

As the World Changes, Camp Continues (Mostly): 2020-26

By Peter Collinge

In January, 2020, plans were well underway for summer camp. But summer camp at Massawepie never happened; the COVID pandemic arrived first. All summer camps in New York state were shut down by Governor Andrew Cuomo as a pandemic precaution. Seneca Waterways Council pivoted quickly and instead offered an online summer camp in 2020.

Camp RacDeever: 2020

The 2020 Seneca Waterways Council online summer camp was named Camp RacDeever, combining the mascots of the three council camps: Babcock-Hovey's racoon, Cutler's red deer, and Massawepie's beaver. Liane Richardson was the Camp Director and Matt Thurston was the Program Director. The camp fee was \$100 for a week, and \$95 for an additional week. Scouts could register for up to three merit badges per week, and also some advancement work for Tenderfoot/Second Class/First Class. All was done online, with sessions Monday – Friday and class sizes limited. Merit badges offered were chosen based on suitability for online work and the availability of staff or volunteer counselors.

During summer, 2020, the facilities at Massawepie were open on a rental basis, similar to end-of-summer Family Camp weeks in more normal years. Quite a few families, and some small groups, took advantage of this unusual opportunity to use the Massawepie cabins, lodges, lean-tos, tent and RV campsites, and other facilities in the summer. A second "plague" hit the camp when an explosion of mice (due to with a bumper crop of beech nuts the year before) descended upon camp infesting cabins, campers, and climbing into hung bear bags. A small volunteer crew and Ranger Staff dealt with the mice and managed nearly 175 rentals from July 1st to Labor Day. The ranger staff and Properties Committee volunteers also took advantage of the lull in summer camp to do considerable work at Mountaineer, upgrading facilities for use in Family Camping.

As 2020 wound down, it was still uncertain whether there would be summer camp at Massawepie in 2021. The pandemic was still raging, though death rates were down somewhat. Then, starting in December, 2020, vaccinations for COVID became available to the public. That development provided hope for a more normal summer camp season.

Summer Camp reopens: 2021-2022

By January, 2021, Seneca Waterways Council was beginning to recruit staff and announce tentative summer camp plans. Then, on February 18, came the news that everyone in NY Scouting had been waiting for: Governor Cuomo announced that summer camps would be allowed to open in June.

In 2020, Katelyn Merritt had been hired as the council's Program Director, and for 2021 she was named as Massawepie Camp Director. Matt Thurston would be Program Director. A week of summer camp would cost \$410 for "early bird" payers (\$445 as the regular fee, \$485 for late payment). After the uncertainty over camp plans, the deposit of \$100 was not due until May 1, with the balance due June 15. Treks would be available, too.

Summer camps in New York in 2021 were required to follow special Department of Health guidelines. Massawepie campers were asked to sanitize their hands upon entering the Dining Hall. Meal service was the biggest challenge. The camp management considered various options to stay within the state's guidelines. First, they considered splitting breakfast and dinner into two shifts each, to reduce occupancy in the Dining Hall, while making lunch "grab and go" style. That idea was abandoned when it became clear that having two morning and evening meal shifts would require reducing the camp's program offerings. The next possibility was to have the Scout "gopher" (or table waiter, who is the

Scout designated to set and clear the table and to “go fer” food) serve all of the food from large dishes onto individual plates at that table. That system would maintain “family style” serving while minimizing the number of hands touching the serving utensils, which was a concern of the state. However, when this system was tested during the Staff Week at the start of the summer, it proved to be quite time-consuming for the gopher, and there were concerns that younger Scouts would really struggle with it.

Therefore, less than a week before the arrival of campers, food serving was changed from “family style” to “cafeteria style.” Fortunately, some stainless steel serving lines had been donated, and hundreds of cafeteria trays were quickly ordered. After some trial and error, a system evolved where the campers would enter the Dining Hall in two lines through the double doors on the side toward the lake, then pass through one of four serving lines to get food on their individual trays. Campers would then go to an assigned table, to eat the meal with their troop as usual. The tables, which usually each seat ten people, were only set to seat eight to allow more room for social distancing. Also, unlike previous years, troops were not assigned to share a table. If one troop did not fill the table, the extra seats were just left empty.

