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## Tahawus Cultural Center placed on National Historic Register Tim Rowland, Apr 05, 2021

**AU SABLE FORKS** | When a fire of almost incomprehensible devastation leveled the downtown of Au Sable Forks in 1925, only three buildings were left standing, one of them being the three-story Freemason lodge that at the time was only 14 years old. With such a fortuitous twist of fate, the building would seem destined for greatness.

This winter the greatness, or at least longevity, was recognized when the lodge, now the Tahawus Cultural Center, was placed on the New York State Register of Historic Places and, three months later, was added to the National Historic Register.

As the town rebuilt from the fire, the lodge remained its totem, towering over the modest architecture that replaced the char. Forlorn with neglect by century's end, it had nevertheless caught the artistic eye of New York City dance choreographer Rebecca Kelly as she and her husband Craig Brashear — who had together formed the Rebecca Kelly Dance Company in 1979 — were splitting time between their SoHo loft and the Adirondacks.

At a reception in Plattsburgh, then-Sen. Hillary Clinton, a fan of Kelly's work in the city, cornered the choreographer and asked what her legacy would be.

"I had no answer," Kelly said. But that question and that old lodge in the Forks smacked head-on into each other when in 2008 the nonprofit Appleby Foundation that oversees the dance company purchased the structure from the Masons.

The Masonic Lodge became the Tahawus Cultural Center for dance, art, science, and educational programming. "We wanted the arts to be available to a wider circle of people," Kelly said. "And we wanted to shine a spotlight on local talent and skills."

From the beginning, it was understood that they were not just buying a property, they were buying a swatch of Au Sable Forks' soul. "Learning the history was mandatory because we were adopted by the town historian (Sharron Hewston)," Kelly said. "We feel we were very well-guided by her."

The vibrant lodge had begun to fade when the paper and pulp mills closed in 1971, and younger generations were no longer enthralled at the thought of fraternal communities. As membership dwindled and heating bills rose, members abandoned the top floor and carved out a little enclave in the first floor, where the flooring that was under the pool table is the only spot where the varnish has not been worn away.

"You almost didn't want to look at it, it was too sad," Kelly said. "But it had really good bones and really good (interior) light."



Tahawus Center directors Rebecca Kelly and Craig Brashear (right) and caretaker Norm Gero outside the historic building.

Through the years, the first floor had also been a post office and a laundromat — **Tahawus Center caretaker Norm Gero** said he remembered playing in the snow as a kid until everyone got too cold, at which point they would all run into the laundromat to warm up. In the basement were the offices of the Adirondack Record newspaper.

With its steel frame and terracotta block construction, Brashear said the building had held up relatively well through the years, although, as these things tend to go, the cost of asbestos and pigeon-dropping removal exceeded the worth of the structure itself.

The third floor was, Brashear said, the ceremonial room with a lighted pedestal and painted in Masonic Blue, a rather uninspiring color even before it begins to fade. But “Craig and I looked at each other and said, it looks like a dance studio to me,” Kelly said.

And so it became the North Country incarnation of the couple’s Manhattan ballet, which guided many young dancers through their teens until the pandemic led to its closure. The galleries and programming will remain, along with businesses on the first floor, consistent with its historic use.

Kelly said the historic designations were helped along by Steve Englehart, director of Adirondack Architectural Heritage, and David Brunner, whose Asgaard Farm is also on the register.

“We had wonderful volunteers in the community who helped,” Kelly said. “Nobody made us feel like we were crazy — although they may have raised an eyebrow or two.”

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