

# REDISCOVERING THE FIRST WILDERNESS



**NORTHERN HUDSON RIVER INTER-MUNICIPAL REDEVELOPMENT  
ACTION PLAN UPDATE**

WITH THE  
WARREN COUNTY PLANNING DEPARTMENT



**SEPTEMBER 15, 2004**



**THE SARATOGA ASSOCIATES**

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Landscape Architects, Architects, Engineers, and Planners, P.C.  
Saratoga Springs ■ New York City ■ Boston

***PREPARED FOR:***

**WARREN COUNTY PLANNING DEPARTMENT**

**AND**

**THE TOWNS OF:**

**JOHNSBURG**

**THURMAN**

**WARRENSBURG**

**STONY CREEK**

**CHESTER**

**HADLEY**

**LAKE LUZERNE**

**CORINTH**

**AND THE**

**VILLAGE OF CORINTH**

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SECTION I  
INTRODUCTION

## INTRODUCTION

In 1995, Warren County purchased the forty-mile right-of-way for the former Adirondack Branch of the Delaware and Hudson Railroad, extending from the town of Corinth in Saratoga County to the hamlet of North Creek in the Warren County town of Johnsburg. Since the 1860s, that rail line has played a central role in various aspects of Adirondack life. Its original passenger service fostered the proliferation of great camps at the turn of the last century. Its freight operations supported the growth of the wood and paper industries, and served as a vital link for mining operations in Tahawus. In the aftermath of the 1932 Lake Placid Olympics, it transported the first generation of downhill skiers from points south to Gore Mountain.

Following its acquisition by the County, the former Adirondack Branch is taking on a new role in the region. The line remains available to provide freight service to local industry. It has also become the focus of tourism development activities along the Northern Hudson River. A tourism excursion railroad is now operating on an eight-mile segment featuring roundtrips from North Creek to Riparius during the summer and early fall seasons. Warren County is actively developing ways to expand the tourism potential of the railroad right-of-way as a springboard to enhance tourism and economic development along the entire Northern Hudson Corridor from Saratoga Springs to Tahawas.

Warren County's investments, combined with key sources of federal support, established improvements for passenger and freight service extending as far south as Saratoga Springs. Retiring U.S. Rep. Jerry Solomon was instrumental in accessing federal funds through the Intermodal Surface Transportation Enhancement Act (ISTEA). Five million dollars was allocated for improving the rail line between Saratoga and North Creek. An additional \$5 million was utilized for the Saratoga Springs rail station renovation reconstruction project, which was completed in the spring of 2004. An additional \$6 million was set aside for the planning and implementation of a commuter train Demonstration Project between Saratoga Springs and Albany. Congressman John Sweeney from the 20<sup>th</sup> District of New York has also played an important role in securing additional funding and continues to support efforts of the First Wilderness Heritage Corridor.

This Final Design Report shall be presented to the New York State Department of Transportation with representative graphics coordinated through Clough Harbour & Associates LLP which serves as the Design Approval Document for stations proposed in the First Wilderness Heritage Corridor (FWHC), NYSDOT Project Identification Number 1755. This report and action plan establishes development principles and outlines specific plans, which will lead to the redevelopment of the Northern Hudson River Corridor through complementary development of specified nodes within communities located along the rail line. A full range of tourism services, lodging, active and passive recreation, historic interpretive sites, cultural destinations, railroad experience and economic development opportunities are planned to meet the needs of the adventure and historic cultural travelers in their rediscovery of The First Wilderness. This work has been accomplished through an intermunicipal agreement. The Warren County towns of Johnsburg, Thurman, Stony Creek, Warrensburg, Chester and Lake Luzerne have joined with the towns of Hadley and Corinth in Saratoga County to create corridor revitalization plans under the aegis of the New York State Department of State's Local Waterfront Revitalization Program. The original study

“Rediscovering the First Wilderness – Intermunicipal Redevelopment Strategy for the Northern Hudson River” was prepared to analyze the potential of the corridor provides the basis for much of the work proposed in this updated document.

### **The New York State Department of State's Local Waterfront Revitalization Program**

The Department of State's Local Waterfront Revitalization Program promotes the creation of Local Waterfront Revitalization Plans (LWRPs) by local municipalities. Each LWRP formulates waterfront development objectives by adapting statewide legislation and policies to the unique and individual requirements of each municipality. The LWRP also outlines strategies that are used to meet the municipality's objectives.

