

A History of Cayuga Lake Park

prepared by
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Earliest History of the Park

For many years local people enjoyed the privately operated picnic grounds on the site of the present Cayuga Lake State Park. In 1877 William G. Wayne in 1877 acquired the property and changed the name to Wayne's Woods. Mr. Wayne was the state master of the Grange.¹ His Wayne's Woods included a pavilion.²

On May 24, 1886 a group of New York City businessmen organized as the Cayuga Lake Park Company.³ This company purchased Wayne's Woods. Soon after this purchase, the Seneca Falls and Cayuga Lake Railroad began construction on a 2.83 miles long extension of the existing Seneca Falls and Waterloo Railroad's line to the lake from the Franklin House on Bridge Street in Seneca Falls to this new Cayuga Lake Park.⁴ This was the first standard gauge railroad line ever built in this country from the primary purpose of reaching a summer resort.⁵ The train consisted of three passenger coaches pulled by a steam-powered locomotive and made the trip every half hour throughout the afternoon and evening.

Facilities at the park expanded greatly because of the large numbers of people who came to the park, especially on Sundays. There were baseball grounds. The wires of the Thomson-Houston Electric Company were extended to the Park, illuminating the resort and providing a grand sight, especially from the lake. A new opera house was built, capable of holding 500 people, and often the place for stage performances by New York City performers. There were fireworks at the pier. By June 1887, a steamboat was making regular trips on Cayuga Lake to the Park's pier.⁶

On July 4, 1887, it was estimated that 25,000 people were present for the celebration described as follows by the *Reveille*:

At prompt 12:00 midnight, the fun commenced, and continued to 12:00 last night. Cannons and cannon firecrackers roared, fourth of July bonfires were fired, and until daybreak young America successfully sought against the attempts of Old Morpheus to entrap his victims in slumber. At daybreak, the Independent Battery of Geneva opened its festivities by a salute of 38 guns, and the church bells, shop bells and whistles joined in. The pioneer parade in the morning was a unique representation of the times of Job Smith, the first settler...The industrial parade at 1:00 in the afternoon was a well-represented exhibition of the village industries....The military and firemens' parade took place at 3:00....After the military and firemens parade, the literary exercises took place at the Opera house....The fireworks display in the evening was one of the grandest ever made in western New York....⁷

In 1887 many changes were made to the park. The lakeside pavilion was modified to provide facilities for women and children. The opera house was converted into a dance hall and skating rink. A steam yacht, connecting with every New York City passenger train, could now bring tourists from the Cayuga, NY station to this park. A balloon ascension attracted visitors as did ball games, church picnics and rowing races. There was a professional regatta.⁸

No liquor was sold at the park. No gambling was allowed. A weekly column in the *Reveille* reported events at the Park, as did many other local newspapers. A camp meeting for African Americans, with jubilee singers, was held. Church groups came from Auburn and Clyde, and there was a reunion picnic for Odd Fellows lodges between Syracuse and Rochester. The railroad line reported that it sold 1574 tickets on one Saturday when there was a ball game. At the end of August 1887, 4000 were reported as present at the park one Saturday. There is a two-page ad for the park in the 1896 publication *Manual of the Churches of Seneca County with Sketches of Their Pastors, 1895-96*, helping to illustrate how much the park was used by various religious groups.⁹

In an article for the *Reveille* on July 14, 1965, Elizabeth Delavan remembered these early trolley-car days of Cayuga Lake Park as follows:

...Back in the trolley-car era, the Park was gay, high-keyed, a little fresh, whereas today's State Park has taken on the dignity of those fine oak trees, now grown so tall and protecting....

A ride from Seneca Falls to the Park in the day of the Trolley Car was inexpensive, pleasantly scenic and of short duration. The trip ended in Wayne's Grove, at the foot of a slope, where the lake lay spread out and sparkling a few hundred feet ahead. From this terminus the visitor walked through aisles of green park benches in the direction of his particular interest—for the Park had several distinct activity areas, each attractive in its own way.

The most wholesome and certainly at times the most satisfying was Wayne's that magic name associated with the best ice cream ever made, and lemonade of excellence. You could buy other things there too....

