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Wake Robin Sugarbush

The Wake Robin sugarbush, and the associated Wake Robin Railroad were located along the south shore of Horseshoe Lake, with the sugar house and later syrup plant located at the far southeast corner of the lake (Figure 7.1). Some of the earliest maple sugaring activities at Horseshoe happened at the Wake Robin sugarbush, along with the Grasse River sugarbush. Lands located along the south shore of Horseshoe Lake where the Wake Robin sugarbush was established were purchased by A.A. Low on August 31, 1896 and September 1, 1896, were among the very earliest of Low's purchases at Horseshoe.¹

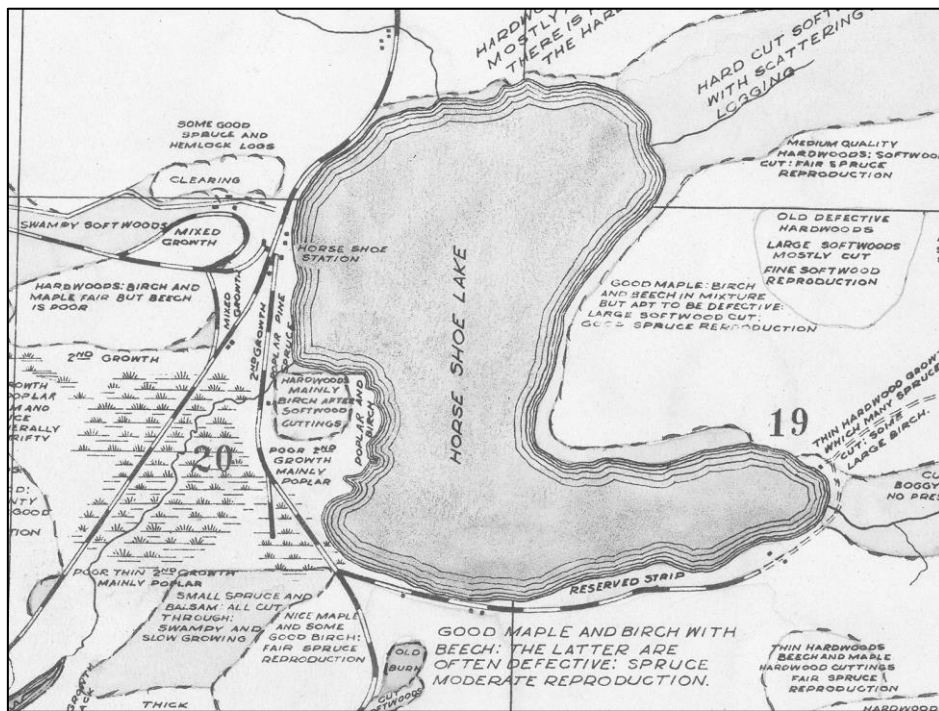


Figure 7.1: Excerpt from Connors and Sewell map of 1913 showing area around Horseshoe Lake. Note the Wake Robin Railroad along the south shore, terminating at two buildings at the southeast corner of the lake.

Like with the Grasse River sugarbush, the Wake Robin sugarbush appears to have witnessed two phases and scales of operation. An earlier, pre-railroad phase with a small, more traditional sugar house, and a second, industrialized, railroad supported phase with a large five evaporator syrup plant. Prior to completion of the fieldwork for this study,

the exact locations of both the earlier sugar house and the later, larger syrup plant were often misidentified or were simply unknown.

The earlier sugar house at Wake Robin is best known from a photograph (Figure 7.2) that appeared in the 1898 publication of the *3rd Annual Report of the Commissioners of Fisheries, Game and Forests for the State of New York* with the caption “ ‘Wake Robin’ Sugar Bush.” Two additional photographs of the same sugar house, probably taken in the same season, are found in the collections of the Piercefield Museum (Figures 7.3 and 7.4). The Adirondack Experience collections also contain a copy of the same Wake Robin sugar house photograph as appeared in the *Fisheries, Game and Forests* report, but with the very important caption “ ‘Early Sugar house’ later supplanted by larger operation, Note raised ramp to permit flow of sap by gravity to feed tanks thence to evaporators.”²



Figure 7.2: First Wake Robin Sugar House as depicted in 1898 *Annual Report of the Commissioners of Fisheries, Game and Forests for the State of New York*.