The LWRP process involves cooperation with State, County, local, and private agencies as well as an appointed LWRP Advisory Committee that included local businesses as well as village and town residents. The LWRP outlines specific projects and policies to encourage environmental protection, foster economic development, protect valuable water resources, and improve public waterfront access. Once enacted into law, the LWRP will ensure that State and local actions proposed within the waterfront area are conducted in a manner consistent with the policies of the LWRP.

One of the components of the LWRP is the identification of long-term uses and specific projects along the waterfront and related lands. These uses and projects, in conjunction with an established management program, can significantly increase a community's ability to attract and manage development activities that complement the unique cultural and natural characteristics of its waterfront.

Once completed and approved by the New York State Secretary of State, the LWRP provides a community with the local controls to guide waterfront development. More importantly, a distinct benefit of the LWRP is the legal ability to ensure that all actions proposed for its waterfront only occurs in a fashion prescribed by the LWRP. This “consistency” provision is a strong tool that assures that State and local governments work in unison, and not at cross purposes, to build a stronger economy and a healthier waterfront environment.

### **Project Approach: The First Wilderness - Enhancing Economic Opportunities by Creating a Corridor-wide Tourism Experience**

The development of a tourism railroad is the first step in revitalizing the Northern Hudson Corridor. The first seasons of operating the Upper Hudson Railroad have met or exceeded expectations. However, tourism railroads become sustainable only if they are developed as one component of a larger tourism experience. Consequently, the challenge and the opportunity presented by the tourism railroad is to use it as a catalyst for integrating the smaller-scale attractions found throughout the corridor into a single experience for visitors.

This report identifies and defines such an experience. The Adirondacks were the first place where Americans realized that wilderness was going to be a distinguishing and *permanent* feature of their

civilization. By the 1880s, more had been written about the Adirondacks than any other wilderness area in America. By the 1890s, the Adirondack Park was created as the largest protected wilderness area east of the Mississippi. Since then, the Adirondack Park has challenged each generation to define the role of wilderness in our increasingly urbanized civilization. As illustrated on the corridor map, the Saratoga-to-North Creek corridor was instrumental in establishing the Adirondacks as the First Wilderness.

The thrust of this study is to define the “First Wilderness” as a consistent tourist experience that can serve as the basis for attracting and retaining tourism activity throughout the corridor. This will involve a continued comprehensive inventory and assessment of community resources; a definition of the tourism market opportunities accessible from the corridor; and development of a tourist experience which integrates existing and potential tourist attractions into a "critical mass," which strengthens the corridor's name recognition and attractiveness in the tourist market place. Corridor, and community issues and actionable items have been developed to implement and enhance the experience and thereby realize the market and economic development opportunities available to communities in the study corridor.



SECTION II  
CREATING AN INTEGRATED TOURISM  
EXPERIENCE ALONG THE UPPER HUDSON  
CORRIDOR

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## CREATING AN INTEGRATED TOURISM EXPERIENCE ALONG THE UPPER HUDSON CORRIDOR

According to the 1995 Report of the Federal Task Force on Cultural Tourism, sustainable Tourism in the United States may be achieved:

- Where visitation is a recognized part of a local or regional economy. A heritage site or park cut off from a region's wealth and civic life may not have the help it needs when priorities change at the state capital or in Washington.
- Where people visit places in which people work and live.
- Where visitors tour along a circuit so that smaller places get their share of visitors but, at the same time, are not destroyed by over-visitation.
- Where there is a local or regional identity of which residents are proud and of where that identity is interpreted in many ways at many sites.
- Where there is an understanding that tourism requires accomplished hosts as well as visitors who spend the night, and where a community's hospitality is genuine.
- Where traditions—family, church, civic, and cultural—are cherished by everyone and are considered by residents and public officials and businesses as the lifeblood of their community, not only for their economic benefits but also for the qualities that they add to the community.

As Table 1 indicates, the previously mentioned survey of tourism operators in the Adirondack Park suggests that the Adirondacks have the potential to tap into the growing tourism segments related to outdoor recreation and heritage tourism. When asked about the strengths and weaknesses of Adirondack Park tourism, the strengths most often listed by tourism operators related to outdoor recreation and family vacations. The weaknesses generally concerned items related to infrastructure and promotions (e.g., signage, tour bus accommodations, and parking). However, the operators also indicated that the region suffered from a lack of historic and cultural learning opportunities.

