

Keene Valley Country Club
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Narrative Statement of Significance

Summary Paragraph

The Keene Valley Country Club is significant at the local level under **Criterion A: Entertainment/Recreation**. Since 1902, the Keene Valley Country Club or K.V.C.C. has been a summertime gathering place for relaxation, sport, and community for area residents and their guests. Located in the heart of the hamlet of Keene Valley, NY K.V.C.C. is situated on the banks of the Ausable River and surrounded by the Adirondack high peaks.

The Keene Valley Country Club is also significant under **Criterion C: Architecture**, as the clubhouse and contributing buildings and site are unusually well preserved, and retain much of the original fabric, and layout, little has been added or changed since 1902.

Criteria A: Entertainment/Recreation

Historical Overview: The Settlement of Keene Flats – The Hamlet of Keene Valley

In 1794 Nathaniel Mallory staked out 640 acres for himself of valuable river valley lands containing Hulls Falls and part of the “Great Flats” of present-day Marcy Field to the south. In 1798 he was issued patents on approximately 9000 more acres of bottomland along the east and west branches of the Ausable River, which became known as Mallory’s Grant, and within which lie the hamlets of present-day Keene and most of Keene Valley. The rest of the early settlement of Keene Valley lies within the Richards Survey. The earliest settlers came up the Ausable River from Lake Champlain to Keene and made improvements to the Old Military tracts of land granted to Revolutionary War veterans, or anyone else willing to make improvements.

The first tracts claimed, cleared and settled, were those with potential for water power, or tillable flatlands along the river between Keene and Johns Brook. By 1798, eleven settlers had claimed parcels and built eight dwellings, among them Newell Reynolds and Levi Dibble in Keene Heights (now Keene) and Stephen Estes in what became known as Keene Flats, (now Keene Valley.)

The 1840s saw the expanding reach of roads and railroads in the region. While New York State made improvements to the Northwest Bay Rd. between Westport, Elizabethtown, Keene, and North Elba, efforts to improve seasonal Chapel Pond route through Keene Flats to Keene were hampered by the mountainous terrain, and Keene Flats remained an intriguing cul-de-sac where residents took a few adventurous summer boarders. The first visitors were the artist of the Hudson River and Barbizon Schools, such as Thomas Cole, John Kensett, Asher Durand, and William Hart, who came in the late 1840s and early 1850s. Exhibitions of their paintings brought the next wave of wealthy, intellectual, urban visitors, to board at local farmhouses. The 1850s saw downturns in the iron industry, and a disastrous flood in 1856 wiped out fences, bridges, and mills to Keeseville. These effects, coupled with the loss of wages and workforce to the Civil War, were catastrophic to the economy of the region, and paying borders of this class were surely welcomed. Many returned year after year, and by the mid-1860s, some were buying or building their own summer homes and “cottages.” These arrivals included more artists, such as Roswell Shurtleff, Alexander Wyant, Homer Dodge Martin, and John Fitch, as well as notable clergy, doctors, lawyers, and writers, including Charles Dudley Warner, and the Reverends Twitchell and William Hodge.

In the early 1870s, lured by William Murray’s *Adventures in the Wilderness or Camp Life in the Adirondacks*,

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‘Murray’s Fools’ rushed in, and local entrepreneurial families took notice. The Tahawus House, built by Norman Dibble in 1872, was the first of Keene Valley’s large hotels. Purchased by George Egglefield in 1883 and enlarged to sleep 200, the Tahawus House was the center of village social life until it burned in 1906. By 1875 the railroad connected Boston and New York to the Adirondacks via Westport. Summer visitors had successfully petitioned for Keene Flats to be re-named Keene Valley, and the romance of wilderness tourism took hold.

Keene Valley developed from the early settler’s cabins, farms, and forges of the 1850’s to the entrepreneurs, lumber mills, inns, and guiding services of the 1860s, ’70s, and ’80s, and into the cultural and social institutions of the sophisticated turn of the century citizenry. Keene Valley was then located at the end of a cul-de-sac; its “discovery” by artist-led to its development as a summer haven for painters, clergy, philosophers, outdoor enthusiast, conservationist, and writers. It continues to be such a haven, though its relative isolation ended after the 1932 Olympics with the completion of a connecting state highway to Lake Placid.