From the restaurant which was near the north end of the Park, a stroll along the cinder path bordering the dusty road brought one to the dance pavilion, a two-story square summery structure framed in offices. A wide pier stretched before it far out into the water to greet the incoming steam and little boats looking for a tie-up.

Across the road from the dance pavilion, near the center of the Park, was a sort of miniature midway offering a merry-go-round, sometimes a ferris wheel, and one season a lovely brown bear in a pen. There were other attractions, they varied from year to year.

The Park ended on the south at a high wooden fence a little beyond the merry-go-round. Just about where the present horseshoe pitching court is located, there used to be some unimposing buildings referred to collectively as The Saloons; but that was beyond the fence, and definitely out of bounds.

A visit to the Park was high adventure for one of impressionable age. Every merry-go-round ride held the thrill of the brass ring you snatched as your horse pranced by...entitling you to a free ride.

The dance floor was romantic...when viewed through the windows of the veranda—although dancing there was forbidden to some growing up in the era when exacting parents believed that dancing should be supervised....

Besides Sunday School picnics there were other picnics of assorted sizes and origins spread under the park trees, among the mosquitoes, on those long, hot summer days. The baskets and blankets and watermelons as well as the passengers all rode down together to the Park on the Trolley.

...The early Park was used by local people; there it was—there was the trolley to take them to it—the trolley went nowhere else...The early Park catered to merry makers. Today's facility encourages purposeful activities—camping, hiking, swimming. In the Trolley Car days the electric lights of concessions and the pavilion used to light up a gay and garish setting of commercialism; today, wood fires flicker serenely these summer evenings before the trailer and cabins, or around the picnic tables.¹⁰

From about 1890 to 1910, this Cayuga Lake Park flourished as the leading summer resort of two counties. The peak year was probably 1895. Pleasure seekers from Geneva, Waterloo, and Seneca Falls frequented the park each summer, making use of the electric trolley. On many busy days, as many as ten and eleven cars would pull away from the park every hour in the evening “jammed to the running boards with Geneva picnickers.”¹¹ There were many excursions from Auburn, Ithaca and many towns along the Erie Canal. These excursions made use of the Auburn railroad line and/or the lake steamers that made regular stops at the park dock.¹²

Steps Leading to the Establishment of Cayuga Lake State Park

The advent of the automobile greatly reduced rider ship on the trolley line to the Cayuga Lake Park. As early as 1914, the Geneva, Seneca Falls and Auburn Railroad Co., which at that time was the company that owned the park and the trolley line to the park, threatened to close the park.¹³ In June 1921, the railroad company formally petitioned the NYS Public Service Commission for permission to abandon the line to the park. In September 1921, the railroad company voted at its annual meeting to abandon their line east from Seneca Falls to Cayuga Lake Park because it was unprofitable.¹⁴

The Railroad Company had actually put the Park up for sale in early January 1921. This comment by *The Auburn Citizen* was typical of the reaction of the local newspapers:

For Cayuga Lake Park, once the summer mecca of the pleasure seekers in the Finger Lakes Region, has gone the way of the buggy, the sailboat, John Barleymore and the family basket picnic. Like many other places of its character it failed to maintain a pace swift enough to satisfy the rising generation in the age of hurry; the attractions which enticed the picnickers of another decade seemed prosaic and interest in the park waned until it became a losing proposition for the Geneva, Seneca Falls and Auburn Railroad which maintained it....

Today the place is offered for sale and the younger generation will hardly miss it; its passing will barely cause a ripple of surprise with hardly a regret, except that its demise may revive in the minds of many who now attempt to control the pleasures of a younger generation the memories of sentiments first

awakened when the waters of Cayuga Lake reflected the moon's soft light as they strolled through the groves of the "matchless queen of pleasure parks."¹⁵

With the demise of the trolley in 1921, Matthew Hamill of Seneca Falls purchased the 50 acres of Cayuga Lake Park, including the grove and pavilion, in order to improve and lease it. By May 1922, the park had been cleaned up for the first time in several years. The dirt road through the park was in good condition with a new bath house, slides, and chutes soon to be put in operation.¹⁶