**Table 1.**  
**Business Operators' Perceptions on Strengths and Weaknesses**  
**of Adirondack Park Tourism**

**Most Frequently Mentioned:**

<u>Strengths</u>	<u>Weaknesses</u>
Opportunity to see wildlife	Tour bus accommodations
Access to lakes and rivers	Directional signage
Summer recreation opportunities	Historical & cultural learning opportunities
Family vacation experience	Advertising/promotion in outside area
Access to trails	Parking in business districts
Winter recreation opportunities	
Adventure vacations	

Source: Holmes & Higgins, *Tourism, Business, Community and Environment in the Adirondack Park* February, 1999.

Thus, while the “raw materials” for cultural and heritage tourism exist in the Adirondack Park and Warren County, they need to be packaged in comprehensive interpretive and promotional programming. In the publication, *Getting Started: How to Succeed in Heritage Tourism*, The National Trust for Historic Preservation developed five principles that help create a sustainable heritage tourism industry in communities.

- Focus on authenticity and quality of experience.
- Preserve and protect resources.
- Make sites come alive.
- Find the fit between a community or region and tourism.
- Collaborate.

This original report “Rediscovering the First Wilderness, Inter Municipal Redevelopment Strategy for the Northern Hudson River” discusses an approach for developing the heritage tourism potential of the Upper Hudson Corridor that combines history and culture with the region’s traditional strengths in outdoor recreation. This document serves as an update to the original report, builds upon the success of the initial strategies and further develops long term initiatives to implement the funding mechanisms, facilities and community amenities proposed within the First Wilderness Heritage Corridor.

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**The “First Wilderness” Experience: Realizing the Potential for Heritage Tourism in the Upper Hudson Corridor.**

*“If there is one thing the history of the Adirondacks teaches, it’s that the meaning of wilderness, like love, changes as soon as it’s defined.”*

Paul Schneider. *The Adirondacks: A History of America’s First Wilderness*. Henry Holt & Company, 1996.

Adventure travelers and historic cultural travelers share a common goal. Both groups wish to experience the essential character of the places they visit. For the adventure traveler, that character is found somewhere in the natural landscape. For the historic/cultural traveler, the essence of a place can be found in how people have cultivated and/or exploited that landscape over time. In both cases, these visitors are seeking a high-quality vacation built around both historic and current facts about the place. Neither of them wants a pre-digested theme park or pre-programmed set of activities that could take place in virtually any suburban location in the United States.

These travelers are seeking authenticity. The places that attract them can offer an experience built upon the area’s distinctive character. The basis for its attractiveness is an interpretation of the place that integrates the natural and built environment with arts, crafts, and stories from the area.

As described in the inventory, the Adirondacks were the first place where Americans realized that wilderness was going to be a distinguishing and *permanent* feature of their civilization. By the 1880s, more had been written about the Adirondacks than any other wilderness area in America. By the 1890s, the Adirondack Park was created as the largest protected wilderness area east of the Mississippi. Since then, the Adirondack Park has challenged each generation to define the role of wilderness in our increasingly urbanized civilization.

The Saratoga-to-North Creek corridor helped establish the Adirondacks as the First Wilderness. It is the logical starting place for those wishing to explore the possibilities of the First Wilderness. In 1771, the Jessup brothers’ one million-acre Totten and Crossfield Purchase from the Mohawks was the first sizeable European purchase in the Adirondacks. In 1813, the Fox Brothers invented log driving along the Schroon/Hudson Corridor.

Indeed, the Adirondacks may have been the place that colored how Americans thought of all their wilderness areas. For example, in 1837, during a trip to Schroon Lake with Thomas Cole, Asher Durand decided to become a landscape painter and began a career that helped define the American notion of wilderness. He helped create the Hudson River School of landscape painting based upon that original experience of the Adirondack wilderness.

In the 1870s, under the leadership of Dr. Thomas C. Durant, the Adirondack railroad was the first line to provide access to the Adirondacks from the New York City area and gave impetus to the development of the Great Camps and eco-tourism. It opened the Adirondacks to urban visitors a generation before similar railroads were completed in the Catskills. Following in the steps of his father Thomas, William West Durant had dreams of extending his line from Saratoga to Ogdensburg, and transforming the Adirondacks into a resort area replete with hotels, golf courses, and great camps. However, due to mismanagement and family squabbles, he failed to extend the tracks any farther than North Creek in Warren County. By the 1890s, the Adirondack Park was designated as a permanent wilderness area. A short time later, Durant left the Adirondacks altogether. Thanks to Durant's railroad (and his failure to extend it to Ogdensburg), this corridor was the place where American popular culture first confronted and first embraced the idea of a permanent wilderness. Since that time, each generation of residents and visitors must wrestle with the task of defining the role of wilderness in American society. That is the core of the attraction the Adirondacks still hold for campers, hikers, hunters, skiers, and all those who visit this area today.

