

PFEIFFER NATURE CENTER

WHERE SCIENCE, ART, AND NATURE COME TOGETHER.

Historical Background of The Pfeiffer/Wheeler Chestnut Cabin

The Pfeiffer/Wheeler Family American Chestnut Cabin is located at the crest of Lillibridge Road, four miles north of the village of Portville, New York. The Cabin is a part of the 188 acre property which comprises part of Pfeiffer Nature Center. The Center was established in 1998/99 by Eleanor Pfeiffer "Wendy" Lawrence to continue the legacy of her parents and of her mother's family (who played a prominent role in the local lumbering history) in the community of Portville.



Various parcels of farmland, pasture, meadow, and forest having unique and special geographical and biological aspects were assembled during the late 1930's and 40's into a contiguous holding of around 400 acres by Timothy Pfeiffer and his wife, Eleanor Wheeler. These properties are the northern apex of the Lillibridge Creek watershed. The Cabin was constructed in 1939 and '40 to provide for summer enjoyment by their family of the woods and open areas. The lands they had combined were divided in 1971 upon Timothy Pfeiffer's death - thus the two Pfeiffer daughters, Eleanor and Katharine, inherited somewhat equal portions - the boundary being the Lillibridge Road.

The eastern portion, the part of the Center with the Cabin, is primarily composed of mixed deciduous forest (oaks and beeches, some evergreens) with a significant number of trees aged over 100 years, though very possibly 25 to 50 years older than that. There are also white pine and hemlock specimens whose longevity may reach to 300-400 years. Since the Pfeiffers purchased the tracts, there has been negligible removal of any timber. Approximately five miles of trails were established over the years (originally for fire safety and prevention). These were used for horseback riding and other recreation by the Pfeiffers and their friends and neighbors - and now by visitors to the Center. This expanse of west and south - facing hillside, one of the highest in Cattaraugus County, offers a variety of ecotypes, flora, and fauna - all of whose qualitative and quantitative features it is part of the work of the Center to inventory and assess. Wendy Lawrence died in June of 1998 just as she was turning into reality her wishes for preserving her property so that it could be appreciated and studied by the wider community.



The Cabin owes its primary significance to its construction based on American Chestnut (*Castanea dentata*) timber log framing. It is a very well preserved specimen of rustic style, aging handsomely inside and out due to this wood's characteristic ability to withstand the elements. The untreated exterior has gained a well-worn silvery hue while the interior's rich burnished patina emanates a warm amber glow. Other wood used for ceiling and roof construction, shutters, and doors is primarily white pine. There is a slate stone floor. The 1300 square foot structure is dominated by the great room (800 sq. ft.) with its massive fireplace, cathedral ceiling, and views via windows and glass-paneled doors on 3 and 1/4 sides. The building was constructed on a prepared site with slopes below to west and

south, giving the western face dramatic, unimpeded views into the sunset over a series of ridges. The north side hugs the adjacent forest, hemlock trees standing close by with their boughs abutting the roof. Usual entry occurs from the southeast, via a driveway off Lillibridge Road. The building is primarily one-story, at ground level, with a 150 sq. ft. addition in 1970 of a second story bed/bathroom. Almost all the interior furniture is intact and in place, much also made of chestnut at the same time the Cabin was built.

Since being built, the structure's basic integrity has remained unchanged and uncompromised. It has been used or occupied only in the summers until 1998 when spring to fall activity commenced. The upstairs bedroom was designed to have limited visual impact. The black asphalt shingle roof was replaced in the late 80's. There are

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original chestnut wood gutters along the east side (the other sides never had them). A series of pine wood- framed multiple-paneled glass double doors extends around the Cabin; these have the original wood framed screen inserts which are all usable. Simple board shutters were constructed on-site, to be deployed for winter protection and meant to be left attached otherwise. Without stains or paint, these outside materials have evolved a special patina. One large plate glass window faces west at the center of its wall.

The interior is composed of the large living or great room (40x20), a kitchen (12x10), a bedroom (14x10) and a bathroom. The horizontal log frame predominates throughout, excepting the bed and bathroom. The slate for the main room came from the village of Portville. The kitchen and bath employ the original linoleum floor. The downstairs bedroom is paneled in "wormy" chestnut boards and has a pine floor. The Cabin has continuously had a well and septic, electricity, and phone (with buried lines). The cathedral ceiling of the main room is of stained white pine boards and rafters. The 1970 addition employs untreated pine and has metal case windows. Pine stairs built against the north wall of the main room lead up to this. The large fieldstone (found on-site) fireplace on the east side of the main room is unadorned and fully functional.

A collection of furniture, furnishings, and mementos was left in the Cabin by the Pfeiffer family when it became part of the non-profit. Included are two very large sofas constructed of chestnut and tables and chairs of similar design and wood. Curtains, cushions, lamps, and chairs from the 40's and 50's are intact and convey a simple aesthetic that speaks of and to the place. Numerous photographs from the time of construction onward show the character of the site and its aesthetic remaining in continuity.