The Development of the Summer Community

The end of the 1870s revealed an increasing change in the relationship between the summer people and the local residents, the patrons, and the patronized. The town church so crucial to summer residents was built in 1878. Although services had been held at the little red schoolhouse for many years, the summer people felt the need for a proper church. The summer residents also felt a need for a library. With the donation of \$200 from Sarah Dunham to purchase books, the library was founded, but it was not until after 1885 that the Keene Valley Library Club became a force in the community. Between 1885 and 1905, the number of summer homes in Keene Valley doubled, and a pattern of separation began, with year-round dwellings located in the hamlets and summer homes located up on surrounding plateaus. Intellectuals, artists, and reformers continued their summer migrations to Keene’s “philosophers camps” tucked away at Glenmore, Summerbrook, and Putnam Camp. Winslow Homer, Horace Bushnell, William James, Felix Adler (who started the Adirondack Trail Improvement Society in 1897), and even Freud and Jung made appearances. The “blue line” was drawn in 1895, establishing the Adirondack Park as a preserve to be kept “forever wild.” By 1910 summer residents owned more than half the property in Keene Valley. The remaining large hotels were in decline, and the relationship between summer and year-round residents became less of a partnership. The economy of the hamlet revolved primarily around servicing the seasonal population.¹

From 1885 to 1910, the physical, economic, and social structure of Keene Valley underwent a dramatic change; the hotels were in decline, the center of town was removed to make way for the country club, the woods and streams that had been unrestricted now became private property. The burgeoning summer community and their acquisition of vast tracts of land, owning more property than the local people, upended the economy and displaced the local population. The local population no longer had control of the development and future of their town. The summer population was entering a new phase. No longer interested in meeting fellow vacationers or mingling among the local people, the summer residents retreated to their cottages. Toward the end of the 1890s, Keene Valley took on a new social character. Transforming the town, the summer people founded the country club, built the library and the Neighborhood House, and instigated social programs for the local residents. The summer community was remaking Keene Valley.²

¹ Neville, Marcy, *Draft Keene and Keene Valley Historic District National Register Nomination*, AARCH files, Keeseville, NY. 2005, p.4.

² Plunz, Richard, *Two Adirondack Hamlets in History: Keene and Keene Valley*, Purple Mountain Press, Fleischmanns, NY 1999, p117

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The Development of the Keene Valley Country Club

Perhaps one of the most notable names within the summer community responsible for the change in Keene Valley was the Notman family. The Notman family's belief "that ugliness can be made beautiful" resulted in the remaking of the town to reflect the new social structures and attitudes. The local people were removed from the town's center, displaced by the country club. If a building did not fit the Notman definition of beautiful, it was removed, remodeled, or relocated. No landmark of the old town was left untouched.³ The Notman's were also the reformers and philanthropists who felt the need to improve living conditions and build community institutions. In 1901, after a typhoid scare, George Notman created the first municipal water system, and then a model dairy farm, including a pond where ice could be cut for refrigeration. Around this time, Notman also began purchasing the lands on the west side of the river around Beede's sawmill and clearing them of undesirable structures, to make way for the Keene Valley Country Club (K.V.C.C.), as a gathering place where the summer population's youth could meet, play tennis and swim. This area was the industrial center of Keene Valley and consisted of lumberyards and warehouses, homes, and shops – including a saloon, a school, and a bandshell. The saloon and the school were relocated across Main Street, and by 1906 the lumberyard was gone, enabling the country club to complete its expansion. Two of the homes Notman purchased were moved and placed together as the present K.V.C.C. clubhouse. The clubhouse was made available as a meeting place for local men after the club closed for the season.

Charles Henry Satchell and family were the only black residents in the town in early times, living in a small house on the road that now leads to the Keene Valley Country Club. The early photo of Mr. Satchell and his daughter shows them standing before his repair shop. The old Band Stand- yes, we had a local band – can be seen at the left of the picture. The sawmill shows in the background, and Norman Dibble's log barn stands at the far left in front of Baxter Mountain. The corner of the schoolyard fence can just be seen in the foreground. This picture was taken in the late eighteen hundreds. Here may be considered the cultural center, for home band concerts were given, or it might be thought of as the ghetto if one looks at the rutted roads and ramshackle buildings. It's all in the point of view of the beholder.⁴



³ Plunz, Richard, *Two Adirondack Hamlets in History: Keene and Keene Valley*, Purple Mountain Press, Fleischmanns, NY 1999, p.119.

⁴ Holt, Charles, *Adirondack Frontier, Stories of Keene Flats After 1776*, Denton Publications, Elizabethtown, NY, 1976, p.59.

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There is no record of what became of the displaced families, and it can well imagine the traumatic impact the razing of the center of town had on the local population.

The Notman's had hoped to build a golf course at part of the club, but the well-established course at the AuSable Club in nearby St. Huberts was not to be rivaled. While many events such as plays, pageants, and afternoon teas were held at the K.V.C.C. in the early years, it was primarily a tennis club and much of club life centered around the courts. The first two courts were laid out on the level space (created from the graded waste from the demolition of the "slums") west of the clubhouse. Space was limited by the location of the men's bathhouse (the original converted schoolhouse) and at the ends by the location of the road and Bill Morrison's cobbler shop. Bill Morrison was a tenant of Orin Holt who was not willing to put him out for the sake of the country club, but upon Mr. Notman's and the village decision that the aging Bill Morrison would be better off in the County Home, once relocated Mr. Notman acquired the land from Orin Holt. This enabled Mr. Notman to complete the final grading at the south end of the courts and excavate for the swimming pool.

