

Highlights of Cayuga Lake History

Cayuga Lake has a rich history but space permits only highlighting some of it in this article. The reader should understand that because the author is the Seneca County Historian, the specific information included in this article will be Seneca County examples.

The natural beauty of what is today Seneca County was probably first reported in 1671 by a Jesuit missionary priest named Father Raffeix. He used the word “Goiogouen” to refer to this area and said the following:

Goiogouen is the fairest country I have seen in America. It is a tract between two lakes and not exceeding four leagues in width, consisting of almost uninterrupted plains, the woods bordering it are extremely beautiful.

Many of the earliest permanent white settlers had been soldiers in the Sullivan Campaign of 1779 and had traveled through this area. After the Revolutionary War, when they were to be given lands in central NY as a reward for their services in the War, these veterans were very willing to accept lands in this area whose beauty they knew so well.

Helping with the influx of settlers from eastern New York was the completion in 1800 of the first wooden bridge across Cayuga Lake. This toll bridge was about 6 miles south of the northern end of the lake and at the time of its completion was the longest bridge in the Western Hemisphere. By 1858, the third such bridge across the lake was abandoned as competition from the Erie Canal, the Free Bridge route, and railroads had proved to be too great. Interestingly, however, in both 1929 and 1930 the New York State Legislature passed bills authorizing the construction of a modern highway bridge over the ancient route of the Cayuga Bridge. Opposition from the Finger Lakes Association, however, prompted Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt to veto both bills.

For many years, fairly large boats traveled Cayuga Lake. The Enterprise began regular schedules from Ithaca to the Cayuga Bridge (Cayuga village in Cayuga) in 1820. There were several horse treadmill ferries in the 1820s. Much of the farm produce of the area was transported on the Lake to Ithaca or out through the Erie Canal. By 1850, East Varick (located on the east side of the lake, nearly across from Aurora), like many small communities along the Lake, was thriving with the Barrack Store House, warehouses and docks, and the Burroughs House. The Burroughs House was one of the main attractions along the lake and its food and the dances held there brought young and old from all over to its doors. Farmers brought their grain there for shipment and freight was bought from the Seneca-Cayuga Canal up the lake to Varick residents. Unfortunately, the advent of the Geneva to Ithaca railroad absorbed the freight transport business in a few years and the warehouses of East Varick lay unused. East Varick, like many lake communities, declined in population and commercial economic prominence.

One of the most famous of the Cayuga Lake steamers was the Frontenac. It made its maiden voyage in 1870. It was 135 feet long and 22 feet wide. It had a daily schedule and was also available for charter. On July 27, 1907, the Frontenac left Ithaca with forty

passengers. It stopped at Sheldrake and then headed for Aurora. It ran aground near Aurora with seven women and one boy drowned. Some of the wreck was salvaged in 1908 but the rest remained until it was used as scrap iron during World War II.

In the 1890's Cayuga Lake became a popular summer tourist trade location. This is not surprising because of the lake area's natural beauty and summer recreational opportunities. It became the fashion "to go to the lake." Large summer hotels such as the Sheldrake Hotel, and the Cayuga Lake House were built or expanded to accommodate the large numbers of tourists who would come between June and October either by train to Interlaken or by steamboat. Later, many county families were have their "lake cottage" or camp to enjoy swimming, boating and fishing or just plain relaxing during the warm summer months.

Despite its depth, Cayuga Lake has frozen over several times. Naomi Brewer of Kidders refers to family diary entries to document that Cayuga Lake completely froze over in 1856, 1885, 1912, and 1936. The Lake also froze over twice in the last forty years. (If anyone reading this article has the documentation the exact years, the author of this article would greatly appreciate this information.) *The Ovid Bee* reports that in 1856 "from Kidders Ferry to Ogden (King Ferry) teams crossed the lake on the ice which had never been heard of before. People walked over and back. In the 1885 the freezing of the Lake began February 17. On March 4, the ice thawed in places but refroze the next day. On March 6 the ice roared and groaned as it froze harder. Iceboats were in use frequently. On March 27 she reported teams crossing on the ice but there was some thawing and water on the ice. Thawing continued so that there were open streaks on April 4. The 1912 freeze-over of the Lake started February 4 and lasted until St. Patrick's Day. The 1912 frozen lake conditions attracted people from Auburn who traveled by train to King Ferry and skated or rode on iceboat over the lake. Naomi Brewer also reports on the complete freeze of Cayuga Lake in 1936. In her diary, Thelma King Steele reported the freezing of Cayuga Lake on February 23, 1936. Several people skated across the lake and back. Charlie and Harry Blew sailed to Union Springs and brought a horse back on the iceboat, tying the horse's legs together and tying the horse to the mast of the boat.

Although Cayuga Lake is not used for commercial transportation today, it still contributes much the economy of the area. Its natural beauty attracts many tourists and avid bass fisherman. It is the source of fine drinking water for much of the population on both sides of the lake, including large communities like Ithaca and Seneca Falls. Much of its shoreline has become summer residences, adding significantly to the tax base to support local government and schools. Many small wineries have developed, making use of the moderating climate from being located near the lake. It is hoped that in this "commercialization and development," the natural beauty and very healthy continued existence of the Lake is not being threatened.