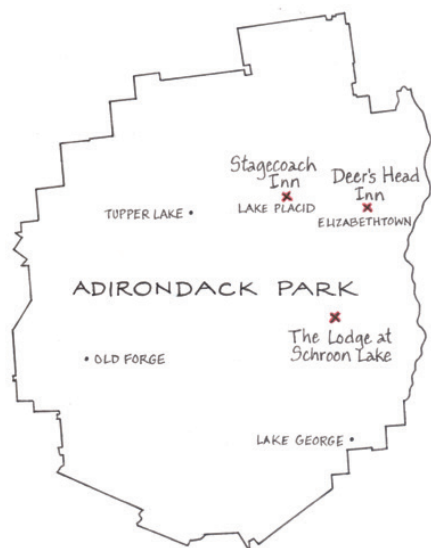




In Elizabethtown, the Deer's Head Inn stands as the oldest continuously operating tavern in the Adirondacks. Today, the business features a restaurant offering seasonal food, a tavern and rooms.

New keepers of the inns

Investors in historic hospitality landmarks preserve a piece of the past



TEXT BY HOLLY RIDDLE

PHOTOS BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA

In the Adirondacks, history isn't just preserved in museums; it's served on a plate. The region's hospitality tradition ensures the lakeside tavern where your grandparents slung back beers in their youth is likely the same spot serving your favorite wings today. The inn where your ancestors rested their heads while traveling between small towns is likely still around in a new iteration.

Keeping these centuries-old buildings intact is hard work. Owners come and go, and historic properties face costly repairs. Keeping them viable requires a fresh touch and an invigorated sense of purpose. With a mix of careful stewardship and bold vision, a new wave of investors is ensuring these Adirondack landmarks remain anchored in their communities.



The owners in front of Deer's Head Inn in Elizabethtown, from left: Aaron Woolf, his wife Carolyn Sicher and Rob DeMuro.



The Stagecoach Inn is a historic inn and restaurant in Lake Placid with roots stretching back to 1780. Today, the business offers small suites for accommodations and fine dining with local seasonal menu options.

A place of light and community

In Elizabethtown, the Deer's Head Inn stands as the oldest continuously operating tavern in the Adirondacks. Established in 1808 as The Mansion House, the property evolved in the 1860s. The current building was an annex for a larger estate, the rest of which has long since vanished.

Presidents Benjamin Harrison and Grover Cleveland signed its guest books, and physicians treated soldiers injured in the Battle of Plattsburgh. Mary Brown, widow of the abolitionist John Brown, stayed at the inn while her husband's body lay in state at the courthouse across the street. Abolitionists used the building to harbor enslaved individuals fleeing toward Canada, and decades later, bootleggers used it as a safe stop on Prohibition-era runs between Montreal and New York City.

When asked why the inn has endured so long, co-owner Aaron Woolf joked that it's the french fries. His wife and co-owner, Carolyn Sicher, points to a more practical reason: its proximity to county government buildings and its strategic location along Route 9.

"Route 9 was the main thoroughfare between Albany and Montreal," Sicher says. "You drove or rode by here, and you stopped." The geographical advantage remains true today. Just recently, a traveler called her at 10 p.m., needing a room midway through a drive from New York City to McGill University. "This happens all the time," Sicher says. "And, I'm sure it happened even more back then."

Woolf has local family ties, but he and Sicher had no plans to enter hospitality until 2016. The transition happened almost serendipitously after Woolf lost a bid for Congress. Before their friend and eventual co-owner Rob DeMuro could even propose a partnership, the small-town rumor mill beat him to it. Woolf actually overheard locals whispering rumors that his next move was buying the temporarily shuttered inn.

"I really dreamed of representing our community in Washington," Woolf says. "That winter was long, cold and dark, and I'll be the first to admit it felt bruising to lose that election." But driving his daughter to school past the darkened building on deep winter afternoons sparked a new ambition. "It looked like a black hole where a place of light and community should be. I thought about all those things I said I wanted to do as a Congressperson. Buying the inn wasn't going to Washington, but it was a way to address the exact things any true representative of this community should be trying to build on."

