



adirondacks, usa

Adirondack Great Camps

In the heart of New York State's Adirondack Mountains are unique architectural wonders that offer a glimpse into the lavish lifestyles of America's wealthiest families during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The "Gilded Age" in America was a time of rapid economic growth, and those who achieved such wealth celebrated it like never before. It was during this era that the Adirondack Park became one of the favorite playgrounds for the rich and famous, and the origin of the American vacation.

Adirondack "great camps" were as synonymous with the Gilded Age as the names Vanderbilt, Carnegie and Rockefeller. Designed to blend into their natural surroundings, these sprawling compounds spanned the most coveted shorelines of the Adirondacks – as well as some of the most remote. From Raquette Lake to Upper Saranac Lake – camps could take weeks to get to; so the glittering elite of the early 19th century made the trek in early summer for the season.

What makes a great camp?

Great camps are family compounds of cabins mostly built during the late 19th century as summer homes for the wealthy during what's known as the Gilded Age, an era of rapid economic, technological and industrial growth. Not your typical "camp," great camps are grandiose and sprawling complexes along the shorelines of the Adirondacks often with a main house, guest houses, boat houses and other structures, often connected by covered walkways. The properties were built by local craftsmen using materials native to the region in a distinctive rustic style that blends into the natural surroundings – what's become known as Adirondack Rustic Style.

Traveling in style

Traveling to the Adirondack great camps during the Gilded Age was no small feat. The family and their friends who were visiting for the summer would board a boat or train in the city bound for the Albany area, where they would then access a different train to take them into the Adirondacks, eventually connecting with a stagecoach along rough roads, another small train and sometimes a small steamship to their property. This would occur with all of their clothing and property needed for the season, packed in multiple trunks.

Housekeeping staff would travel a few weeks ahead of the family with all supplies needed to "open" camp for the season, preparing for the family and their guests.

The father of the Adirondack great camp

Known for being the father of the Adirondack great camp, William West Durant was born the son of a railroad baron with an eye toward expanding his prospects into the Adirondacks. Durant's father tasked him with designing a retreat for entertaining wealthy investors and property developers.

The Adirondack “great camp” building boom spanned from the 1880s through the 1920s, yet the style remains popular today, spreading to regions far outside the Adirondacks. Built with local labor and materials, Adirondack great camps embodied the values of the naturalist movement of the late 1800s. Some are so remarkable that they have been deemed national historic landmarks.

Camp Pine Knot

Built over a thirteen-year period beginning in 1877 on the shores of Raquette Lake, Camp Pine Knot was the original Adirondack great camp and has since epitomized the great camp architectural style we know today. Durant designed Camp Pine Knot into a compound cluster of buildings that allowed privacy to coexist with a sense of community. After a long stretch of living lavishly and spending frivolously on the building of great camps, William West Durant sold Camp Pine Knot to wealthy railroad industrialist Collis P. Huntington in 1895. Huntington passed a few years later, and the camp remained empty for nearly 50 years until his heirs gifted the estate to SUNY Cortland in 1949. Cortland has since renamed the compound Huntington Memorial Outdoor Education Center and hosts school groups year-round.

Camp Uncas

Built for his own use and began in 1890, Camp Uncas, nestled on the shore of Lake Mohegan, was the second of Durant's Adirondack great camps. The camp was composed mainly of resources gathered and forged on-site and was completed in two years. Camp Uncas was sold to J. Pierpont Morgan in 1896, who enjoyed it until his passing in 1913. From thereon, the camp remained with the Morgan family until Margaret Emerson, the widow of Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt, bought the estate in 1947.

Mrs. Vanderbilt left Camp Uncas to a foundation, which eventually sold it to the Rockland County Boy Scouts. Camp Uncas was returned to private use in 1975, and thereafter was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1987, and was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2008.

Great Camp Sagamore

Daunting debt did not deter Durant from spearheading the building of his third Adirondack great camp, which was destined to be the most expansive and expensive yet. Built over the course of 1895-1897, Great Camp Sagamore was built on the shores of Shedd Lake which sits to the south of Raquette Lake.

In 1901, Durant fell into financial hardship due to a lawsuit brought on by his sister over the mismanagement of the family estate. Great Camp Sagamore was sold to Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt, who renamed Shedd Lake to Sagamore Lake, and improved the compound with running water, flush toilets, a sewage system, hydroelectric plant, and an outdoor bowling alley. In 1915, Alfred perished during the Lusitania sinking, leaving Great Camp Sagamore to his widow, Margaret. Margaret used the camp seasonally for years before transferring it to Syracuse University, which operated a conference center on-site. Great Camp Sagamore was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2000. Currently, the camp is run by the Sagamore Institute of the Adirondacks, which offers accommodations, educational programming, and public guided tours seasonally.

Camp Santanoni

The sprawling compound and National Historic Landmark known as Camp Santanoni is a must-see attraction for the adventurous traveler. Once one of the most sophisticated and treasured great camps of its era, this secluded complex provides a 9.5-mile wilderness mountain biking or hiking experience that will lead you to one of the great treasures of the Adirondack Region. Open seasonally, Santanoni offers guided tours, residential programs, workshops, programs and lectures throughout the summer.

White Pine Camp

In Paul Smiths, White Pine Camp boasts its own storied elegance and historical importance as the one-time summer White House of President Calvin Coolidge. Built at the turn of the 20th century, White Pine Camp features the classic great camp style of multiple buildings that form the compound. Open year-round for overnight guests, White Pine boasts an indoor tennis court, bowling alley, and two bathhouses, as well as the iconic Japanese Tea House extending into Osgood Pond on its own peninsula.

Many other great camps are still standing (roughly 35 in total), and are in-use as private residences or hotels. These include (among others):

- The Point Resort (Rockefeller)
- Blue Hedges (General Hiram Duryea)
- Lake Kora (Timothy Woodruff, NY Lt. Governor)
- Topridge (Post), now owned by Harlan Crow
- Moss Ledge (Ballantine)
- Flat Rock (Paine family)
- Kildare Club (Webb / Vanderbilt)

Protecting Adirondack History

Adirondack Architectural Heritage (AARCH) oversees the preservation of many great camps and other rustic buildings throughout the Adirondack Park. As a non-profit, AARCH acts as a steward for the region's architectural treasures, leading group tours and hosting exhibits and workshops to further understanding and conservation of the region's unique history.