

## The History of Williams Bay

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Unfortunately, the early settlers of Williams Bay did not leave much in writing about their experiences. However, Colonel Samuel F. Phoenix, the first settler in Delavan kept a diary, and from that, we can get some very good word pictures of the neighborhood, as first viewed by Israel Jr. and Moses Williams.

To the early explorers, the country seemed a veritable paradise, just waiting for man to enter into its possession. The southern and eastern parts of the county, which were the first to be viewed by prospectors, was watered by the most considerable lakes in the county. Geneva Lake stretched for nine miles through heavily wooded rolling country, opening out at its southern extremity on to the beautiful prairie of Big Foot. Across the country, some three miles to the northwest, another beautiful lake, then known as Swan Lake (Delavan Lake) lay in all its native loveliness, quite heavily wooded about its banks but flanked farther north by open prairie and groves, or openings as they were termed, of oaks.

The oaks had a peculiar fascination for the incoming explorers. Few of them had ever seen the like before. Emerging from the deep woods, they came upon these natural parks, as clear of underbrush as an ordinary orchard and skirting the prairie on every side. As an old pioneer expressed it "They seemed like the old apple orchards in York State, only the fences were all gone, and they extended as far as the eye could penetrate the shade.

It was along borders of these openings where they skirted the prairie that the first farmers

staked their claims, generally including a strip of timber and a strip of the prairie.

On July 15, 1836, Colonel Phoenix, on his horse Wall, starting from Spring Prairie (where Dr. Ansel Hemenway had already erected a cabin), passed through the small settlement of a cabin or two at what is now the city of Lake Geneva, followed the trail on the north of Geneva Lake and reached Swan Lake (Delavan Lake) at dusk. He tells about the difficulties of his prospecting trip as follows:

"In the midst of the untraversed wilderness, tormented by hungry mosquitoes, and bewildered in trying to trace the indistinct and sometimes hardly discernable surveyor's lines, I was often hungry for the pleasant home in the East and for a brief time felt like giving up."

The surveyor's marks mentioned had been made the fall before by John Brink, Hodgson, and William Ostrander and party, who had taken the contract for surveying the lines.

It was then John Brink, in making his map of the district, put down "Geneva Lake" instead of following his directions to use the Indian names. Otherwise the lake might have been called "Kishwauketoe" meaning clear water.

Politically, Walworth was at first a part of Delavan Township. In 1839 it was set off, together with what is now Sharon as Walworth; in 1843 it assumed its present limits when Sharon was set off as a separate town. Williams Bay was part of Walworth Township and stayed

like that until the incorporation of the Village in 1919.

When the first settlers appeared in Williams Bay, other settlements had already been established in Spring Prairie, Geneva, East Troy, and Delavan. By the end of 1836, there were some 200 people in the county, including men, women, and children, with 31 families and 30 single men.

The Village of Geneva has a railroad as early as 1856. The track condition deteriorated, and rail service was abandoned. However, rail service to Geneva resumed in July of 1871. After the Great Chicago Fire in October 1871, Geneva was raised from a small county town to a summer colony.

## **Community**

### **Chicago & North Western Railroad**

Williams Bay also profited when rail service was resumed but on a smaller scale. Prosperous and wealthy citizens of Chicago soon began to make their summer homes on the shores of the beautiful lake. Private yachts began to appear. In 1873 the Lady of the Lake plied the lake to the delight of the visitors on a day's outing.

At the head of the Bay, the Chicago & North Western Railroad made one of its terminal stations. The trains arrived in Williams Bay on June 1, 1888. After the arrival of the railroad in Williams Bay, several families who had settled in East Delavan moved over to this town.

The railroad certainly helped the town as far as transportation is concerned. On the other hand it handicapped the possibility of the development

of an adequate beach by planting the tracks and depot building a few feet from the waterfront.

## **Library**

There is a colorful history behind the library in Williams Bay officially known as Barrett Memorial Library. After Mrs. Edward Williams was appointed postmistress of Williams Bay, she gathered a collection of books, some from residents and others from the State Traveling Library, in her home, where the post office was located. The Williams home stood where the Fire Station now stands. In the early 1900s residents of the Village began to feel the need of a public meeting place, and it was suggested that a building might also house a library. In 1907 Dr. Storrs B. Barrett, a world renowned astronomer at Yerkes Observatory and an active resident of the Bay, learned that a building on the George Sturges estate was to be torn down or otherwise disposed of. It had been built to house a club room and a private bowling alley. Mr. Sturges and his sisters, Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. Dauchy, gave the building to Barrett along with one thousand dollars for moving it from the west shore of Geneva Bay to Williams Bay. All plans were made to move the building across the frozen lake. Stories vary on how the building was moved. Some accounts say the building was moved on the ice others that it came by land. Residents of the Village, the surrounding area, and also summer residents gave generously of money and talent in getting this project underway and completed.