Today, Woolf, Sicher and DeMuro have revived the inn into a vibrant gathering spot that anchors Elizabethtown. Woolf's efforts of community revitalization can be seen with his latest project across the street, as he works with partners to turn the former pharmacy building into a gathering hub, bike shop and co-working space.

The oldest building in Lake Placid

Nearly 30 miles away in Lake Placid, Kelly Collins was mirroring Woolf's transition of a high-stakes career move into historic preservation. Her own leap of faith began at the Stagecoach Inn, believed to be the oldest surviving prop-

erty in Lake Placid, with roots stretching back to 1780.

As the first structure erected in Lake Placid, the building along Old Military Road originally served as a weigh station, then a stagecoach stop, an 1830s boarding house, and eventually a private residence. Collins fell in love with the building as a child and hosted her engagement party there in 1992. The property retained a special hold on her heart until early 2025, when fate intervened.

"Literally the day after I decided to retire from a career in Washington, D.C., working in cybersecurity, my cousins messaged me that my favorite inn was for sale," Collins says. "I had



Clockwise from left: **A colorful seared tuna entree from the Stagecoach menu. Stagecoach owner Kelly Collins, left, with chef Victoria Breyette, right, raise a glass in one of the dining rooms. Updates were underway on the exterior of the Stagecoach Inn this summer.**





Clockwise from top left: **The Lodge At Schroon Lake** underwent a multi-million dollar renovation in 2022 and offers upscale accommodations and dining. Food and Beverage Manager Peter Hlophe seen at the Brown Swan, which is the restaurant that is part of The Lodge at Schroon Lake. The property has operated since the late 1800s under names such as the Brown Swan Club and, later, the Word of Life conference center.

no background in hospitality, but Lake Placid has always been my emotional hometown—my family has been here for over 200 years. It was a leap of faith for a building I loved.”

Collins preserved the inn's heritage while putting her own stamp on the interior. Unassuming from the roadway, the building features a refined, traditional Adirondack style, complete with elevated accommodations and a restaurant earning renown for both its locally sourced menu and its welcoming atmosphere. The rooms showcase local artwork sourced from Lake George to Tupper Lake.

Though the inn remains something of a hidden gem to locals who pass it daily, it draws global travelers from Manhattan to Australia. “I get a huge kick out of meeting people in town who’ve driven by it a thousand times without realizing we have a restaurant and inn,” Collins says. “It’s a beloved historic building that has witnessed the area’s glory days,

from the era of the Lake Placid Club to its resurgence as an Olympic Village, and now its incarnation today.”

Reviving a camp with 19th-century roots

Andrea Crisafulli chased a similar nostalgic pull at The Lodge at Schroon Lake. Having spent her childhood summers visiting her family’s nearby lake house, she grew up in awe of the historic property, which has operated since the late 1800s under names such as the Brown Swan Club and, later, the Word of Life conference center.

During the pandemic, Crisafulli noticed the property lacked its former luster and wondered if it might hit the market. When it did in 2021, she discovered it was already under contract. Undeterred, she reached out anyway. “I told them my vision was to restore what was there, to preserve the bones of the history rather than tear it down for condos,” Crisafulli says.

It turned out the prospective buyers shared her exact reverence for the landmark. Those buyers happened to be her friends Sonny and Julie Bonacio. “I reached out to them, and within 30 minutes of excited conversation, we decided to partner up.”

The team has heavily renovated the property to evoke the 1910s era of the Brown Swan Club, offering a classic Adirondack camp experience where families can relax and unplug (though modern amenities like fast Wi-Fi remain standard).

“I knew in my heart it would be a place where people could unwind and feel safe,” Crisafulli says. “We wanted to bring that classic camp family feel back.” The restoration has already struck an emotional chord with visitors. “We meet older guests walking the grounds with deep nostalgia. Some worked in the restaurant when it was the Brown Swan Club back in their 20s. It literally gives me goosebumps.”

Moving forward, Crisafulli plans to gather these oral histories from local community members to weave directly into the resort’s identity—ensuring that while the touch is fresh, the history remains firmly intact. ■



HOLLY RIDDLE is a lifestyle and business journalist based in Plattsburgh. Her work is featured in regional and national publications, covering small businesses, food, agriculture and travel.