These three wintertime images (Figures 7.2 to 7.4) depict a simple wood frame sugarhouse with a cupola for venting steam and two smoke stacks, indicating the presence of two evaporators. There is no indication of a railroad grade nearby. Instead, the sugar house seems to be nestled in a small opening in the woods and was accessed by woods road and teams of horses pulling sleds and sleighs. A raised ramp made of large logs was built alongside the sugar house for horse teams pulling sap gathering tanks on sleds to unload and use gravity to drain their tanks into larger storage tanks in the sugar house. Near the front and along the side of the sugar house are stacks of firewood to feed the evaporators. These photos have not been attributed to any photographer, so we do not know who took these three images.

Despite these three images of this early sugar house at Wake Robin, information on its exact location and longevity are lacking. The caption noting that it was supplanted by a larger operation is unclear on the question of whether the later operation replaced this sugar house at another location or if the later operation was built in the exact same spot as this sugar house, and if so, was this sugar house removed or incorporated into the footprint and structure of the syrup plant of the later operation. A comparison of the features of the

Wake Robin sugar house structure to the features, form, and size of the structures at the later and larger Wake Robin syrup plant suggest that the earlier sugar house was not used as an architectural component in the syrup plant.



Figure 7.3: Photo of the Wake Robin sugar house, ca. 1898. Collections of the Piercefield Museum.

Two maps dating to 1897, the DEC map and the Blankman map, depict a small camp of three buildings about midway along the south shore corner of Horseshoe Lake.³ Both 1897 maps predate the construction of the Wake Robin Railroad and show this camp was connected to Horseshoe Station by an early road. It is possible that the unnamed camp indicated on these maps was the Wake Robin sugar house. Unfortunately, we do not know more about the camp on

these maps.

If the Wake Robin sugar house was located close to the location of the later syrup plant, such as inland immediately across the railroad grade, relocating it will prove difficult. That piece of land has been so severely disturbed and modified with the modern



Figure 7.4: Opposite view of the Wake Robin sugar house, ca. 1898. Collections of the Piercefield Museum.

presence of a borrow pit and work area adjacent to Highway 421, that there are likely no remains to be found. Nevertheless, it is my feeling that the earlier Wake Robin sugar house was in fact at the borrow pit work area location. Like with the Grasse River sugarbush, A.A. Low most likely stuck with the same location and simply expanded and improved on an earlier setup.

Sometime after 1899, the Wake Robin sugar house was replaced with a larger evaporation building housing five large evaporators and connected to a group of other supporting structures. The best archival evidence of this later Wake Robin syrup plant comes from two photographs taken by George Baldwin in 1900 or 1901. Both images, each from different vantage points, show

a narrow-gauge railroad adjacent to and up slope from a sprawling syrup plant made up of multiple, interconnected buildings. The first image (Figure 7.5), which appeared hand



Figure 7.5: Baldwin image showing Wake Robin syrup plant, looking north. Not the lake and far shoreline in background. Collections of the Adirondack Experience P020992.

colored in the Baldwin album (see Chapter Five), and was submitted with the Library of Congress copyright series, includes the caption “Wake Robin Sugar House.” The second, non-colored image, omitted from the “Baldwin album” and copyright application, was found in the collections at the Adirondack Experience with a caption of “Locomotive ‘no.4’ making delivery of sap from tanks on two flat cars at Wake Robin Evaporator.”(Figure 7.6)

A written description from the period of operation of the Wake Robin sugarbush identifying the specific location of the syrup plant comes from the summary of a 1906 court decision for a township taxation case where A.A. Low wished to have his local taxes consolidated into one jurisdiction. In summarizing the facts of the case, the judge noted, “At the eastern end of Horseshoe Lake in Piercefield was an extensive plant for reducing maple sap to syrup and in close proximity thereto was a maple wood where about 15,000 trees were tapped annually.”⁴

The 1907 Tupper Lake USGS quadrangle map shows a similar cluster of three buildings along the south shore of the lake as was depicted on the 1897 maps, but they are

now accessed and bisected by the Wake Robin Railroad that continues past the camp and along the south shore ending at the southeast corner of the lake. Interestingly, there is no indication on that map of the syrup plant structures at the southeast corner of the lake



Figure 7.6: Baldwin image showing Locomotive No. 4 on the narrow-gauge railroad in front of the Wake Robin syrup plant. Collections of the Adirondack Experience P011350.

where the Wake Robin Railroad ended. Extending beyond the tracks and around the east side of the lake is a road connecting to Colonel Barbour's estate on Tupper Lake. (see Figure 7.1). The route of the Wake Robin Railroad and the road connecting the end of the railroad to Tupper Lake is the same path that is today covered by State Highway 421.

