

Hemlock Lake

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Hemlock Lake, considered one of the most attractive of all the beautiful lakes in western New York, is almost seven miles long and six-tenths of a mile wide. Its greatest depth is said to be 90 feet.

History tells us that this particular region was the home of the Seneca Indians and in the Seneca tongue was known as Onehda Tecarneodi, which in English was taken to mean Hemlock Lake.

Following the Revolutionary War and the settlement of State titles, many of the men from Sullivan's army returned to purchase land. As settlers began to arrive, the original Phelps and Gorham purchase area was mapped and townships were established. Hemlock Lake was first mapped in 1790.

That tract of land at the southern head of the lake was called Hemlock Valley (where the Village of Springwater now is) and the town of Hemlock was at the northern foot of the lake.

The first known settler near Hemlock Lake was Philip Short who arrived near the present village of Hemlock in 1795. A hermit named Maloy built a cabin on the lake around 1800. Other settlers followed, many of whom built their first dwellings along the lakeshore. Hemlock Lake itself became a sort of highway for the settlement of the region. Seth Knowles, the first settler of Springwater, came up the lake in March of 1807 by travelling over the ice with all his family and possessions. David Badgro and his family made the trip up the lake Indian style in canoes.

Thus, began a period of great activity in the Hemlock region. What began as a route of settlement quickly became a route of commerce. Hemlock Lake was located at a natural dividing line between the pine and hemlock forests to the south and the hardwood timber to the north. There was a great demand for softer building materials in the growing settled areas to the north. The forestry industry which developed sent lumber to the north in return for bread and foodstuffs which were needed to the south.

Sawmills were soon erected at both ends of Hemlock Lake. Many men were employed as lumberjacks and huge rafts of logs were floated down Hemlock Lake for shipment north. In the winter, as many as 200 teams of horses and oxen were used to pull lumber north over the ice. The first roadway was cut along the shore of Hemlock Lake in 1815.

Tremendous quantities of lumber were taken from the Hemlock valley in this manner. Hemlock bark was also taken for use in the leather tanning industry.

In short order the entire foot of Hemlock Lake was cleared of pine and lumber was piled up for sale. Mule skimmers from the growing cities and towns to the north arrived with their wagons and a frontier town developed at the site of present day Hemlock village. It is quite likely that much of the lumber that helped to build the infant city of Rochester came up from the Hemlock valley by log raft, barge, and wagon. Many of the old buildings along St. Paul Street sport structural timbers nearly 18 inches square which may well trace their origin to Hemlock. The site of Hemlock village was then known as Slab City, a name derived from the rough-cut slabs of lumber which formed the first buildings and boardwalks.

A new plank toll road connecting Rochester and Hemlock was instrumental in opening up the Hemlock valley to recreational use. Completed in 1850, the plank road was actually paved with lumber so stage coaches could make the five-hour trip and return the same day. It was not long before hotels and cottages were built along Hemlock's shores. It would appear that the lumbermen had not stripped the forest completely to the shore. Early visitors to Hemlock's first resorts spoke in glowing terms of the primitive wilderness and sylvan shores.

But Hemlock was not to remain unspoiled. The very people who sought her sylvan shores for retreat from civilization would come to clear her shores for hotels, cottages, and roads. To the north, city planners

would covet her pure waters as a reservoir for Rochester.

There were over 200 cottages on Hemlock Lake before there was a single one on Conesus Lake. With the development of the lakeshore, Slab City became the village of Hemlock Lake, then briefly Holden, and finally simply Hemlock.

Most of the hotels and cottages of Hemlock Lake were built in the latter half of the 19th century. The three-story St. James Hotel opened in 1879 on the east shore of the lake. It was considered elegant for the time and had rooms for 60 guests.

Other hotels on Hemlock included the Jacques House, the Port House, the Half Way House, and the Hermitage. The Lake Shore House was famous for its dance hall and fine restaurant.

In 1860, George Watson, an experienced canal boat builder, built the first steam boat to sail on Hemlock Lake. The 70-foot craft was built along the pattern of the Erie Canal barge and used a steam engine from a saw mill. Excursions on the lake became quite popular. Other steamers followed in the wake of the Watson with such names as the Seth Green, the Corabelle, the Mollie Teft, the Nellie, and the Camilla.

Increasing fire insurance rates and a cholera epidemic in 1852 were responsible for the growing city of Rochester first recognizing its need for a reliable water supply. After considering a number of alternatives, Hemlock Lake was chosen on the basis of its purity and elevation. Pumping would not be necessary to deliver water to Rochester customers.

A private company was awarded the first contract for a conduit from Hemlock Lake. Some wooden conduit was laid following the Civil War. The capacity of the first conduit was reached by 1885 when shortages began to appear. At the time, the Hemlock system was second only to Brooklyn in volume and quality of service.

The first decade of use of Hemlock Lake as a city water supply saw little change in the recreational and other uses of the lake. A sawmill was operating on the lake as late as 1883 and the hotels were in their heydays.

A second conduit from Hemlock was finally authorized in 1891. Concurrently with the increased dependence of the city on Hemlock Lake as a water supply, development of the shoreline was reaching a peak. The Plank Road had established Hemlock Lake as a popular and accessible resort. In 1895, work began on a railroad extension which would greatly increase access to the lake.

The extension of the Lehigh Railroad to the village of Hemlock was completed. The inauguration of passenger service to Hemlock was an important event. The popularity of Hemlock Lake as a resort brought four passenger trains each way daily from Rochester.

Then, even as now, as time passed along, more people were attracted in the summer months to this beautiful lake and it soon became a summer resort. People purchased lots on the lakeshore and erected summer homes or cottages.

By 1927, the capacity of the entire Hemlock-Canadice watershed had been reached. As demand for water exceeded supply, the city was forced to buy water from the Lake Ontario company and from Eastman Kodak which had its own Lake Ontario intake. From that time to the present, the proportion of Hemlock water delivered to city customers has steadily declined. The use of water by the City of Rochester forced

the removal of the cottages along the lakeshore during the 1920's.

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