

# Sale of Whitney estate could change heart of Adirondacks

What will happen now that 36,000 acres is for sale?

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*The Adirondack estate owned by the Whitney family is on the market for \$180 million. John Hendrickson, widower of Marylou Whitney, tells the Wall Street Journal that he plans to sell the 36,000-acre estate in Long Lake - including the family's great camp Deerlands - that has been in the Whitney family since the 1890s. Courtesy: John Hendrickson*

LONG LAKE – The sale of the Whitney property in the heart of the Adirondacks marks the end of an era.

It's the one of the few remaining Gilded Age great camps, with palatial rustic mansions given names like the Sagamore, Uncas and Pine Knot. They were built at the end of the 19th century by industrialists who sought escape to a vast and

pristine wilderness – an outdoor recreational playground on crystalline waters protected by lush forests.

While many of the great camps remain, the sprawling buffer of privately-owned acreage around them has faded. The Whitney's 17-bedroom great camp Deerlands, which is on 36,000 acres and boasts 22 lakes, is only one of a few to retain a patrician sheen.

With a plan to sell the estate at a price of \$180 million, Marylou Whitney's widower John Hendrickson said the property could be a buyer's fantasy as no easements, or restrictions, on the land exist. Saturday morning, Hendrickson told the Times Union he will not sell to developers, only to someone who intends to preserve the property.

PREVIOUSLY: [Marylou Whitney's widower puts staggering price tag on Adirondack estate](#)

Still, the freedom from restrictions on the property arouses concern with environmentalists who worry that the Hamilton County land that William C. Whitney purchased for \$1.50 an acre in 1897 will undergo an irreversible and radical change.

Among them is the Adirondack Park Council Executive Director Willie Janeway, who is advocating for a state takeover.

"We do have a lot of concerns," Janeway said. "This is a huge property right in the middle of the Adirondacks. For 100 plus years, the Whitney family has managed and protected in a way that was consistent with the surrounding lands. They maintained the integrity of this nationally and globally significant Adirondack Park."

Yet the next owner could, by current regulations, build one dwelling per every 40 acres, he said.

"Even if you made them 50- or 100- or 300-acre camps, there would be hundreds of them," Janeway said. "It would fragment the large forest landscape and negatively impact the ecological integrity that impacts water quality and wildlife habitat and a lot of other things."

David Gibson, managing partner with Adirondack Wild, a nonprofit that works to safeguard the Adirondack wilderness through education, said Whitney's land must become a priority for the state.

"In the context of the whole Adirondack Park, it's an amazing network of lakes, streams and wetlands that connect to each other," Gibson said. "The location in the heart of the Adirondacks and the linkages within it to the great water bodies of the Adirondacks make it exciting for a paddler. .... We look at it from an ecological point of view. We don't want to see that landscape cut up and parcelized into smaller units by 40 different landowners."

As for the state, a Department of Environmental Conservation spokesperson said the land is listed in its Open Space Conservation Plan, a 1992 blueprint for spending of the state's \$300 million Environmental Protection Fund. And DEC officials also said the state "remains open for discussion with the owners for future state acquisition."

However, Hendrickson was adamant in July when he said he won't sell to the state. He went sour on the state after cutting a land deal with them in 1997. At that time, Marylou Whitney sold 15,000 acres to the state that included Little Tupper Lake. Hendrickson blames the state for allowing the introduction of bass into the lake, which killed off the brook trout.

"I was not happy," said Hendrickson, who inherited the massive property after his wife's death in July 2019.

The state's Adirondack Park Agency, along with the DEC, oversees the six million acre park that was established by the state in 1892. At that point, Gibson said, the park encompassed 650,000 acres. Over the years, through an act of the state legislature, the blue line or boundary was expanded with large tracts added in the 1930s and 1970s -- moving the boundary to encompass Lake Champlain, north of Lake Placid and much of Warren County including Lake George. It remains a mix of private and public lands, with the state owning a little less than half, 2.7 million acres, of the park

The 1997 deal with the state was made after Marylou Whitney announced plans to subdivide Little Tupper. She and Hendrickson, whom she was engaged to at the time, were going to build \$2 million estates on 300 acres each. As vice president of Whitney Industries, which is the logging operation on the property, Hendrickson was ushering the project.

