property is more agricultural in character than the pavement barrens and wooded wetlands that surround Flat Rock Camp. Open fields and woodlands rolling down to the Lake and the River provide distant views of both the Green Mountains and the Adirondacks. The Boquet River, once navigable by small craft to the falls in Willsboro, the site of the original pulp mill, is now quite shallow and has formed a considerable delta in the Lake. Along the River flood plain lies hardwood forest with associated wetlands, an area of significant ecological importance. At the site of the Fairchild homestead near the River mouth stood an immense black locust, no doubt planted in the late 18th century. This tree was one of the largest black locusts in the State of New York and was sadly felled in a recent severe storm. The River also supports a land-locked salmon fishery (a fish ladder was built about 20 years ago at the old pulp mill dam in town), which may some day rival the Atlantic salmon fishery for which the Boquet was famous in the 18th and early to mid 19th century.

In recent years, The Nature Conservancy acquired over a mile of shoreline on the southerly side of the River where it enters the Lake, including a spectacular sand beach on the Lake itself. Working cooperatively with the Town of Willsboro, substantially all of this shoreline has been protected as part of the Noblewood Park and Nature Preserve now owned by the Town. In addition the Conservancy and the Town are working together on a long term basis to protect via purchase and/or conservation easements the remaining southerly River shoreline area from Noblewood up to the former site of the pulp mill. The Paine family has contributed substantially to these further efforts to protect the Boquet River corridor.

Quite a bit of history attaches to this part of the Boquet River. Both sides used the mouth of the River for concealment during the French and Indian wars. General "Gentleman Johnny" Burgoyne and his army encamped both north and south of the mouth of the River for a couple of weeks in June of 1777 on their way south to the capture of Fort Ticonderoga and eventual defeat and surrender at the Battle of Saratoga. It was here that the General engaged in his then controversial parley with his Indian allies, promising money and booty for scalping and killing innocent, civilian non-combatants and destroying their homes. After Burgoyne's defeat and surrender, British troops from Canada undertook a scorched earth expedition in the Champlain Valley later in 1777 to deny food and shelter to the American troops. Only a handful of houses in Willsboro may have survived the perils of those revolutionary times.

The mouth of the Boquet was also the site of a British raid on Willsboro during the War of 1812, where a British raiding party was badly mauled by local militia after burning a storehouse and the grist mill at the falls. This was the last hostile activity that took place on the River.

Finally, one of the unique aspects of Flat Rock Camp and the entire 1,000 acre estate is that essentially all of the property remains today in Paine family ownership over a century after A.G. first began acquiring his land in Willsboro. Currently, the third through sixth generations of the Paine family occupy or visit the various houses and camps on the property at varied times of the year. The Paine family (and their Potts relatives) have indeed a "sense of place" in the Champlain Valley. This continuity of ownership in a single family over so many generations is relatively rare among the Adirondack Great Camps.

Whatever the future may hold for the Paine family, thanks to the conservation easement held by The Nature Conservancy, the natural character of the land, with all its varied natural resources, will endure for future generations.