## **PRINCIPLES FOR IMPLEMENTING THE “FIRST WILDERNESS” EXPERIENCE**

As indicated above, the First Wilderness experience can serve as a vehicle to highlight the attractiveness of the Upper Hudson Corridor to high-income travelers interested in outdoor recreation, sightseeing, and rest or relaxation. However, successfully implementing this concept will require more than just the creation and printing of a brochure with a logo. The five principles announced by the National Trust for Historic Preservation provide an excellent framework for discussing how to implement the First Wilderness Heritage Corridor.

### ***Focus on authenticity and quality of experience.***

A severe climate and a rugged terrain have shaped human life in the First Wilderness. In many areas, this has led to human settlement patterns that are rustic and robust. These conditions communicate something distinct about the First Wilderness. Consequently, redevelopment efforts must avoid “prettification” that is more closely associated with Vermont or Massachusetts. To date, the Hamlets of North Creek and Warrensburg have managed to maintain that rustic character in their redevelopment efforts. Similar care should be taken throughout the corridor.

In addition, part of the First Wilderness experience is about the creative tensions between desires for development versus conservation. These should not be glossed over, but should become an essential part of the interpretive story. Much more profound conflicts have been successfully included in interpretive programs in other areas. For example, tour guides at certain Civil War historic sites sometimes welcome visitors by explaining that the Civil War has been referred to in the South as the “War of the Northern Aggression,” introducing the visitor to the notion that divergent views of history still exist. An appropriate approach should be taken to recognize ongoing tensions or conflicts as part of the experience.

***Preserve and protect resources.***

Part of the legacy of the First Wilderness is the Adirondack Park and its commitment to preserve natural resources. This effort should be reflected in the First Wilderness experience. It is equally important to preserve and protect resources that reflect the economic, cultural, and historic legacies of the First Wilderness. The authenticity of the experience is strengthened if—consistent with environmental protection—it includes the continuation of traditional ways of making a living and socializing. While local residents may consider their annual firefighters’ picnic or ice cream social to be fairly ordinary, it may be a very valuable guide to help a tourist appreciate the traditional ways of life that help make up the First Wilderness. Highlighting and promoting such events will enhance the tourist experience and may also serve to infuse new interest and vitality in these local activities.

***Make sites come alive.***

A site that is actually used by a community is a much more compelling heritage tourism experience. Fragile or endangered materials and/or facilities should certainly be protected. However, if it is consistent with sound environmental and historic preservation practices, communities should continue to actively use those sites that illustrate their history and/or culture. To take a far-flung example, part of the appeal of the great European cathedrals to tourists is that these centuries-old structures are still being used for religious services and community gatherings. If traditional places of community life and work can be kept in use, they serve as much stronger attractions to tourists.

***Find the fit between a community or region and tourism.***

Historic/cultural tourism succeeds when the resources communicate what is special about this place, its environment, and its way of life. Such places quickly lose their appeal if efforts to accommodate tourists overwhelm the character of the place. Several places in southern Vermont have suffered from this dynamic. At the same time, if the Corridor is to benefit from tourism, visitors must feel welcome and comfortable. Through coordinated programs of signage and hospitality training, visitors can be directed to the features or event that make the area special. This will provide visitors with an enjoyable experience, while at the same time minimizing any unanticipated disruptions to community life caused by errant or uninformed visitors.

***Collaborate.***

A successful heritage tourism experience comes from the creation of consistent messages and a well-coordinated series of experiences for each visitor. This can only be done through the close collaboration of existing organizations and enterprises. No one single agency could keep track of all the ingredients that make a compelling heritage tourism experience. Even if one agency undertook every tourist-related activity in the area, the resulting experience would be cut off from the local groups and businesses that give the community its distinctive character. So collaboration is essential if visitors are to have an experience that truly reflects community character.

At the same time, collaboration is essential for effective marketing and promotion of historic/cultural experiences. The First Wilderness experience involves outdoor recreation, railroading, dining, local cultural events, and other opportunities to explore the community. Each one of these enterprises must be prepared to refer its visitors to other destinations within the area. Similarly, the “market presence” of such an experience can only be maximized if the participating organizations and enterprises undertake joint marketing and promotional efforts. For example, a local historical society or local restaurant is each more likely to attract new clientele if they are identified as key components of a First Wilderness Experience. This would enable them to each capture new visitors who are attracted by a First Wilderness campaign that is aggressively promoted in markets that either the society or the restaurant could never afford to reach through its own advertising budget.