

Historical Highlights

Sand Lake Historical Society

Volume 24, No. 2

Winter 1998

Ed.
Winter
97-98

Burden Lake

The story of the building of the Burden Lakes is an interesting part of the history of Sand Lake. It is hard to imagine today, when driving along the shores of Burden Lake, that the lake was once a green valley with a small stream in its center. At the south of this valley, in Nassau, was Martins Lake, a relatively small lake.

It all began in the year 1829. The Wynantskill Association, an association of mill owners with mills along the Wynants Kill, had just been organized. Their purpose was to gain control of the lakes that feed into the Wynants Kill and regulate its flow. By damming up these lakes, raising the water level and installing gates, the flow could be regulated to increase its usefulness of the stream for milling purposes.

When the occupants of the farms that bordered Martins Lake were approached by the Wynantskill Association, they refused to have their lands overflowed. Instead, these farmers agreed to allow the Wynants Kill Association to build a dam and control gates at the lake's outlet and then dig a ditch so that the lake could be drawn down to supply extra water as required by the Association.

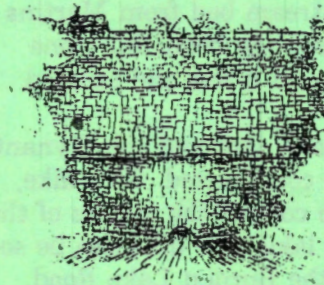
To mark the existing high water level and eliminate any future dispute about the level, a hole was drilled in a large rock on the north shore at Bristol's farm. The farmers, in consideration of \$1 each paid by the Wynantskill Association, signed an indenture giving permission to build the dam and draw down the lake. Members of the Association were assessed \$20 a share to cover the cost of the work. The dam was completed in 1831. This arrangement remained in effect until the 1860s.

The Association was always hopeful that they could increase the size of Martins Lake by building a large reservoir, creating a dependable supply of water to power the mills. The idea was to build a dam downstream on the outlet stream of Martins Lake and flood the entire valley. This effort was frustrated over the years for two reasons: first, the reluctance of

the land owners whose farms would be flooded to give their permission; and second, the quarter sale stipulation in the original Stephen Van Rensselaer's leases. These stipulations discouraged the sale of the land. Finally in the early 1860s these problems were resolved, and planning began.

The Wynantskill Improvement Association, a reorganization of the Wynantskill Association, engaged the services of Burton Thomas, a self-made civil engineer living in West Sand Lake, to design the project. Thomas saw two problems. First, the water level of this new reservoir had to be determined in order to estimate the total area that would be flooded and the quantity of water that could be stored. Second, it had to be determined whether the proposed watershed would be ample to fill the new lake.

The study of the watershed concluded that it would be necessary to find an additional supply of water to fill this new lake. To resolve this problem, it was decided that it would be necessary to build a dam on the Wynantskill Creek and divert its waters through a dike into the then-dry valley. The chosen location of this dam was just below the Tompkins Paper Mill.



Before work could be started, an agreement was made with Staats D. Tompkins. So that the dam would not interfere with the paper mill operation, the water level resulting from the proposed dam should be two feet below the mill tailrace. In

addition, the Association would at all times protect the water rights of the mills upstream of the diverting dam. To accomplish this it was agreed that, once the new reservoir was completed, the Wynantskill Improvement Association would draw water from Sand Lake (Crystal Lake), Glass Lake and Crooked

Lake in sufficient quantity to operate The Arnold Cotton Mill at full capacity.



At the same time the above conditions were made with Tompkins, the Association was negotiating with the farmers located along the creek from Martins Lake for permission to flood their lands. To determine the new water level, a survey line was then run from the Paper Mill tailrace level to the hole that was drilled at Martins Lake in 1831. It was calculated that the new lake would be raised eight feet above the old level. To mark this new high water level, a second hole was drilled in a rock at the north end of the proposed lake and an iron bolt inserted. With these issues resolved and design completed, work was begun.

Just when construction began and how long it took to complete the work is not fully known. It is estimated that work began in the spring of 1863. It was a major project. Work consisted of four parts: many man hours of labor digging ditches; hauling earth and stone in horse-drawn carts; and building dams, dikes and roads.