By the close of 1923, there were expectations that Cayuga Lake Park might be in the State Park Plan, authorized by the State Legislature in 1922. It was not, however, included in the initial parks established in the Finger Lakes. In September 1927, the Seneca Falls Business Association presented a detailed proposal to the Finger Lakes Park Commission for the creation of Red Jacket State Park at the park site. The two key individuals in this proposal were A.S. Hughes and Murray Hilbert. The Finger Lakes Park Commission voted to support creation of a state park at this park site, but with keeping the old title of Cayuga Lake Park. On October 15, 1927, the State Council on Parks gave its approval to the state's acquiring the park, and Governor Alfred E. Smith gave his approval on October 25, 1927. Cyrus Garnsey, Jr. offered additional lake frontage from his farm for park purposes. In 1928, a total of 125.98 acres was acquired for the Cayuga Lake State Park. In that year, three new Finger Lakes parks were named as state parks: Fair Haven, Stony Brook, and Cayuga Lake State Park.¹⁷

Early Years as Cayuga Lake State Park

Soon after its becoming a state park, much development work took place at the park. This work included dock construction, parking area, beach improvement, camp, picnic and bathing facilities and building repairs. The park's appearance had been greatly improved. The old brick powerhouse and small stand near the pavilion had been removed, benches were repaired and repainted, and new rustic picnic tables were made. Eighteen hundred feet of water pipe were laid.¹⁸

The first outing at Cayuga Lake State Park was in July 1928, by the Married People's Club of the First Presbyterian Church. They used the pavilion which had been thoroughly restored with lighting, plumbing, and other service equipment.¹⁹

Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt visited the Park on Friday, July 18, 1930, as part of his tour of the Barge Canal system. He spoke to an audience of about 2000, preceded by a dinner party for about 250 in the pavilion. His speech lasted over an hour. Throngs of people filled the pavilion's dance floor and porches. Police officers sought to keep the attending crowd back from the pavilion veranda, fearing the structure might collapse.²⁰

In 1928, Cayuga Lake Park camping fee receipts were \$147.00, second only to Taughannock Falls State Park.

More development and improvements came in the next few years. In 1929, \$40,000 was expended to enlarge the Cayuga Lake State Park beach area and to dredge for a boat harbor. On August 24, 1932, a new pavilion was dedicated. It had been built at a cost of \$35,000 and was

built on the site of the former larger pavilion. Dancing continued at this new pavilion. A new Automatic Player Piano was installed in 1933. In 1932, the parking area was enlarged and a new heating system in the pavilion was installed. This made the pavilion available for winter sports. Because of the economic hardships stemming from the Depression, the state appropriated \$22,500 in TERA (Temporary Emergency Relief Administration) funds to improve Cayuga Lake State Park. These funds were used to erect a new storage building and paint shop, grading and gravelling of the parking area, placing 2500 pounds of sand on the bathing beach, topsoil and planting placed on the beach front, gravelling of the park road connecting Route 89 and the camping area, grading and gravelling of 1000 feet of trail, the construction of stone steps and flagstone walks near the pavilion and extension of the water supply system. In 1933 additional TERA funded work was done to improve the park.

In 1935, Cayuga Lake Park became part of a Civilian Conservation Corps project funded by the federal government. Construction of 13 buildings comprising the CCC camp was completed at the end of July. As many as 200 young men, largely from the Hudson River Valley and New York City areas, worked on various projects at the park and were “inculcated [with the] American ideas of life, thought, and work, in addition to instilling wholesome respect for authority, work and education.”²¹ Among other things, in 1936 the CCC youth constructed a shelter pavilion in the picnic grove.

Morehouse Boat Company, Grandview Inn and Grandview Pavilion

George Morehouse built his first boat in 1913. He earned \$25 for flat-bottomed designs and \$35 for round-bottomed ones. He purchased the Wayne Pavilion in 1919 and renamed it the Grandview Inn. In 1925 he established a boat livery next to the restaurant. Much of his boat production, as many as 12 boats per year, was aimed at outfitting his new business. For several years, it was the restaurant that supported the boat business.

George’s sons Richard and Robert joined him in the business in 1936. Their production increased to as many as 50 craft per year. In 1937, they renamed the boat-building operation the Morehouse Boat Manufacturing Company, and moved the shore-side livery into the basement of the newly-erected restaurant. This Grandview Inn restaurant offered full-service breakfasts and dinners for up to 200 people. The restaurant featured a soda fountain with home-made ice cream and was renamed Morehouse’s.