Baldwin's two photos of the Wake Robin syrup plant show a sprawling linear complex of interconnected buildings stretched out between the Wake Robin Railroad grade and the shore of Horseshoe Lake which can be seen in the background of Figure 7.5. The central feature in the images is the evaporation room, a large, one and a half-story rectangular gable ended structure with five very tall, square smoke stacks protruding from the roof and a cupola along the length of the ridgeline. These five stacks are indicative of this syrup plant housing five large dimension sap evaporators. All the structures in the Wake Robin syrup plant were wood framed and wood sided.

Along the east face of the evaporation room is a shed roof addition that housed the syrup finishing rig, as can be seen by the four tightly spaced round smoke stacks to the right of the photo in Figure 7.5. In the front of the evaporation room, upslope on the railroad side of the syrup plant, oriented perpendicular to the layout of the plant is a one story sap storage building. This building is leveled above sloping ground by a series of piers

and is elevated above the level of the evaporator building. The elevated design further permits the use of gravity to feed sap from the storage tanks to the nearby evaporators built at a slightly lower elevation. In both images we can see a sap delivery pipeline suspended above the ground and running directly into the outer wall of the sap storage building, carrying sap from collection points upslope in the sugarbush.

To the west of the evaporation building is another rectangular gable-end one, and a half story building built at a slight northward angle to the orientation of the evaporation building and following the shape and contour of the ground surface and lakeshore. This building likely provided additional space for sap storage, wood storage and other miscellaneous work space. It appears from the photos that there was an enclosed pipe, or ramp running from the edge of the railroad into this building. Behind this building and furthest to the west was a lower profile, open sided wood frame structure also likely used for storing fire wood and possibly large sap storage tanks.

In the foreground of the image in Figure 7.6 is the east-west running narrow-gauge Wake Robin Railroad track with the locomotive “No. 4” pulling two flatbed cars, each carrying three large sap gathering tanks. A close examination of the area behind the last flatbed car in the photo shows that this was the terminus of the railroad track. In fact, one can see in both photos that the sap pipeline running downhill and into the sap storage building was placed just beyond the end of the tracks. Placing the end of the Wake Robin track at this point is consistent with how the grade was mapped in both the 1907 USGS Tupper Lake map and the 1913 Conners and Sewall map. Figure 7.6 shows a large wood stave tank alongside the railroad grade. This tank may have contained water for the steam locomotive, or it may have been used for sap storage for the syrup operation.

In the background of Figure 7.5, just over the roof of the syrup room one can clearly see that the syrup plant was built immediately adjacent to Horseshoe Lake. Additionally, in this photo, the far shoreline of the lakeshore does not appear to be particularly far away, consistent with the placement of the syrup plant at the narrow arm of the southeast corner of the lake. Unfortunately, we do not have any images showing the north side of the plant, closest to the water, so we are unable to conclusively describe design features or elements of construction that were built between the plant and the shoreline of Horseshoe Lake. Similarly, the snow in the images obscures the details of the foundation and footings of the various structures in the plant.

The design and layout of the Wake Robin syrup plant, with multiple smaller buildings of different shapes, orientations, and profiles, suggest that this syrup plant may have developed and expanded over time, rather than having been planned as a tight purpose-built structure, like we see at Maple Valley. This further suggests that this syrup plant at Wake Robin predates the Maple Valley design, with Wake Robin evolving more organically. Based on the combination of archival and field investigations, Figure 7.7 depicts a schematic interpretation of the layout of the Wake Robin syrup plant site during its period of use. A modern aerial photograph serves as a base layer to show the current

location of State Highway 421, the borrow/work area, the lake, and modern vegetation as well as the linear nature of the layout of the syrup plant buildings.



Figure 7.7: Schematic drawing of the layout of the buildings at the Wake Robin syrup plant in relation to modern features alongside State Highway 421 and Horseshoe Lake.

Historic documentation from photos, maps, and written accounts were combined to provide a compelling argument for the location of the Wake Robin syrup plant, but was there any supporting evidence on the ground? The question remained, where exactly on the landscape did the plant once stand? Michael Kudish attempted to relocate the Wake Robin syrup plant, focusing his investigations at the area of the small camp midway along the south shore of Horseshoe Lake. Finding nothing, he concluded what was there has been obliterated by the construction and expansion of State Highway 421. He was on the right track but did not extend his search far enough to the east and to the far end of the Wake Robin Railroad.⁵

Locating the site was ultimately based on a combination of things. Relocating the Wake Robin Railroad was relatively easy, since it was essentially the same corridor now covered by State Highway 421. The Baldwin photos were helpful in identifying the relative location of the syrup plant to the railroad. As stated above, the lake can be seen in the background in one of the photos, thus situating the plant between the shoreline and the lake, although admittedly that feature of the photo was not as readily realized and our early field surveys in the woods spent a good bit of time examining the woods to the south on the inland side of State Highway 421. Eventually recognizing the closeness to the lakeshore and estimating the relative distance of the far shore of the lake in the photo in Figure 7.5

supported the decision to focus on the eastern end of the lake where the southeast arm of the lake narrows.