One part of the project consisted of building a large dam across the stream coming from Martins Lake. An earthen dam about 20 feet high and wide enough to carry a road — today's Burden Lake Road — was constructed. One of the features was the stone face, constructed of local cut stone without the use of mortar or cement. At the base of the dam, a trunk or pipe complete with a gate valve was installed to regulate the water flow from the lake. This flow of water would follow the original stream bed from Martins Lake. Today, it is hard to see the beautiful stone work without walking through a wet and tangled area.

Between the Burden Lake dam and the Wynants Kill, a ditch and dike were constructed. This dike, about 900 feet long, was to convey the waters of the Wynants Kill into the new lake. The dike can be seen today when driving along the Burden Lake Road. Next, a dam was built across the Wynants Kill to divert the water from the Wynants Kill, through the canal formed by the dike and into the lake. The top of the diverting dam was at the same level as the bolt

in the rock designating high water. Thus, in periods of low water in the kill, water would flow into the lake and not over the dam. In periods of high water, the excess water would overflow the dam, maintaining the water level.

In addition to the dams and dikes, there were roads that crossed the valley. Sand and gravel had to be carted from local sand banks to raise the road bed above high water. At each of these roads — First Dike and Second Dike Roads — a wooden trunk was installed at the low spot to allow water to flow and the lakes to be drained. In addition, a spillway and bridge was constructed to connect the lakes.

With the dams, dikes, canals and roads completed, it was time to fill the reservoir. Just when it was started is unsure. It seems that the process began in the fall of 1865 and the lakes filled by the spring of 1866. (If any one has more accurate information, we would like to hear from you.) When completed, the gate valve in the Burden Lake dam would be used to control the flow to the mills. This usually meant the closing of the valve at day's end to store water and opening the valve in early morning to supply the mills.

Looking at the dates of the indentures for the flooded lands, it seems that all of the agreements about flooding the land were made before construction began but not completed until after the lake was flooded and the true extent of flooding was seen. In the indentures with the landowners, all dated 1866, all have the same description of the new water level: "The top of the overflow apron shall be on a level with an iron bolt set in a rock on the north east side of the lake bearing south 85# 15' east 239 3/12 Feet from the center of the stem of the water gate at the discharge trunk from the lake."



The agreement with Staats Tompkins mentioned above, which gives all the conditions to allow the building of the dams and dikes, ends with the statement: "And whereas the said dam and its connections, having by the said Wynantskill Improvement Association, being completed the water of the said Wynants Kill turned and running into Martins Lake as contemplated, now therefore in consideration of



Sand Lake Historical Society Board of Trustees 1997-98

John Allendorph (2000)
President
283-4838

E. Berenice Danks (1998)
President
674-5030

Winifred Edwards (1998)
283-1218

Ross French (1998)
Recording Secretary
674-5710

Chet Gavryck (1998)
674-5515

Arthea Gibbs (1999)
674-3127

Marion Hacker (1999)
Corresponding Secretary
674-3191

John Kacharian (1999)
674-3587

Marge Larsen (2000)
674-3209

Andrew Mace (1999)
766-5413

Barbara Mohan (1999)
Treasurer
283-1067

Linda Ormsby (1998)
Vice President
674-3624

the aforesaid premises. The Wynantskill Improvement Association hereby agrees to and with S. Tompkins...." It is dated March 5, 1866.

In 1866 the Wynantskill Improvement Association had 12 members. Four mills — Tompkins Paper Factory, Arnolds Cotton Factory, Knowlson Wool Factory, and James Akin Knitting Mill — were upstream of the diverting dam and did not benefit from new lakes. However, during this same period the Association was doubling the size of Glass Lake (but that's another story). The downstream members, all of which contributed to the cost of the project, were: Kidder and Akin in West Sand Lake; Troy Woolen Company in Albia; The Smart Paper Mills off Campbell's Highway; H. Burden & Son; Albany Iron Works; Corning & Winslow; and Winslow, Griswold, & Holley — all in Troy.

Henry Burden, the President of H. Burden Company, was also Director of the Wynants Kill Association from its inception in 1829. He was very active in the organizing and a leading figure of the Association. In recognition of his efforts, the lake was named in his honor.

Burton Thomas, the engineer, was a man of all trades. As well as being an engineer, he was a landscape architect, designing many cemeteries; a Postmaster; Justice of the Peace; and Supervisor of the Town of Sand Lake in 1866-67.