On the immediate grounds around the Cabin there is original slate walkways, including an antique compass arrow anchored into a paver. An original chestnut log low fence, often used for sitting, girds the west- and north facing patio area which includes a stone grill. From Lillibridge Road entry is via a predominantly dirt drive which includes a portion of old brick pavers from the village of Portville. The site includes two very small outbuildings, made of 2-3 inch chestnut logs, a garage of white pine, and a 500 yard distant abandoned horse stable/holding pen, also mostly of chestnut logs. The roof has collapsed but much of the fencing could be usable. Vintage dates for all of these are later than the Cabin. The larger of the two sheds was built as a play structure for children around 1964. The stable is perhaps from the early 50's. The garage is out of view of and from the Cabin, and its style is rather standard rough hewn board construction, ca. 1955. Its roof is in disrepair but still intact.



The now historic ensemble of the Cabin and its interior represents a significant and unique resource for the local communities to support and benefit from. The Pfeiffer Nature Center is looking into ways to present this heritage and introduce people to the museum quality aspects of this building and very importantly, its context in an increasingly rare forest setting. Throughout the years, the original interior and exterior of the Cabin and the full complement of the remarkably undisturbed associated lands and property have been respected and treasured by its visitors - with the result today that a valuable local heritage can be accorded further notice. Long term residents of the area and those who were friends of Timothy and Eleanor and their daughters are well aware of this legacy.

The Pfeiffer/Wheeler Family American Chestnut Cabin represents a significant phase in the history of rustic log cabin architecture in the northeast US. This is attributable to its specific location and the provenance of construction materials. The American chestnut logs were sourced on the Pfeiffer property in the late 1930's after the lethal fungal blight had killed the vast majority of this species in its entire habitat east of the Mississippi. There are very few examples anywhere of a private residence utilizing American chestnut log frame construction from this period. This extremely well preserved specimen was maintained continuously by the Pfeiffer family with very limited alterations inside or out. Until 1998 three generations of the Pfeiffers were stewards of this structure and the 188 acres of intact forest whose integrity became the basis for a non-profit organization. The mission of the non-

profit, its existence in rural Cattaraugus County, and the trends in abutting land ownership mean that this entity will gain increasing attention and recognition for the value of its preservation and research work.

There are environmental conditions and contexts associated with the property, some of which were well known in the community and which attracted the Pfeiffer family. Ease of access up Lillibridge Road four miles from the village of Portville to the crest of a broad ridge with truly noteworthy views to the west. Extremely rare surviving ancient hemlock and white pine trees are within an easy walk. Contiguous forest ecotypes which include a range of species and ages of flora and fauna reach right to the Cabin. Grazing of cows and sheep and harvesting of various crops meant the open land was engaged in activity and provided opportunities to share in neighborly activities. Farming has in fact no longer the prominence in this immediate area as it did 25 to 60 to 100 years ago. An interlacing fabric of parcels of land was purchased with a vision of enjoying two prominent ridge lines by Timothy and Eleanor Wheeler Pfeiffer. They thus linked land together from a number of property owners during the late 1930's and 40's. Some of the names of families and friends continuing to live very close by along the Lillibridge or Yuba Dam include: Griffin, Holcomb, Chalker, Blakeslee, Taggerty, Warner, Robinson and Hatzell.



Eleanor Wheeler was raised in Portville at 29 Maple Avenue in the house her father, William E. Wheeler, built - which has also now received historic designation. In her youth she participated in Camp Fire Girl and other outdoor activity, often in the Lillibridge Road area. Later in life, for forty years, she was closely involved with the Women's Branch of the New York City Mission Society, and with Camp Minisink. Timothy Pfeiffer, born in New Jersey, attended Princeton University and played a significant role in establishing a summer outdoor rural camp for urban youth in 1908 that had strong affiliate ties to the University. This institution, which he continued to assist over decades, thrives today as the Princeton - Blairstown Center in Blairstown NJ, serving many constituents. The four Pfeiffer children (Bert, Tim, Katharine, and Wendy) grew up

partially in Portville in the William E. Wheeler House and were all engaged in pursuits that combined natural history and the arts. Over the years the family would make numerous visits to the land that was later purchased along Lillibridge Road. One son became the first naturalist for Allegheny State Park and was an instrumental figure in ornithological activities in the region. His paintings of birds from different parts of the world hung in the Cabin for many years.

Eleanor "Wendy" Lawrence was an accomplished ceramist with a background of many years of volunteering in arts programs that reached to youth. She was a frequent visitor to Portville and the region until moving to Olean in 1992 where she became closely involved with a wide range of arts programs and organizations and exhibited her own work. She maintained close ties with and was financially supportive of the Central and Western New York Chapter of the Nature Conservancy and from 1976 to 1997 was in discussions to donate her Lillibridge property to that group. She made significant financial contributions to various local arts and education programs upon her death.