George Morehouse died in 1942. His widow ran the restaurant and his two sons were to run the livery and boat company. During World War II, however, the boat business suffered when Bob went into the service and Dick went to work on defense matters at the nearby Seneca Ordnance Depot.

Across the road from the Grandview Inn, George Morehouse in 1927-28 built the Grandview Pavilion as a dance hall. In the 1940s it was used a roller-skating rink. After the war, Bob and Dick converted the Grandview Pavilion into the new home of the Morehouse Boat Manufacturing Company.

Except for the war years, the company built Comet sailboats (1939-51) and Lightning sailboats (1946-51) which had great reputation in sailing competitions. In 1948, the company built its first inboard boat, using Chris-Craft (Hercules) engines. The peak year of Morehouse boat production was 1956, with 12 different models on display in the showroom that once was the restaurant. That year the company produced 300 boats (one per work day with the labor force of 8). The advent of fiberglass and aluminum in small crafts in the mid-1950s offered

increasingly fierce competition for the Morehouse Company's more expensive wooden craft. In 1961-62, the Morehouse Boat Company discontinued boat production. The boat marina operation, which was the largest full-service marina in the area, continued until 1978.

The livery building was demolished in 1983. The manufacturing plant (the old dance hall) was razed in 1993. The rest of the Morehouse complex was sold to the New York State Department of Parks in 1982.²²

Bits and Pieces of More Recent History of the Park

George A. Dobson retired in December 1938 as the Superintendent of Cayuga Lake State Park. He had first started working at the state park as a caretaker in June 1928, shortly after the park became a state park.²³

In fall 1942, two recreation buildings at the park were used as housing for construction workers at the Seneca Ordnance Depot and Sampson Naval Training Center, stemming from the serious local housing shortage. Interestingly, in 1952, the State condemned the swimming facilities as off limits to airmen from Sampson Air Force Base because of pollution from raw sewage flowing into Cayuga's waters. (The military standards were higher than those for civilian use.)²⁴

During the summer of 1954, the Director of the Seneca County Health Department said the diving-area water was dangerously polluted by human waste from nearby cottages. The beach was closed to swimmers in August.

In August 1958, Park Superintendent James Henry told the Seneca Falls Kiwanians that Cayuga Lake State Park was the most popular park in the State. To that date during that year, a total of 102,697 people had attended the park. The picnic area could accommodate 5000. About 35 campers were turned away each day. There were 47 tent sites, 19 trailer sites, and 14 cabins. The west side of the camping area was being developed to make 300 more tent/trailer sites and three shower buildings.²⁵

The pollution problems in Cayuga Lake continued to demand attention. In 1977 a research and field survey team from Eisenhower College conducted a survey of areas to be impacted by the proposed extension of the Village of Seneca Falls sewer system to the Town. This sewer system was finally initiated in 1981.²⁶

During 1976, a total of 136,000 people attended the park. A 1978 survey showed that 94.4% of the Park visitors came to the Park by automobile and that 80.6% came from the Finger Lakes area.²⁷

In the most recent year (2007-08) the park attendance was 166,766. This is an increase of about 25,000 from the previous two years.²⁸

Concluding remarks

In the early 1930s, C.R. Rosenbenberry wrote “Rambling Round Cayuga State Park.” Below is a portion of what he had to say about the park²⁹:

An earlier generation in Seneca Falls and its neighbor towns used to pack its lunch, pile into trolley cars, and enjoy happy days at Cayuga Lake Park.

There it rode the merry-go-round and the “ocean wave,” bathed in the Lake at a time when bathing suits were tenfold more ample than today, listened to band concerts and vaudeville, and watched the first flickering attempts at moving pictures.

In the heyday of Cayuga Lake Park, the three floors of the big pavilion were often packed with gaily-bedecked merry makers, and sometimes there weren’t streetcars enough to get them all home until after midnight, which was very late, in the Nineties.

The local street railway company had built the pavilion and developed the amusement park as a magnet for fares, and it was a good investment—until the automobile age put a crimp in it!

