

# Lake Saltonstall In Its Heyday Was An Oasis For Tired City Dwellers

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This article, in praise of Lake Saltonstall, was written by Mrs. Henry Townshend, one of many in the New Haven area who mourn the passing of the lake from a public resort to a public water supply.

With the recent closing of Lake Saltonstall to fishing by the New Haven Water Co., the public loses its last touch with this lovely lake, once a popular summer resort.

In 1890 throngs of New Haveners, seeking relief from the city's heat and in pursuit of woodland pleasures, took the 15-minute ride on the twice-daily Shoreline Railroad to the East Haven depot and then walked over to Lake Saltonstall. Here they found a comfortable refreshment house and waiting room, appropriately named "Lake View," and a dock where boats could be hired for fishing and rowing at 10 to 50 cents an hour. The entire length of the lake (four and one half miles and "one of the loveliest sheets of water in the world") could be traveled roundtrip in the little steamer, Cynget, captained by G. Herbert Baldwin, for only 25 cents.

At the head of the lake, the passengers disembarked at the steamboat landing into a beautiful wooded picnic area called "Glen Grove," where a pavilion stood complete with tables and seats. Those family groups, parties of friends and Sunday school classes who made the trip were lavish in praise of "the beauty and quiet of the incomparable Lake Saltonstall."

#### A Magnificent View

In the Journal and Courier, July 16, 1892, a writer extolled the picturesque scenery which "reminds one strongly of the palisades of the Hudson." On the west side of the lake rose a sharp ridge of 250 feet, heavily wooded with pine, birch,

hemlock, beech and cedar and providing at "Eagle's Nest" Point a magnificent view of the surrounding countryside: Long Island Sound, New Haven Harbor, the hills of Meriden and all the shoreline towns, snugged into the thick greenery with white church steeples poking through.

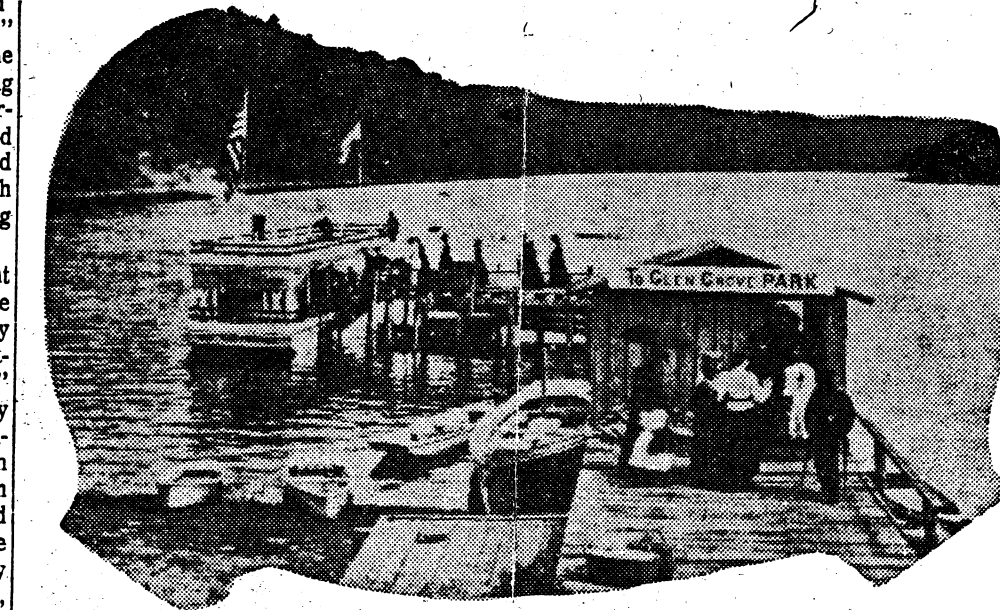
On the eastern side, verdant pastures and fields rimmed the lake's edge with particularly charming spots named: "Chestnut Grove," "Wigwam Grove," "Stillwater Bay" and "Lily Pond" (abounding in blueish-pink water lilies brought from Cape Cod). With the afternoon shadows of the high-walled hills falling early on the lake and with cool breezes gently fanning the deep (112 feet), crystal-clear waters, it is not hard to imagine why city dwellers found this park a delightful retreat. Admirers even boasted that mosquitoes were non-existent here!

