

Origin of Lake Williams

By Paul Cote

Did Lake Williams always exist? Is it man made? I think it is man made because some "old timers" on the lake spin yarns of how bad it was for residents during the repair of the dam many years ago. From this, I assume the dam is necessary for the lake to exist and the lake's birth can probably be traced back to the creation of the dam.

The old timers tell of receding shorelines and the influx of fish eating birds that swooped into Lebanon to feast upon the fish. All of the lake's fish species became "sitting ducks" for the birds in the increasingly shallow water. Concerned lake residents like Leigh Rider were instrumental in restocking bass when dam repairs were completed and normal water levels returned.

Based upon these stories I can only surmise that only a stream or a brook would exist without the dam. Stories are told that the lake bottom once existed as farmland. There is another story that the rock island at the northwest section of the lake was created by farmers who piled their stones in one location as they tilled the land. There is another tale about the small island that is located in the approximate center of the lake. There is a remnant of a small structure on that island and it is said that it once was a trapper's cabin.

When did the lake first come into existence? When was the dam created and when was it repaired? Why is it named Lake Williams? Is it named after famous Lebanon resident William Williams, who is one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence? This reporter is seeking historical information to present the facts to you in this newsletter. Wouldn't your trips to the lake or cruises in your boat with guests be more enjoyable if you could spout some of this history and point out the important spots on the lake like an experienced tour guide?

My visits to the Lebanon Library were not fruitful in answering most of my questions, even with the gracious help of the library staff and their computer system. Sadly, the world-wide-web is also barren of information about the lake. My next step was to solicit the help of the Lebanon Historical Society and I have already sent a query to the Lebanon Town Hall. If anyone has information that would be useful to bring some of these questions to light, or if you know where I can find relevant reference documents, please contact me. Together we can separate fact from fiction and reveal some of the lake's mysteries.

This response was graciously provided by Alicia Wayland, the Lebanon Town Historian:

Lake Williams is not named after William Williams, signer of the Declaration of Independence, who lived in Lebanon. It is named after Elias Williams and his son Elias L. Williams who had a saw mill and other mills on the pond. The Williams name is a very common surname and

there is no connection between the family of William Williams, the signer, and the Elias Williams family.

As you know, Lake Williams is really a man-made pond and is correctly called Williams Pond. The ecclesiastical survey map of 1770 does not show any body of water at the site, although it does show North Pond (Amston Lake). The 1811 map of Connecticut that shows the locations of mills in the state does not show a body of water at the site although there are two mills noted downstream on Bartlett Brook. The 1854 map of Lebanon does not show a body of water at the site, although there is a saw mill shown downstream on Bartlett Brook. However, there was a dam on the brook built sometime around 1816. It is referred to in the 1816 deed from John and Abigail Welles of Boston in their sale of several large tracts of land to Elias Williams that year.

Welles retained the right to flow the premises with water "in Consequence of a Dam lately Erected at the New Saw Mill," which indicates both the dam and the saw mill were relatively new. Many small mills on brooks were operated seasonally. It was the custom to retain ponding rights to provide a source of water for a mill during the fall and spring when rainfall would be heaviest. The water would be drawn off in the spring so the land could be farmed, usually for hay. Then the dam would be closed in late fall so water would back up again to provide water power for the mill.

The circa 1816 dam was rebuilt or replaced by the Kent Manufacturing Company about 1865, and this is probably the time that the pond remained flooded year-round. Williams Pond is shown and named on the 1868 map of Lebanon. Below Williams Pond, the 1868 map shows Kent Co. Pond, now Brewster Pond. The dam was purchased in 1905 by Gilman Brothers, Inc. Williams Pond was "renamed" Lake Williams probably after 1902 when the Lugars opened a hotel across from the pond and they wanted to make it sound attractive to boarders from the cities.

The development of the seasonal lots began after the Sun Valley Development Corporation bought a large farm from the Greenbergs on Leonard Bridge Road in 1948. The company sold off the best acreage as standard building lots, then built a road into the pond and subdivided that land into seasonal "lake" lots. The company did not build houses, just sold vacant lots.

John Wilcox, a local realtor, bought a number of unsold lots and sold and resold these for a number of years. Many buyers of these small lots assumed they could live year-round in the houses they built, although the lots were always considered seasonal and sold as such.

In 1970, the PZC grandfathered a number of lots as year round to those people who could prove they were living year-round in their houses prior to the adoption of zoning in 1962. The other lots continued to remain seasonal.