But to the relief of environmentalists, Hendrickson relented, selling the property to the state for \$17.1 million, \$11 million less than he wanted. The sale ensured it will remain forever wild. It also opened up the land to outdoor enthusiasts who were not allowed on the property for a century. Gibson said at the time the state surveyed most of the Whitney property, thus its placement on its Open Space Conservation Plan. The DEC and APA said it classified "the land as wilderness, to prevent the use of motor vehicles or boats and other actions that could disturb its unique natural character. DEC's careful stewardship of this parcel is ongoing."

Janeway thinks Hendrickson may be jockeying for another deal with the state.

“The price appears to be more than the state and others, private parties, are willing to pay for large tracts of Adirondack land,” Janeway said, but added “I wouldn’t expect Mr. Hendrickson to start out with anything other than an aspirational price. From the family’s perspective, the property is priceless. As an environmentalist, I would agree with that.”

Most of the property, cut up into 20 separately assessed parcels, is priced at \$440 an acre, much less than the \$5,000 per acre Hendrickson is seeking. Janeway said the assessment is preserved at a 1926 level because of the timber operations on the land, allowing it to be enrolled in a state tax abatement plan known as 480-a.



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John Sheehan, director of communication at the Adirondack Council, said the sale of the property to the state would dissolve the tax abatements on that property, because the state is ineligible for the tax break. Without tax

abatements, Sheehan estimates that Long Lake's town and school budgets could enjoy a \$520,000 windfall. But the property might not go back on the tax rolls if a private owner is eligible for the logging tax abatement as the tax break is attached to the land, not the owner.

Long Lake's Sole Elected Assessor Jim Bateman explained, that while the state doesn't pay property taxes on many of the buildings it owns, the state does pay full taxes on forest lands in the Adirondacks. But he argued, the town would not get an influx of cash no matter who owned the property because the levy, the amount to be raised in taxes, would remain the same. He also said that if a nonprofit purchased the land, it would not necessarily pay taxes. However, he said the Nature Conservancy, which is a nonprofit, has purchased Adirondack lands that it continued to pay taxes on.

No matter who takes ownership, the massive property will have to be reassessed for what its current value is. Meanwhile, he said there's been a lot of discussion about the future of the land.

"A lot of people think the state has all the land it can handle," Bateman said. "Some folks would like to see economic development in something more than hikers and canoeists."

Fred Short, a realtor with Gillis Realty, said the value of the land is sentimental.

"I grew up there, hunting and fishing," Fred Short said.

Short had access to the property because his father, David Short, was Cornelius Vanderbilt "Sonny" Whitney's personal guide to hunting and fishing in the Adirondacks from 1923 until Sonny Whitney's death in 1992. At one point, his father was credited with saving Sonny Whitney's life after he slipped and tore up his leg on a rusty nail. As chronicled in Jeffrey L. Rodengen's book "The Legend of Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney," Dave Short, who was much smaller than Sonny Whitney, dragged him a half of a mile over marshy lands, and put him in a vehicle to drive to the caretakers house to call for help.

Fred Short often tagged along with his father and also spent a lot of time with the children in the family – M'lou (Marylou Whitney's oldest daughter), the boys, Hank and Hobbs, as well as Heather and Cornelia. When asked what Cornelia, the only child of Sonny and Marylou Whitney, would think of Hendrickson's sale of their family land, Fred Short said he's sure she wouldn't say. But for him, he said, "It's kind of melancholy."

"It's similar to how I felt when they sold Little Tupper," Fred Short said. "There is a lot of history there."

No matter what one feels about the sale, most agree that the Whitneys were fine stewards of the land and gracious community members as well.

Long Lake historian Jeanne Plumley said though essentially gone from the area, the family won't be soon forgotten. She points to the town's World War I memorial as a solid reminder of the Whitney family presence. The sandstone sculpture was designed and sculpted by Sonny Whitney's mother, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. Known as the "Doughboys," it stands on the school lawn.

She also said that Marylou Whitney was especially loved, generously donating to the library, the medical center and the United Methodist Church.