Using these boundaries or parameters limited the potential area to a narrow strip of uneven land that slopes from the edge of State Highway 421 to the lakeshore before narrowing to a point at the eastern end. At first glance this area seemed unlikely because it did not appear wide or flat enough to locate the sprawling complex of buildings in the Baldwin photos. Being thorough in our field efforts, we still took a look, just to be sure, and to our surprise discovered the remains of a series of stone, brick, and mortar piers or footings, brick and mortar platforms, as well as evidence of pits, trenches, cutting and levelling, and a diverse scatter of historic trash and debris.

An earlier brief walk through of the area had noted a surface scatter of historic debris, but it wasn't until we went back and took the time to look at it more closely that we began to see the patterns and relationship of the remains for what they were. After spending time recording the neat and tidy and well preserved remains at the Maple Valley syrup plant, we quite wrongly had been expecting to find similar evidence that jumped out at us and screamed syrup plant. The remains at Wake Robin showed that to be far from the case,

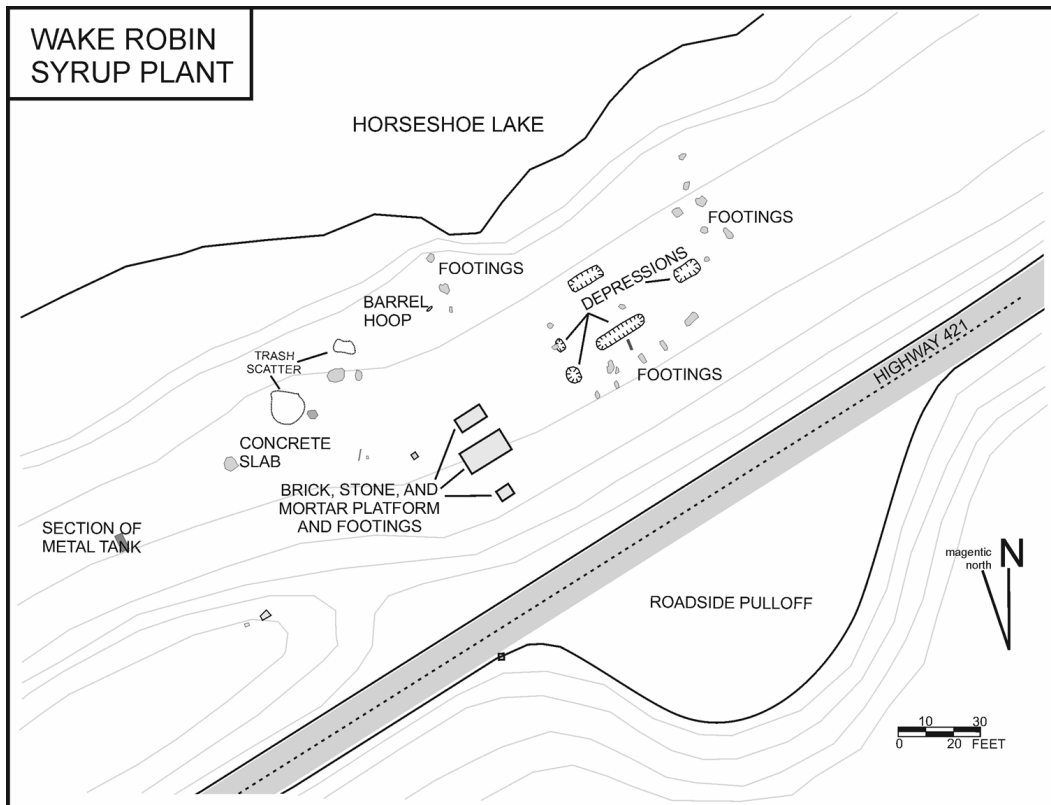


Figure 7.8: Surface features and artifact scatters observed in area of Wake Robin syrup plant.

presenting us with a much different state of preservation and clarity. At first it was not easy to convince my wisely skeptical research partner that this really was the remains of the plant and our ensuing discussions included lots of challenging back and forth questions.

But in the end, the historic references and images lined up with evidence on the ground and we were sure of our discovery.

