

## HAVENS | Clayton, N.Y.

## On the St. Lawrence and on the Way Back

By C. J. HUGHES

**D**OZENS of small towns in upstate New York slid into languorous decline in the 1970's as if they were so many burnt-out rock stars. So it went in Clayton, which nudges the St. Lawrence River, where businesses shut, houses grew shabby and the streets fell eerily quiet, long-time residents say, as vacationers deserted the town.

The region's low point may have come in June 1976, when an oil barge crashed and spilled 300,000 gallons of oil into the river. (Water-skiing, anyone?)

Yet, decades later, the locals can laugh about it. Earlier this summer, year-round residents and, perhaps more important, second-home owners, packed the Clayton Opera House and took in "The Slick of '76: A Musical Catastrophe," a satirical play about the spill.

Yes, part-time residents are returning to Clayton, a small town along New York State's border with Canada, with the Thousand Islands fanned across its front yard.

"A decade ago, the town was rundown and desolate, like the dying-out of an era," said Kathy Danielson, a 14-year resident who in July opened the Lyric Coffee Shop in a former vaudeville theater. "Now it's growing again, but this time it's not just tourists."

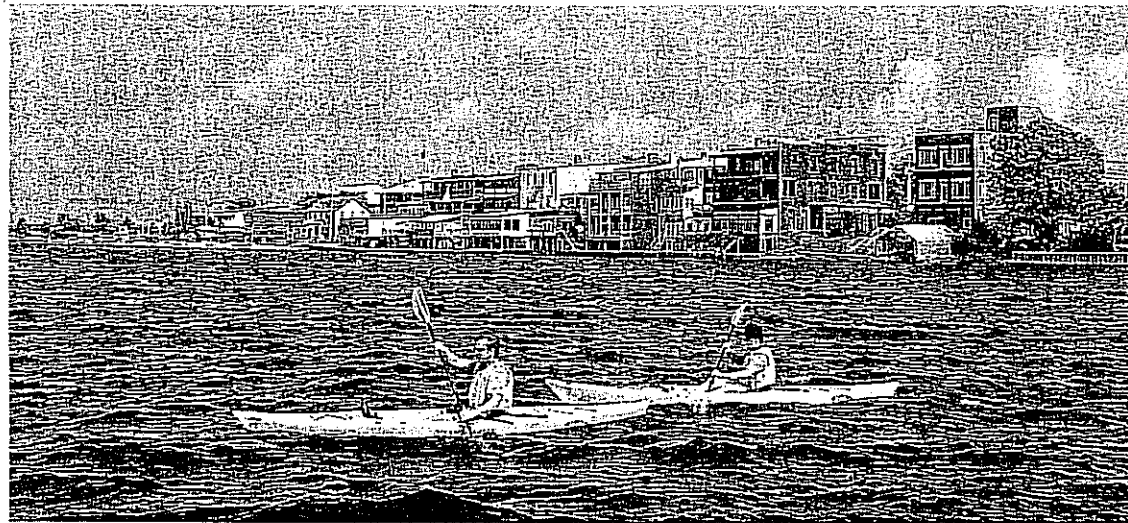
Outsiders are rediscovering fixer-upper dairy farms whose pastures roll to the river's edge. In the village, they are finding well-kept 19th-century and early-20th-century houses that grid a compact grid of streets.

Just blocks away, cafes, cheese shops and wine stores have moved into old brick storefronts that, having weathered the down-at-the-heels days of the late 20th century, are now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Perhaps most noticeable is that the St. Lawrence is clean and a flurry of ripton, as sailboats, motorboats, kayaks and canoes slalom amid the river's peach-colored rocks.

"This is easily the Venice of North America, because you travel by boat the way others would travel by car," said David Montrois, a financial adviser from Tallahassee, Fla., who lives in Clayton from June to September.

Mr. Montrois's 1,400-square-foot farmhouse, built in 1830, has three bedrooms and one and a half bathrooms and sits on nine acres. Mr. Montrois paid \$150,000 for it in 1998, though he says he has put at least that much into renovations, including a dock, where he keeps a runabout, a Jet-Ski, a houseboat and a skiff. "I can hop in the golf cart, buzz down to the dock," he said, "and be in Ontario for lunch."