There are other historical continuities that make this property worthy of consideration. The Wheelers were among the most prominent early families of Portville and nearby Olean. In 1834 a William F. Wheeler, (William E.'s father) having taken rafts of lumber down the Delaware River from Deposit to Philadelphia for his father's company, sought to establish a similar business along the Allegheny River at Portville to send timber to Pittsburgh. Separately and in partnership with the Dusenbury and Mersereau families a variety of enterprises proved successful and allowed the family to achieve its prominence in the local community: in industry, banking, religion, education, and health care. In 1922 the core twenty acres of the Hearts Content National Scenic Area and Natural Landmark in Pennsylvania's Allegheny National Forest were donated by the Wheelers/Dusenburys. They also jointly set aside land and a tract of very old forest near Portville's Chestnut Hill Cemetery, close to the southern origin of Lillibridge Road. A series of land and monetary bequests to the Portville and Olean communities by the Wheeler family occurred over the years from their arrival in the area. The Wheeler families primarily owned land in and close to the

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village, and along the Dodge Creek watershed (just east of the Lillibridge area), leading up to and nearby what we know today as Bedford Corners. Wendy Lawrence, who inherited the Cabin from her parents, was an avid student of these various historical links and was very much influenced by the Heart's Content memorial. She wanted to set aside for posterity her property to honor a heritage of cultural interaction with the natural world. She sought to commemorate local familial associations by encouraging the exploration and practice of stewardship.

Chestnut log construction formats are in evidence in cabins in two local parks, Allegheny State and Letchworth State. These might serve a reference function to this nomination, but due to the public nature of the buildings and the frequent use of wood siding and framing and/or paints and stains and/or hewn logs with white cement caulking their general style is less formally intact and their features are more diffused and altered. There do not seem to be any counterpart residences within the scope of nearby communities, and in the six months that a scale model of the Pfeiffer structure has been on wide public display no other similar building has been brought to the Center's attention. Other uses in Civilian Conservation Corps projects of American chestnut wood and logs can be found around New York State, such as at Bear Mountain and Letchworth Parks. The blight began to have major impact soon after the turn of the century, thus at Bear Mountain can be found numerous examples of chestnut usage. There is a link from that site's early buildings to some Adirondack lodge constructions, and thence to National Park Service structures as far as the southern Appalachians. The New Jersey home of Gustav Stickley, part of the Craftsman Farms Foundation, was built in 1910-11 and includes chestnut logs. Since Timothy and Eleanor Pfeiffer traveled in New Jersey to and from Blairstown, about 50 miles west of Morris Plains, there is likelihood they could have been aware of this building.

Timothy Pfeiffer's long and close involvement with activities at the Princeton Blairstown Camp (later known as Center) provided the background and the impetus for development of the Portville property and its Cabin's establishment. In 1930 arrangements were made to bring from Maine Mr. Ivory Watters, a very skilled craftsman and builder, to erect a series of cabins at the Camp. This was a long-term process that progressed as the Camp grew and often involved the use of chestnut timber. Many of these structures are still standing; though they have seen heavy use by Camp participants. Mr. Pfeiffer arranged for Mr. Watters' expertise to be similarly applied to fulfill the Portville project for the Pfeiffer family's use. In the winter of 1939-40, at the Lillibridge Road property, teams of horses hauled chestnut logs out of the woods to begin the construction project there in Portville. Watters arrived in the spring of 1941 to lead local crews in building the Chestnut Cabin.

The Pfeiffer/Wheeler Cabin was designed by Olean architect Metcalf Shaffer, who lived from 1904 to 1969. Copies of the blueprints are on hand at the offices of the Center. According to the Olean Historical and Preservation Society Mr. Shaffer is on record with five buildings, all only in this specific geographic area, the Cabin unique among them. Local state park historians report that the usual format of CCC building construction was developed on-site, without significant outside professional input. It is very probable that Mr. Shaffer visited these parks though, contributing to his awareness and professional skills. Today one can also view preserved CCC-built chestnut structures at the Lumber Museum in Galeton PA and at Cook Forest State Park, also in Pennsylvania.

The distinctively well preserved character, functionality, and educational potential of the Pfeiffer/Wheeler Family American Chestnut Cabin are firmly in place. These attributes represent a place that has received informal kudos and reverence for decades. Wendy Lawrence sought to share this place and its Cabin while she was alive, inviting a variety of natural history, arts, and gardening organizations to visit. She was aware of the rarity of the structure and the setting and hoped that future generations could experience and appreciate what her parents had the foresight to create and preserve.



During 2001, Nicolas Vaczek (Wendy's nephew) was charged with making arrangements for nominating this Chestnut Cabin and the accompanying property to the New York State Historic Register and to the National Register. Listing on the State Register occurred on October 31, 2001 and on the National Register on January 11, 2002. Also listed on both Registers at the same time was the William E. Wheeler house in Portville, extremely well cared for since 1969 by Tom and Ronda Pollock who purchased the home after Eleanor Pfeiffer died.