With the different start to the meal there were some needed program changes. Grace was sung after the troops lined up at the front doors, before they entered the Dining Hall. The meal song was then sung almost immediately after grace to entertain the troops as they waited to enter the Dining Hall.

In camp outside of meals, masks were available but optional. There were other challenges, like an unusually small number of junior staff after having no Counselor-in-Training (CIT) program in 2020, but overall everyone was pleased to have summer camp back in operation.

To rebuild the Massawepie Treks program in 2021 after a year off, Ian Craig (who was already an experienced Trek Director from Sabattis Adventure Camp) was hired as Trek Director. He brought several former Sabattis trek staffers with him.

The 2021 October Odyssey featured a park-wide scavenger hunt with challenges both inside Massawepie and out in the wider Adirondack Park. Saturday dinner and Sunday breakfast were provided to participants, along with a campsite.

In January, 2022, the Massawepie Arctic Challenge returned after skipping 2021 due to the lingering pandemic. Each year the camp hosts troop contingents over the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day weekend, with the numbers limited by the availability of sleeping spaces in winterized Massawepie buildings like Gannett Lodge and Keymel Lodge.

By winter, the council was looking for more than 70 staff members for Massawepie 2022, with minimum ages of 16, 18, or 21 depending on position, as usual. Mary Beth Boyle, who was Assistant Camp Director in 2021, would be the 2022 Camp Director, with Christielee Geiger as Assistant Camp Director and Matt Thurston back again as Program Director.

The Massawepie Staff Alumni Association (MSAA) continued its quest to improve life in the Staff Site by sponsoring a project in 2022 to begin “hardening” the “tabins” (tent cabins) with metal roofs and wooden sides. Earlier, in 2019 the MSAA had brought electricity to two lean-tos in the Staff Site, and in 2021 it had worked to bring a light and electrical outlets to each staff tabin.

Massawepie celebrated its 70th anniversary as a Scout summer camp in 2022. Summer camp attendance continued to rebound with 1464 Scout-weeks, up from 1337 in 2021, though those numbers were still down from before the COVID pandemic as Scouting membership had taken a hit in 2020. Massawepie attendance was helped some by the closing of Seneca Waterway’s Council’s other Scouts BSA summer camp, Camp Babcock-Hovey, after the 2021 season. Similarly, several other

Scout camps in New York state, such as Henderson Scout Reservation, had closed and Seneca Waterways Council worked to encourage units from those camps to try Massawepie.

Back to Normal, and More!: 2023-2026

During the spring Work Weekends of 2023, the rangers and Properties Committee volunteers began a project to build a pavilion in each of the camp's troop sites. This followed a project begun in 2021 to install a storage shed in each site, mostly by moving sheds from Camp Babcock-Hovey after it closed.

For 2023, Brendan Flaherty (a long-time Massawepie staffer in the 2010s) was named Camp Director, with Peter Huber as Program Director. One of the last remnants of pandemic-era adaptations ended as the Dining Hall abandoned "cafeteria-style" serving lines and returned to traditional "family style" food service. Several new merit badges (Architecture and Painting) were added, other offerings were enhanced, and Instructional Swim returned to the Waterfront. Promotion of the Mountaineer Family Camp ramped up in 2023 with year-round camp resident Christielee Geiger serving as Family Camp Director, and Matt and Michelle Trost serving as Camp Caretakers out of their RV at Mountaineer.

Massawepie hosted its first Wood Badge training course for Scout leaders August 20-25, 2023, directed by Dillon Constable. The weeklong course was a change from the two-weekend course format prevalent in recent years. Then, over Columbus Day weekend in October, Massawepie hosted a Fire Tower Challenge where over 90 Scouts and leaders hiked to at least one of 17 Adirondack fire towers. Repeating a successful plan from 2022, the same weekend also served as Fall Beaver Weekend, where volunteers worked to finish up camp projects and start readying camp for the winter.