Today there are no mills on The Wynants Kill, and the waters of the lakes are no longer regulated. The last mill, Portec, rolled its last rail joint on October 12, 1989. The Wynantskill Improvement Association, after 170 years of active life, is now looking for ways to close its books.

From the President

In this, my final year as President of the Sand Lake Historical Society, I reflect on success and failure!

Our program presentations have been excellent, our membership has increased, and receipts from our raffle this year will add a more than sufficient amount to our budget. Sounds like success, doesn't it?

However, I feel a gnawing sense of failure as well. Perhaps the message has been "we need money" and not that we need most your *presence* and your *sharing*. You have been most generous in monetary support, but, were it not for the dedicated hours given by so few, there would not be a Sand Lake Historical Society.

Attendance at our meetings has been adequate, but representative of a small percentage of the entire membership and the general public. I consider this not failure, but a lack of total success! Stories of the past have awakened my senses to an awareness of all we've lost — and all we can regain by sharing our memories.

During this holiday season, I wish for us all that we continue the new friendships we've made and strengthen those rekindled. I remember with love Ruthea Backer and Velma Bushell, whose deaths this past year have saddened all who knew them. They, too, are a part of the mantle of history we choose to preserve. They have enriched us with their legacy of memories.

In the coming new year, don't just long for "the good old days." Come and join us in learning the truth. Perhaps then we can all choose a part of the "olden days" worthy of continuing into our bright, but uncertain, futures! — Bea Danks



Toll Gate Road

Before we had paved roads, stop lights and heavy traffic, we had turnpikes and plank roads. It is hard to imagine that, at one time, a trip to Albany or Troy in a bumpy stage coach took most of a day. Toll Gate Road, located east of West Sand Lake, is one of the few reminders of those days.

The toll charge would depend, for example, on the number of horses pulling your carriage or maybe the number of sheep you were driving to market. That's how the turnpikes were financed. One of the tollgates was at the intersection of Toll Gate Road and Route 43. There was one other toll gate in the Town of Sand Lake. It was located just south of the intersection of Eastern Union Turnpike on Route 66. A milestone still marks its location.

Can you imagine stopping at a tollgate in your own neighborhood on your way to work? Think about it as you drive by these historic sights.

Tell us a story

Us is the Sand Lake Historical Society. *Us* can also be all of the people living in the Town of Sand Lake if you tell a story that we can print in *Historical Highlights*. The stories we would like to hear about concern events that happened to you or to someone in your family. Tell us about those funny, sad, tragic or historical things that happened — things that you and only you might know about.

Let us all know. Your story can be long or short. It can be about anything. Tell us about life on a farm: crops, tools, animals, buildings. Tell us about your school days: teachers, conditions, classmates. Tell us about military service: Army, Navy; Coast Guard, WAC's, WAVES; when, where; unusual buddies.

Tell us about your ancestors. How far back can you go? Tell us about your childhood: illnesses; games; friends. Tell us any story you care to tell us.

If you have any questions, suggestions, or comments, you can call President Bea Danks (674-5030) or John Allendorph (283-4838). We would be glad to help.

Please — TELL US YOUR STORY!

Town of Sand Lake Historian Reporting

Thanks to a request from a third grader, I had occasion to briefly research Crystal Cove, Reichard's Lake Town Beach, Butler Park and the Methodist Farm.

From the Town Assessor's office I found out that *Reichard's Lake Town Beach* was given to the Town in 1955. It had been a beach, and in the indenture it is stipulated that it must remain a beach or the title will revert back to the donor. The beach has served the Town well as a free swimming facility for residents.

Crystal Cove has been known by that name for the past four years. Ruth McGlew, President of the Crystal Cove Association, is carrying on the "hundred year tradition of having the beach open to the public, available for swimming lessons as well as being used for private parties." She stated that Crystal Lake is noted for being the cleanest lake in Rensselaer County. People enjoy the beach because it abides by the rules of common sense, common courtesy, and maintains a family atmosphere.

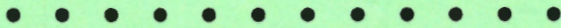
I spoke with Lois Bishop. She and her husband have had a camp at *Methodist Farm* for 51 years. Paul, her husband, had given a presentation of the farm in years past. She shared that the Methodist Sunday School Association bought the Stiles farm around 75 years ago for people to have picnics and camp. The Methodist Farm hosted the YMCA Day Camp as a gift to that association. It is still available for year-round or seasonal renting of the space, group outings or individual occasions. Religious services are held on Sunday evenings. Over the years, it has maintained an alcohol-free environment. By the end of the season, campers have worked up an endurance for climbing "the Hill" up from the beach.