A passion for boats suffuses many Clayton residents, like Lawrence Trumpore, a manufacturer of industrial rubber products



Michael J. Okoniewski for The New York Times

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he and his wife, Loretta, lived on one of their boats in a Clayton marina. But needing a residence that was easier to enter and exit, they decided to move to a place on land. In 2003, they bought a 1,400-square-foot riverside ranch-style house, with two bedrooms and two bathrooms, built in 1988, for \$269,000.

Clayton is appealing, he said, because the year-rounders accept the part-timers, even if the income gaps between the two can be large. "Nobody here ever looks at you like you're some kind of a snob," Mr. Trumpore said. "It's fun and casual."

### The Scene

In the late 1800's, class distinctions were more pronounced, when the chief executives of the day came to Clayton on New York Central trains, but only to catch steamships bound for their private islands. That train terminal today has been transformed into the breezy Frink Park, which has a weekly farmer's market. Another gathering spot is the recently renovated Antique Boat Museum, which plays host throughout the summer to regattas and boat-building classes.

And back at the Opera House, an interior renovation will give the building, which opened in 1904, air-conditioning, new seats and other improvements.

Down the street, the Riverside Cafe has a full menu served on a wide deck that has up-close views of the enormous boats that plod toward the Great Lakes weighted down with

andria Bay, Route 12, is a throwback to an earlier era, with faded billboards that advertise mini-golf courses, drive-in movie theaters and fish-fries.

### The Real Estate Market

Real estate brokers say the Clayton market extends east and west along the St. Lawrence River between Cape Vincent and Alexandria Bay. The most sought-after homes, brokers say, are early-20th-century cottages, those petite fixer-uppers that wait shyly on the river. In the last few years, people have bought them as second homes, adding new roofs, kitchens and bathrooms, said Cathy Garlock of Garlock Realty in Alexandria Bay. They have also winterized them so they can live in them for six months a year or more.

"Then it's back to Florida or Arizona for the other six months," Ms. Garlock said.

These cottages, which cost around \$400,000, are found on the outskirts of town, along Quebec Head to the east or, to the west, Bartlett Point, which faces French

Bay. Last year, a 684-square-foot one-story cottage, built in 1930, with two bedrooms and 210 feet of river frontage sold for \$240,000 after being listed for \$299,999.

Newer waterfront houses can be found on Washington Island — connected to Clayton by a bridge — where a 1,500-square-foot post-and-beam house built in the 1980's, with two bedrooms, two bathrooms and a dock with room for a pair of Adirondack chairs, might cost \$750,000, the brokers say.

Also desirable are houses built around 1900 on the river's other islands. There are precisely 1,865 islands, according to Trudy Gagnon, a clerk at Hawn Memorial Library in Clayton.

Baroque in detail — with servants' quarters, lookout towers and spacious boat-houses — these compounds are rarely on the market. When they are, though, they can easily command more than \$1 million. Earlier this summer, a 5,800-square-foot Shingle-style house built in 1880, with nine bedrooms and four bathrooms and situated on Sport Island, in Alexandria Bay, was listed at \$1.8 million.

### LAY OF THE LAND

**POPULATION** 4,817 year round; up to 13,000 in the warmer months.  
**SIZE** 82.6 square miles.

**LOCATION** In the Thousand Islands region in New York, about 340 miles northwest of New York City and 160 miles southwest of Montreal.

**WHO'S BUYING** Boat aficionados, scuba divers and sport fishermen from Syracuse, Rochester and Buffalo, as well as New Jersey and Florida.

**GETTING THERE** Interstate 81 to Exit 47, then northwest on Route 12.

**WHILE YOU'RE LOOKING** A popular salad dressing made its public debut at the Herald Hotel, now called the Thousand Islands Inn, built in 1897 (335 Riverside Drive, 800-544-4241; www.1000-islands.com). The inn, which is open only 19 weeks a year, offers 13 rooms starting at \$85 a night.

