

Preserving the “Magic”



Before and after photos of the main house. Once known as “Whispering Pines”, this harbor-view property has had a complete make-over, including cabins, and is now “Sunapee Harbor Cottages”.

RESTORING THE PERFECT LODGING LOCATION

By Allison Lewis

Since the late 1800s, the Lake Sunapee region has been known as a special vacation destination for families. Grand hotels were prominent along the shores of Lake Sunapee during the Steamboat Era when well to do “city dwellers”, laden with heavy trunks and often accompanied by staff, escaped to Sunapee for the summer. They traveled by train to a lakeside depot and were then delivered by steamship to the various grand hotels and resort lodges, where they enjoyed fishing, swimming and sailing on sparkling clear waters surrounded by the beauty of majestic mountains.

As economic structure changed along with the introduction of the automobile, travelers gained greater mobility, allowing Sunapee visitors more versatility and independence. By the 1950’s, the grand hotels and resort lodges, once catering to lengthy and luxurious stays, had declined in popularity and gave way to small lodges, inns, camps and motels which were built to accommodate the new type of traveler to the area. The “magic” of Sunapee spread beyond the lake itself, when the state of NH established a downhill ski area at Mount Sunapee, and the winter season beckoned vacationing families.

Over the next 40 years, the attraction to Sunapee gained momentum as a new generation of families began to establish summer vacation homes along the lakeshore. Initially, these were mostly modest cottages constructed only for seasonal use but allowing the families to escape the cities and suburbs, much the same as their predecessors - 100 years before. While this trend progressed and the value of lakefront property increased, one-by-one the small inns, camps and motels once scattered along the lakeshore disappeared as they were purchased for private use, valued for the choice parcels on which they existed.

Determination to re-establish the “historic lodging style”, once a prominent feature of Lake Sunapee, saved one such property in Sunapee Harbor from a threatening demise. Prior to its purchase in 2001, Whispering Pines Lodge & Cabins, a diamond in the rough, lay dormant and deteriorating in the heart of Sunapee Harbor. The cute little cabins, which at one time sported bright yellow awnings and big picture windows welcoming summer visitors, reposed in a state of disrepair and engulfed by vegetation. With a combination of ambition and focus on family vacations, this corner of the

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Harbor was transformed into what is known today as Sunapee Harbor Cottages... offering year-round nightly lodging with lakeside cottage charm, plus amenities and services reminiscent of days gone by.

Sheila Thomas Whitcomb is the visionary behind this project, which she approached with research, energy, attention to detail and imaginative style. Having traveled extensively with her own family when the children were younger, she knew exactly what vacationing families needed for a comfortable stay. “Initially delving into the project, without any previous experience in the role of Bob Newhart, was a leap of faith”, according to Sheila. However, her “life experiences” of travel, multiple building projects and a design background provided the confidence necessary for rising to the challenge. Participation in the “bigger picture” also served as inspiration for this restoration. Although the zoning of the property allowed many uses, Sheila’s commitment to historical preservation, along with community benefits and Harbor beautification, ascertained the direction this project would take.

With the three R’s (recycle, reclaim, restore) instilled and emphasized since childhood, the project was thus tackled with a “waste not” attitude. The Lodge, now the main residence with office space for Sunapee Harbor Cottages and Spotted Dog Group Web Design, was stripped down to the frame, saving many components for use in the restoration and the rest handed over to a salvage company to be sold and reused. The cabin structures were also stripped for salvage, disassembled to allow for flat mobilization and removed from the property (now re-erected and housing farm animals elsewhere). Although the cabins had not hosted guests in more than 20 years, beds (still made up with chenille coverlets), bureaus and assorted accessories were discovered beneath the rubble, most of which now has found a “second life” inside the cottages.



Guests can walk to the town dock, shops and eateries.

The six new cottages that replace the cabins boast creative craftsmanship and energy efficiency while embracing the ambience of “lakeside cottage” charm, including whitewashed rafters and “comfy” furnishings. The name for each cottage is derived from pieces of Lake Sunapee’s historical past, and representative artifacts are utilized to accessorize and enlighten guests. The property has been further enhanced with artistic stonewalls and beautiful flower gardens, culminating Sheila’s vision and certainly an asset to Sunapee Harbor.

It has now been 3 years since Sunapee Harbor Cottages began hosting guests, and the dream to re-establish historic family-style lodging has become a reality - providing a unique experience for year-round visitors to the area, with exceptional services and amenities. As guests meander through the village shops, galleries and eateries, enjoying live music wafting through the air with the sights and sounds of waterfront activities as a backdrop... a stop at the big gray barn, housing the Historical Society, allows them to step back in time and glimpse the visitors who enjoyed the same “magic”... more than 100 years before them.