When the Village was incorporated in 1919, the library league presented the building and contents to the Village free of debt. The community room which occupies the long bowling area at the rear of building serves in many ways: as the official polling place, for

meetings of various clubs, and for a time Sunday services were held there by the Lutheran Church. During World War II much war relief work was done there.

## **Recreation**

### **Conference Point**

At first on Conference Point were wood lots used by people living on the prairies. In 1868, a group of members of the Congregational Church of Delavan met on the shore of the Lake with their pastor, Joseph Collie, for recreation. In 1874 the group moved to the point. Dr. Collie advertised that he had rooms and boats to rent, board by the day or week, single meals, milk, ice, excellent water, a laundry department with reasonable charges, stables for horses, cookstoves and wood fitted to them for those who would wish to do their own cooking, fishing tackle, etc.

Dr. Collie was determined that along with very good religious teaching; his people should have recreation and relaxation at Camp Collie.

Conference Point became widely known for its assemblies. At the present time, it has become known as The International Association for Religious Education and an active association it is with no racial nor religious prejudices.

### **Holiday Home**

Holiday Home camp is a private non-profit camp operated for the benefit of underprivileged children in the age levels of eight to fifteen who are referred by twenty-two charitable agencies in the City of Chicago.

In the fall of 1886 a group of women met to see what could be done to give children and

convalescents from the low income groups a chance to spend some time on Geneva Lake. They formed an association and adopted as their official title Lake Geneva Fresh Air Association.

### **George Williams College Camp**

Fifty-seven young men met at what is now known as Camp Collie for a camp institution in June 1884. It was from this group that not only George Williams College Camp grew, but it was also the nucleus from which George Williams College developed. In 1887 the first national conference of YMCA secretaries was held; at this time it became known as the YMCA Camp. Progress was rapid, and 1890 was the first big year for expansion. Through a gift from S.B. Chapin an 18-hole golf course was added.

### **Congress Club**

Originally Congress Club was the pleasure club of young married couples, most of who lived on Congress Street in Chicago. In 1881 ten acres of wooded lots was purchased and by July 1882 the members had built a clubhouse, and several cottages were ready for use.

### **Cedar Point Park**

Cedar Point Park came into existence in 1925, Alfred Pedersen and Emory Jaeger acquired a vast estate and transformed the native wilderness into a beautiful subdivision. The Association incorporated under the laws of the State of Wisconsin and was granted a charter.

There are four hundred fifty-six lots in the subdivision. Although this subdivision maintains its parks, peirs, and roads, it is a vital part of the Village and observes the building codes of the Village and follows Villiage

ordinances related to fire, firearms, and pet nuisance.

In many ways Williams Bay is different from the ordinary community in this section of the country. Because of its location on the shores of one of the finest lakes in the State, it is an attractive summer resort. Because of its scientific research center at the Yerkes Observatory, its diversified population, and the activities of its many civic groups, this village, which is the youngest in the County, has grown rapidly into an interesting thriving community.

In summer the population is nearly doubled with all the camps, hotels, and cottages filling up with happy vacationists. In winter the little town is nearly dormant. However, more and more people are coming out to enjoy winter sports.

All in all, Williams Bay has proudly taken its place in Walworth County as a very nice place to live.

### **Epilogue**

When you travel through the past, as have just done, you cannot help but observe mistakes that have been made and could have been avoided. Everybody makes mistakes, and Williams Bay has had its share of them. But mistakes are history, and for the sake of history should be recorded; their recording may also serve to guard against similar ones in the future.

As we read the brochure showing so clearly Mr. Crane's beautiful 1922 plan to make Williams Bay a much more beautiful locality in which to live, and we realize that the 20 years it would have taken to make it so are well passed and that with a little more vision, courage, and perseverance on the part of city fathers and the citizens in general, we would now be living in

that more beautiful and prosperous Williams Bay, we cannot help feeling a deep pang of regret and frustration.

The first mistake was to have allowed the railroad to be installed so near the waterfront. The second was failing to carry out Mr. Crane's plan. The third came only a few years ago when an attempt was made by a group of alert citizens to move the railroad and reclaim the waterfront for park usage. This group worked on its plans together with the Village Board, the State Department, and the railroad representatives. The State drew up the plans and promised to do all the landscaping and planting and the railroad people agreed to move the depot and railroad back to make room for the park along the waterfront. Everything was ready and agreed upon, and the chairman of that committee was authorized to go to Madison and let the State authorities know that the Village was ready to go ahead, only to be told that the Village President had been there the day before to tell them that the Village did not want the project to go through.

A few months later the road along the lake was macadamized, making any future improvements still more difficult. A beautiful dream was lost.

Perhaps not. . . if the younger generation is made aware of these past mistakes, they may profit from them. It is urgent that they become familiar with the history of the place in which they are living, learn the good and bad that have done, and learn the importance of choosing intelligently and with an open mind the group of people who will be working for them as Village Officers.

At present throughout the State great effort is being made to establish junior historical

societies, for which project much helpful Historical Society.  
literature may be obtained from the State

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