Houses that have already been winterized, meanwhile, are found in town, a change hands more often, since they are on the water, brokers say. Still, a buyer who's willing to strap a kayak to the roof of her car and drive a few minutes to the river can buy a two-story Italianate, Arts and Crafts or Queen Anne, with three bedrooms, two baths and a decent yard, for less than \$200,000.

With limited supply and continuing demand, prices throughout town have risen 1 percent a year in each of the last three years after being stagnant for more than a decade, said Lisa Johnson, an agent with NN Homes in nearby Watertown.

Second-home buyers, who make up 20 percent of the market (and that figure is increasing), are behind a lot of the rise in prices, she said. Demand is also coming from families that are moving to Clayton to be near soldiers who are stationed at Fort Drum, a military base in Watertown.

"Clayton has been working really hard to make things look better," Ms. Johnson said. "The continued demand is a result."

### THREE FOR SALE

## Seeking a Kayak Lifestyle Among 1,865 Islands

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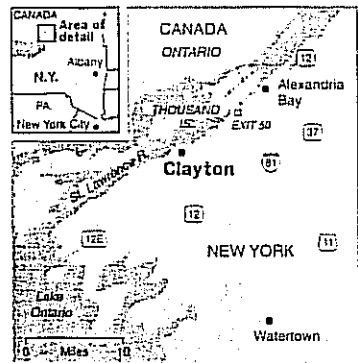
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A passion for boats suffuses many Clayton residents, like Lawrence Trumpore, a manufacturer of industrial rubber products from Hope, N.J., who spends weekends in Clayton. All the boats in his extensive collection are antiques with mahogany hulls.

For eight summers, Mr. Trumpore said,



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Down the street, the Riverside Cafe has a full menu served on a wide deck that has up-close views of the enormous boats that plod toward the Great Lakes weighted down with coal.

Then there is the lure of the near-empty roads, which cyclists like for their lack of hills. And 12 miles to the northeast is Alexandria Bay, a rowdier version of Clayton just bursting with tourists, ice-cream stands and bars.

### Pros

Clayton's flat horizon and mirrorlike inlets leave it bathed in sunlight from dawn to dusk. And in the warm weather, there are enough green meadows speckled and flecked with purple and yellow wildflowers to make this northern town seem downright lush.

### Cons

The homes tend to be clustered together, so anybody looking for backyard privacy may be disappointed. And the main commercial road that connects Clayton to Alex-

andria Bay, Route 12, is a throwback to an earlier era, with faded billboards that advertise minigolf courses, drive-in movie theaters and fish-fries.

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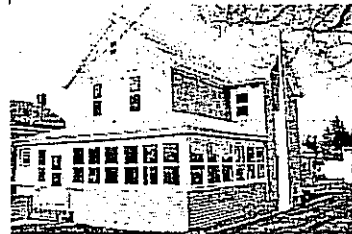
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### THREE FOR SALE

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WHAT 5-bedroom house  
HOW MUCH \$139,900

This vinyl-sided 1,700-square-foot house has two bathrooms and an enclosed porch. The lot is about a quarter-acre and has a one-car garage. Agent: Walter Christensen, Christensen Realty USA, (315) 686-4000; www.christensenrealty.com.

Information on properties was supplied by the listing companies.



WHAT 2-bedroom house  
HOW MUCH \$235,000

This seasonal 576-square-foot cottage, with one bath and 50 feet of river frontage, was built in 1933. It has a new driveway and a new roof. The house, which includes an enclosed porch and a gas fireplace, is offered furnished. The property is a half-acre and has a detached storage building. Agent: Jocelyn Merritt, Garlock Realty, (315) 482-6000; www.garlockrealty.com.



WHAT 5-bedroom house  
HOW MUCH \$274,900

Built in 1880, this Queen Anne-style house is almost 3,000 square feet and has two modern bathrooms and a contemporary kitchen. There are original details, including a stained-glass window and hand-carved moldings. The fenced backyard has an above-ground pool. Agent: Lisa Johnson, NNY Homes, (315) 771-2371; www.nnyhomes.com.

# Track.

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