Butler Park has become a well-used and very popular spot. John Glasser, Town Councilman, was a good source of information. (Several inquiries had come to him already on this school assignment.) Butler Park was dedicated in 1983 from land donated by the Butler family. It has become a real community effort by Kiwanis, Boy Scouts and groups who have worked on the Fitness Trail, playground and the Elroy Face Baseball Field. More recently, the Eagle Pavilion, built as an Eagle Scout project, and the new stage have made the park even more versatile. The Summer Festival has become a great Town celebration. Plans are to have a volleyball court and to add ice skating this winter. The overall goal is to make Butler Park the best park in Rensselaer County. We're well on our way!!



It was good to become focused on more recent history and to realize how much more serious investigation needs to be done to tell the whole story. **Any "pieces of the puzzle" any of you may have on these places or others would be most welcome!**

Today I received a gift. With the help of Erin Wilbur of the High School History Club, Iona Mosher and "the computer," we now have an index to the Sand Lake portion of *Sylvester's History of Rensselaer County*. Thank you, thank you, thank you!! What a time-saver this will be in looking up names!! — Mary French, Town Historian



Upcoming Meeting

December 9

DECEMBER MEETING: Our next meeting night, Tuesday, December 9, is the date of the drawing!!! "Samantha," an American Girl Doll together with a hand-crafted copy of an antique wardrobe, an attached bed sized to fit the doll, extra outfits and shoes are included in the drawing. This beautiful set, valued at \$300, would be an ideal addition to your collection or an wonderful gift for a grandchild. And just in time for Christmas!

Raffle tickets will be available at the meeting at \$2 each or three for \$5. They are also available at Marty's Liquor Store on Route 43 in Averill Park or at Lee Barnum's "Bay Window" on Burden Lake Road, or call 674-5030 or 674-3209.

Drawing will take place before the close of the meeting. The wardrobe is hand-made by Anthony and Bonnie Lisosky and donated to the Historical Society by them for our fundraiser of this year.

Our program on December 9 features Keith Meissner, who will talk on the subject of antiques, copies and fakes.



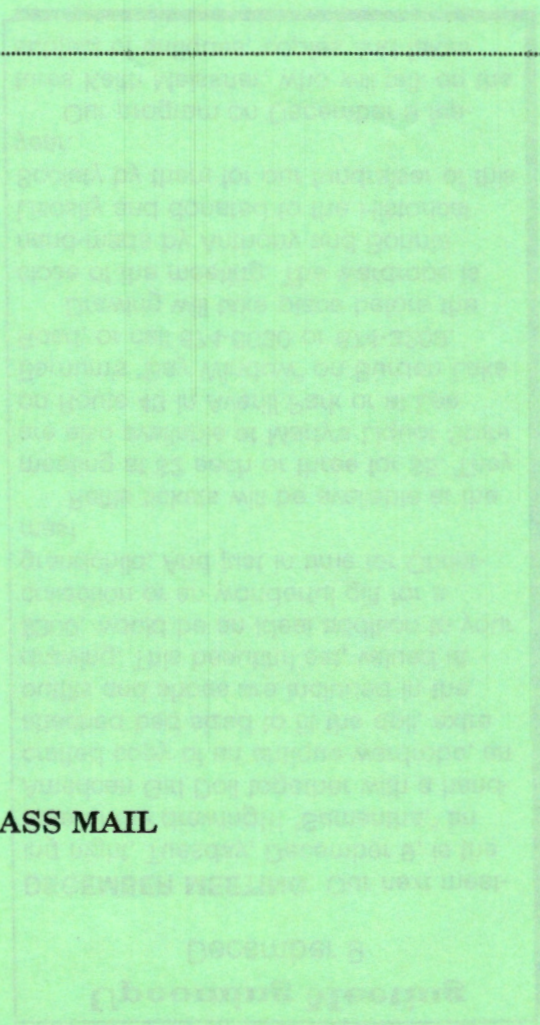


FORWARDING/ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

Sand Lake Historical Society
POB 492
West Sand Lake, NY 12196

Historical Highlights

Bob Lilly, Editor
Andrew Mace, Publisher



FIRST CLASS MAIL

DEC 20 1996

SAND LAKE NY 12196