Figure 7.8 shows the results of mapping the surface remains of the Wake Robin syrup plant spread along 250 feet of sloping land between State Highway 421 and the Horseshoe Lake shoreline. The eastern end of the remains is marked by a roughly linear network of low, crumbling piers or footings that were constructed from a combination of bricks and mortar and rough stone and mortar (Figure 7.9). Also notable in this area are a grouping of shallow, often water-filled depressions or pits, some squarish, some rectilinear in shape (Figure 7.10). These pits were probably a remnant of cutting and filling and borrowing earth to level the ground as best as possible. A bit further to the west one finds a cluster of solid low brick and mortar platforms or foundations that supported some sort of larger or heavier equipment, possibly a boiler or generator.

Overall, the central area of the site where these features and debris scatter are most evident appears to have been artificially flattened. This area has a floor-like appearance and



Figure 7.9: Example of bricks from the remains of a fallen support pier at the Wake Robin syrup plant. Photo by author.

is considerably less hummocky or uneven than the surrounding forest floor.

What is lacking is a poured concrete floor or foundations that would demarcate the outline of one or more buildings. In the case of the Wake Robin syrup plant, the builders created level buildings and compensated for building on the sloping land by raising all the structures above the ground on footings. Such a design can be seen in the photo in Figure 7.5 and is supported



Figure 7.10: Example of water filled depression at site of Wake Robin syrup plant. Photo by author.

by the evidence on the ground with an abundance of fallen and decaying footings and a lack of foundation walls and poured floors.

The syrup plant remains are further marked by an extensive surface, and likely subsurface, scatter of historic trash. Complicating the interpretation of the site is the fact that the trash and debris are not only representative of the short window of the Horse Shoe Forestry operation, but also the diversity of people visiting Horseshoe Lake over the course of the twentieth century and discarding trash at this location. This is most certainly a result of the nature and location of the opening in the forest that once existed at this site following the removal or destruction of the syrup plant buildings. Examination of the



Figure 7.11: Image of what the area of the Wake Robin syrup plant looks like today. Compare the scene in this image to that of Figure 7.6. Photo by author.

ground and aerial photos of this location indicate that the area where we would expect the syrup plant to have stood is marked by a clustering of a tangled growth of 50 to 60-year-old spruce and young balsam trees. That a dense growth of spruce and balsam would be present is consistent with this space having recently been an opening in the forest with disturbed ground.

With the removal of the Wake Robin Railroad tracks, the grade along the south shore of the lake became a dirt or gravel road between Horseshoe Station and Tupper Lake and Bog River Falls. Later the road was paved and connected to Highway 30 before itself becoming State Highway 421 as automobile transportation replaced the railroad as the means to access and visit Horseshoe Lake (Figure 7.11). With the road so close to the lake in this section and this space once having been something of an opening in the forest with some evidence of earlier use and surface debris, it was probably an easy and obvious place

to stop and dump additional trash in later years. The development of a borrow area directly across the road from this spot, as well as a DEC primitive camp site and two popular natural springs nearby, only further invited disturbance and reuse. The challenge becomes sorting out what is not so old, from what is from the earlier era of the Horse Shoe Forestry Company. As with Grasse River syrup plant, it is not known when buildings at Wake Robin were removed or demolished.

¹ Wake Robin is another, more vernacular name for the flowering woodland plant trillium.

² William F. Fox, "A Forest Product," *Third Annual Report of the Commissioners of Fisheries, Game and Forests of the State of New York* (New York, NY 1898); Photos of the Wake Robin Sugar House in the Piercefield Museum collections were donated by Jim Peck, former caretaker at Camp Otterbrook and longtime land manager and past land owner at Horseshoe Lake.; Adirondack Experience photograph number PO11348.

³ Map Showing South Easterly Part of Township No. 2 (Oakham) and South Westerly Part of Township No. 3 (Atherton), St. Lawrence County, N.Y. Property of A.A. Low 1897. T.E. Ehrehart, Surveyor. Map on File in the Watertown Office of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.

⁴ People ex rel. Low v. Wilson et al., Assessors. 113 App. Div. 1 (N.Y. App. Div. 1906) *New York Supplement, Containing Decisions of Supreme and Lower Courts of Record, New York State*, vol. 98 (New York State Reporter, vol. 132), (ST. Paul, MN: West Publishing, 1906); *The Malone Farmer*, 21 October 1903, 1; *The Malone Farmer*, 9 December 1903.

⁵ Michael Kudish, "Horse Shoe Forestry Company and Its Wake Robin and Maple Valley Railroads- Maps 45-1 through 45-4 36-19, and 36-58," *Where Did the Tracks Go in the Central Adirondacks? Mountain Railroads of New York State: Volume 2* (Fleischmanns, New York: Purple Mountain Press, 2007), 464-465.