Long before this scene of wild beauty was known to pleasure seekers, back in the dim days of Indian dominion, an ancient legend told of the creation of the lake. When Chief Momaugin sold his tribe's rights on the land to the English settlers, he recalled this legend: it seems the great spirit of the red man foresaw the coming of the white man and anticipating the fate of his children, his tears flowed heavily down the mountainside and scooped out the depression forming the lovely lake. "Tear of the Great Spirit" the Indians called it, or Lake Lonotonquet.

Time rolled tranquilly by with only local fishermen frequenting the "remote" lake or hunters and Indian artifact collectors, although farming and milling went on as usual on the southern portion at the East Haven River outlet.

#### An Exciting Change

But in 1890 Lake Saltonstall



Lake Saltonstall railroad station and steamboat landing.

was in for an exciting change. By that time George H. Townsend of East Haven had acquired much of the lake property, thus satisfying a lifelong desire of his, and he had great plans to open up the charms of the lake to everyone. During the next few years, the 700-acre private park began to vie successfully with the attractions offered by the better-known and more accessible Savin Rock.

The grounds at Glen Grove were enlarged to include tennis and croquet courts, baseball and football fields. Andrew Granniss of Foxon opened up a refreshment saloon there, selling confectionery, bottled temperance drinks and ice cream, also providing plates and cutlery for the convenience of those on picnics. Walks and carriage drives encircling the lake were laid out and developed with enchanting views exposed along the way.

But the biggest allurements of the lake was the superb fishing. Perch, pickerel, bullheads, roach and croppies (a very

gamey fish, 4 to 5 pounds when mature) kept the most eager anglers busy all day. The first black bass ever known in these waters were brought here from Winsted in 1858 by George Townsend, who continued to stock the lake at an average of 2,000 fish per year. He also stocked the streams with trout fry and made deep, little pools for them by damming the streams at frequent intervals.

#### Trolley Boom

In the summer of 1894, when the electric street car or trolley line from New Haven Green to Granniss Four Corners was ex-

tended to East Haven Green and then to Lake Saltonstall, the rush was on in earnest. The cars, leaving every 20 minutes, were packed with people who looked forward to a respite from the hot, dusty city. "A GREAT DAY AT LAKE SALTONSTALL" headlined The Daily Palladium on May 31, 1895. "BEAT ALL RECORDS!" The newspaper continued: "A moderate estimate of those who spent a part of the day at Saltonstall would be 3,000." Extra excursion boats were added to the little fleet: the steamer Susie Saltonstall, the barge Gov-

ernor Saltonstall and the handsome launch Electric, straight from the World's Fair at Chicago.

Such was the great upsurge in popularity of this new resort that many talked of building large summer hotels and vacation cottages on the lake's edge and converting the mountain into a huge park. And it wasn't only in summer that the lake drew the public. In winter many skaters, young and old, flocked to the lake for a day of sliding and gliding. On Jan. 6, 1895, 2,000 skaters were reported out on the ice with the railroad running a special train to accommodate the crowds.

June 22, 1870, Lake Saltonstall was the site of a gallant rowing contest over a three-mile course between Harvard and Yale's scientific schools crews, Lawrence and Sheffield. YALE THE WINNER! blazoned the New York papers the next day. A year later in another boat race on the lake, the sophomore crew of Yale College lost by nine seconds to the Atlanta crew.

All of this public enjoyment came to an abrupt end in June 1895 when the New Haven Water Co., bought the surrounding land—in the words of Eli Whitney Jr., president: "to keep the water in a pure condition and prevent its contamination by being used for pleasure purposes."

This caused much consterna-

tion among the excursionists, none more so than General Manager Dodge of the New Haven Street Railway Co., who said: "I do not know what the water company intends to do, but I hope it will not shut the public off from one of New Haven's finest summer resorts."

The merits of the resort were much publicized in the newspapers. The Shore Line Times, May 18, 1894; "Lake Saltonstall is destined to be one of the most attractive spots in the state, if it is not already." Meriden Daily Republican, Feb. 20, 1895: "One of the most romantic and beautiful summer resorts in the state is Lake Saltonstall." The Evening Leader, June 14, 1894: "Pretty Lake Saltonstall—the heart of the Adirondacks furnishes no wilder or more enchanting resting places for tourists."

All was not lost immediately however; the public still retained the right to fish with a permit from the water company. But finally in March 1966 the last, fateful blow was struck. CLOSED TO FISHING! PUBLIC KEEP OUT! TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED! the signs might read. The tears of ardent fishermen might well mingle with the tears of the Indians' great spirit.

So now lovely Lake Saltonstall reverts to its original state—quiet woods and serene waters. Time marches on—or does it slip backward?