For summer camp 2024, long-time Massawepie staffer Matt Thurston was named Camp Director, with Jacob Emery as Assistant Camp Director and Peter Huber returning as Program Director. Cordell Reynolds, who had previously served on the Handicraft and Ranger staffs, became Trek Director. One new program was "Cowboy Action," held at the Rifle Range by the Shooting Sports staff. Attendance was up to 1552 Scout-weeks, partly because the Longhouse Council had decided to close Sabattis Scout Reservation a few months before summer and a number of the troops from Sabattis made the last-minute switch to Massawepie.

On July 31, 2024, an incident with a missing camper caused concern but had a happy ending. A Scout from Brockport was seen leaving his campsite around 10:30 AM, but did not appear for his scheduled class. After not finding the Scout in camp, the staff called the DEC Forest Rangers at 12:55 PM. DEC personnel, camp staff and leaders, and later community volunteers searched within and around Massawepie for the rest of the day, despite constant rain. (With darkness approaching and the camp staff and leaders tiring after searching all day, community volunteers had been recruited through social media to help join the search.) During the search a large maple limb split off and fell onto the main powerlines into camp, knocking out the power to Camp Pioneer and smashing the roof of a truck of a local Tupper Lake volunteer. The fallen limb only complicated the situation for Property Superintendent Ben Geiger, who needed to remove the limb blocking the main road into camp and restore power without help from his ranger staff who were still out searching, while still himself helping to organize the search. Fortunately, some St. Lawrence University volunteers (who were in the Yurt Village for their work week to get it ready for the upcoming semester) stepped in to help with the searching. That allowed Geiger to focus more on opening the road and restoring power to Pioneer. Everyone was relieved when community member Garrick Monroe, searching on his ATV, found the Scout at a nearby hunting camp around 8 PM.

Matt & Michelle Trost ran the Family Camp at Mountaineer, which now offered four cabins including Skylight Lodge (the remodeled trading post), five RV sites with hookups, four sites for small RVs or tents, and three tent sites. Additional amenities included two shower houses, a laundry area, a recreation center (the former dining hall), a private beach, and more. Campers included many former

staff members, families of Scouts camped at Pioneer, and others who had found Mountaineer through Hip Camp, the new online reservation system.

The Columbus Day event for 2024 was the October Odyssey, a scavenger hunt similar to that in 2021. And by the end of 2024, planning was well underway for summer camp in 2025. One need was emerging: the average troop contingent at camp was trending toward fewer Scouts, leading to more small troops sharing a troop site. Sometimes the troops were compatible and enjoyed each other's company, but sometimes relations were a bit more awkward. Plans were underway to start adding more small troop sites to reduce sharing. That started with adding the Big Moose site for 2025, between Horseshoe and Gannett Lodge. At the same time, "Cranberry B" (the southern portion of the Cranberry troop site, which was separate enough to often be used by a different troop) was renamed "Tear of The Clouds." Both of those names continued the traditional of naming Pioneer sites after well-known Adirondack lakes.

Stephen Hoitt, who had been Seneca Waterways Council Executive since 2010, was promoted in November, 2024 to serve as Council Service Territory 10 Director. On March 1, 2025, Jonathan Widmark moved from the Cape Fear Council in North Carolina to become the new Seneca Waterways Council Executive. One of his stated priorities was to promote the upcoming 75th anniversary of Massawepie in 2027. At Widmark's suggestion, in June the members of the Massawepie Staff Alumni Association agreed to begin the process of dropping "Staff" from the organization's name to broaden its appeal to all Massawepie alumni. The Alumni Association, which was founded in 2000, celebrated its 25th anniversary at an event in November.

For 2025, Matt Thurston was returning as Camp Director, Jacob Emery as Assistant Camp Director, and Cordell Reynolds as Trek Director. (Reynolds had been working full-time at Massawepie since winter, partly funded by a grant from generous Massawepie alumni Philip Bartels, splitting time between ranger and trek duties.) Seneca Waterways Council Director of Support Services Tracy Jones, who had come north from Louisiana to work for the council, recruited several Louisiana camp staff members to work at Massawepie. Among them was Parker Hebert, who served as Program Director.