In the fall of 1905, Mr. Notman purchased the sawmill lot from Fletcher Beede, which doubled the amount of land available for club use. Two more tennis courts were laid out employing the then little known surfacing techniques for clay tennis courts. It was not until the late 19th century that clay courts emerged when William Renshaw, seven time Wimbledon champion, decided to cover his grass court with a thin layer of red powder. He did this to protect the grass from burning in the scorching summer sun, by grinding down the rejected clay pots that did not pass inspection from the town of Vallauris in the south of France unknowingly developing the first red clay tennis court. In the United States and at the K.V.C.C., however, a different type of clay court was adopted instead of the European red clay seen, Green Clay was used. This method of screening sand into three or four sizes on the bottom, providing large rock as a foundation for drainage, and gradually filling the interstices with finer stone and sand was skillfully mastered and continues to be used to this day.

Even before the establishment of the Keene Valley Country Club, people had gathered at the property of George and Katharine Notman to play tennis, drink tea and talk. In 1902, the K.V.C.C. was officially founded as a voluntary organization, sustained by the efforts and generosity of its members.

The Notmans allowed the club the use of their land, refurbished or moved buildings on the property for the use of the membership, and subsidized the club's operation. Existing cottages were joined to make a clubhouse; an old schoolhouse was reconstructed as the men's locker room; a saloon was relocated for the use of the women.



Circa 1910. The member-cast of a theatrical production in the clubhouse



Circa 1960. A sing-along in the clubhouse.

In 1923, the family of Charles Laight, a past president of the club, donated about 60 acres, on which the paddle-tennis court now stands. Over time, the club had to rely less on the patronage of the Notmans and, in 1938, began to charge membership dues to support the continued operation of the club. In 1946, the Notman heirs deeded the property and buildings to the club. In



Mr. Charles Laight

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1952 there was a substantial renovation of the swimming pool, which was originally built in 1916.⁵ From its very beginnings, K.V.C.C. held an exceptional place in the heart of the summer community and was gradually embraced by the local community as many summer residents became full time residence, married, and raised their children here. The membership at the 50th and 100th anniversary shows continued generations of membership.

On September 11, 1903, The Essex County Republican reported:

“The grounds of the Keene Valley Country Clubhouse are being graded, tennis courts built, and a golf ground arranged. The Country Club has a fine membership, and the clubhouse is a very popular place of amusement.”

K.V.C.C. Remarks made by Elliot B. Macrae at the 50th anniversary of the Keene Valley Country Club, Thursday, August 21, 1852.

“It will be my privilege to introduce those who will take part in the 50th-anniversary celebration of the K.V.C.C. This little club has brought joy to a great many people. We owe much to those that have gone before, and we must do our best to keep the club on an even keel so it will be here for another fifty years. It is interesting to note that there has been such continuity in the membership. In some instances, we are now in the third or fourth generation of the early members. We are truly a family club.”⁶

Criteria C: Architecture

The Keene Valley Country Club is also significant in the area of architecture as it embodies the characteristics of early 20th century vernacular cottage style, recreational buildings and grounds. The clubhouse, buildings, and site are unusually well preserved, and retain much of the original fabric, and layout, little has been added or changed since 1902.

Sometime before 1900, George Notman purchased two small houses near the AuSable river belonging to Lont Hammer and the Weldon's, part of the “slum removal” project. The Hammers and Weldons had lived there at least since 1890. Notman moved these houses together to form an “L” and making the beginnings of the current clubhouse. Soon after, he arranged for the construction of a tennis court, and the present club began to take shape.

The development of the buildings and grounds as described Winifred Notman Prince :

Four small buildings had been salvaged from the rural slum area and could be made to serve: the Lont Hammer two-room house stood on the river bank, which Mr. Notman had reinforced with a stone wall and attached to it was a shed from the Jaquish barns. Near the back of of the schoolyard was a one-room building which had the odor of sanctity because it had been the first village school and in it had preached on summer Sunday mornings, eminent divines from New England who had heard of the beauties of the valley. The fourth building was a simple square structure from which John Ledwith had dispensed cheer.⁷

It is quite remarkable that this original layout and assemblage of buildings remain intact with a high degree of integrity.

⁵ Information provided by the Keene Valley Country Club

⁶ Prince, Augusta, with Frissie Cole and Barbara Kaufman, *Keene Valley Country Club 1902-2002, One Hundred Summers by the River*, Keene Valley Country Club, 2002. P.12

⁷ Plunz, Richard, *Two Adirondack Hamlets in History: Keene and Keene Valley*, Purple Mountain Press, Fleischmanns, NY 1999,p.127.