After a while the trolley line was abandoned and weeds began to grow in the grove where joyous picnickers had one time roamed. The pavilion was still used for dances, but that was about all, and the property came to be owned by a man named Matthew Hamill. From him the State purchased it to revive its popularity as a park—but a very different kind of park.

Cayuga Lake State Park has a long frontage on the lake only two miles from its outlet. Old Cayuga, with her reputation for danger, for stern depths and chill waters, is in a kindlier mood at her northern extremity. Shallow—a tall man could almost wade across at the point—the water is perpetually warm for the swimmers.

This park, too, has its distinct individuality. Aside from the lake view and tall grove of oaks on the rolling hillside, it has no special scenic values to offer. Its tone is more one of pleasantness and holiday relaxation. Here you can go to rest, rather than ramble through long gorges and listen to roaring waterfalls [as in other nearby Parks].

Cayuga Lake Park has one of the two real sand beaches in the Finger Lakes, and a beautiful pavilion and bath house, built in Swiss Chalet style, facing the waterfront. A thousand feet long, the beach is amply wide to permit thousands of people to enjoy sun-bathing, and it extends far enough out under water to provide a soft cushion for the toes of those who prefer water-bathing.

Cayuga Lake is a gem in that necklace of parks and scenic beauty spots along the Cayuga Lake Boulevard extending northward from Ithaca to Lake Ontario. This new road passes through the center of this park and will doubtless bring far greater visitation than it now enjoys.

One of the joys of the park is its large picnic and camping grove, whose carpet is mainly greensward but underneath which much of the characteristic Finger Lakes planting has been done—flowering shrubs, azalea, mountain laurel, rhododendron, and the like.

The park area extends back up the gentle hillside from the lakeshore for some distance, covering 250 acres or more. The grove will sometime be extended. Above that is an athletic field with a baseball diamond fit for the "Big Leagues" to use.

Historically, Cayuga Lake State Park points with pride to the association of the celebrated Seneca Indian Chief, Red Jacket, within its neighborhood. This most renowned of Indian orators was born nearby and a monument has been erected in his honor.

A spacious boat harbor at the southern end of the park is one of the improvements. Here all sizes of boats, from motor launches to rowboats, find haven.

The park is sandwiched between popular cottage areas, the lakeshore for many miles being doted with summer dwellings.

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- ¹ “Cayuga Lake Park Passes,” *The Auburn Citizen*, January 14, 1921
- ² “Cayuga Lake Park,” *The Auburn Citizen*, January 30, 1914.
- ³ Sheldon S. King, *Trolleys to Cayuga Lake Park*, Seneca Falls: Seneca Falls Historical Society, 1978, p 3
- ⁴ Hilda R. Watrous, “Cayuga Lake State Park,” *The County Between the Lakes: A History of Seneca County, New York, 1876-1982*, p 141.
- ⁵ Watrous p 137
- ⁶ Watrous pp 141-43
- ⁷ Watrous pp 143-44
- ⁸ Watrous p 144
- ⁹ Watrous pp 144-45
- ¹⁰ Watrous p 160
- ¹¹ “Cayuga Lake Park Passes”
- ¹² “Cayuga Lake Park”
- ¹³ Sheldon S. King, *Trolleys to Cayuga Lake Park*, Seneca Falls: Seneca Falls Historical Society, 1978, p 24
- ¹⁴ Watrous pp 145-47
- ¹⁵ “Cayuga Lake Park Passes”
- ¹⁶ Watrous p 148
- ¹⁷ Watrous pp 149-51
- ¹⁸ Watrous p 151
- ¹⁹ Watrous p 151
- ²⁰ Watrous pp 151-52
- ²¹ Watrous p 156
- ²² Duncan Remington and Dick Sherwood, “Morehouse boats: A brief history,” *The Reveille Between the Lakes*, August 8, 2005.
- ²³ Watrous p 157
- ²⁴ Watrous p 158
- ²⁵ Watrous p 158
- ²⁶ Watrous p 159
- ²⁷ Watrous p 161
- ²⁸ Telephone conversation with Christine Murphy, Cayuga Lake State Park staff member, on March 6, 2008.
- ²⁹ Watrous pp 154-55