New for 2025 was "Ha De Ron Dah Village," designed to be a living history program. The camp's STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) offerings were expanded as well, and Golf merit badge was added at Sports. And by the summer of 2025, each troop site had a permanent pavilion in place. Unfortunately, attendance dropped in 2025 by more than three hundred Scout-weeks to 1228. There were a combination of factors: Scouting membership overall continued to decrease, some of the troops that switched from Massawepie when Sabattis closed in the spring of 2024 had now taken time to research and choose other camps, and probably most importantly failures of the 2024 camp food service vendor had led to poor food quality and quantity at times which discouraged some troops from returning. The 2025 food service vendor, Gill's Grilling, was a big improvement.

One of the Massawepie volunteers, Conor Henrie, helped arrange a grant from the Constellation Energy Foundation for trail work. Ben Geiger was able to keep one of his summer ranger staff (Cam Weber) working for two extra months in the fall of 2025. The first month, he assessed trail needs (especially boardwalk needs on the white trail around Massawepie Lake), then was able to buy materials with the help of the grant and get work done himself and with the use of volunteers. Weber even used artificial intelligence (newly widespread at that time) to figure out the most economical way to buy and cut the necessary lumber pieces.

2025 also brought news of a forthcoming grant of \$1 million from New York State, secured by State Senator Jeremy Cooney, to improve camp facilities. Cooney is an Eagle Scout, from the troop formerly led by long-time Massawepie staffer George Varga, and had himself served on Massawepie staff for multiple summers. The first priority for these funds was to work on the Dining Hall, which had

long been inadequate for the number of campers being served. Seating space had been expanded in the early 2000s by adding three carports outside of the Dining Hall, but the kitchen area had not been expanded to match, so that was the first priority. Starting in the fall of 2025, and with work continuing through June of 2026, an addition was built on the north side of the kitchen. This work was mostly done by volunteers, but with hired contractors helping as needed.

One big improvement for 2026 within the kitchen expansion was a dedicated new dishwashing area, which keeps the dirty dishes separate from the food preparation area and frees up more space for food preparation. Another behind-the-scenes change was that the camp staff took over managing the food distribution for patrol cooking troops from the food service vendor, utilizing some of the new space in the kitchen addition. Getting the camp's food service vendors to understand the needs of patrol cooking units had always been a challenge, and the vendors had naturally tended to prioritize cooking for the Dining Hall. Bringing the patrol cooking food "in house" was intended to provide better service at a lower cost for the camp.

Meanwhile, in the spring of 2026 the Seneca Waterways Council announced that it would be merging with the Baden-Powell Council (out of Binghamton) to form a new Greater Finger Lakes Council of Scouting America. Tuscarora Scout Reservation in the foothills of the Catskills would be joining Massawepie and Cutler as the new council's three camp properties.

Matt Thurston returned for his third year as Camp Director in 2026, again assisted by Jacob Emery and with Parker Hebert as Program Director. Ten new merit badges were added to the offerings, including American Heritage and Citizenship in the Nation in honor of the nation's 250th anniversary. Another notable addition was Pottery merit badge, utilizing the former firewood storage area in Gannett Lodge for the new potter's wheel and kiln. The STEM center hosted AI, Electronics, and Energy merit badges, while the Sports area added Multisport (think triathalons) and Movie Making joined the Handicraft area. Camp attendance was down again, to 1126 Scout-weeks, but Scouting America was holding a National Jamboree in 2026 and a dip in camp attendance isn't unusual during those years.

As 2026 wound down, work was underway for an additional expansion on the south side of the Dining Hall kitchen, a Boat Storage Building near August Lodge, and a Firewood Shed (funded by a donation from long-time Massawepie volunteer Chris Harris and his wife Joan), hopefully soon to be followed by a long-sought expansion of the Dining Hall seating area. These improvements are among the extensive plans being made for Massawepie's 75th anniversary as a Scout summer camp in 2027, and will help pave the way for many more years of Scouting at Massawepie!