



A Stroll Around Crystal Lake

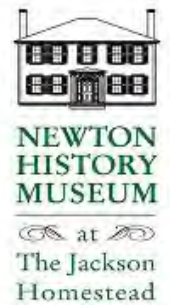
Newton History Museum



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June 2006

Produced by Newton Historical Society Board Member Lucy Caldwell-Stair,
using the archives of the



A Stroll Around Crystal Lake

Situated at the edge of the villages of Newton Centre and Newton Highlands, Crystal Lake has its own rich history. First acquired by Elder Thomas Wiswall before 1654, the lake was the site of an ice-harvesting business in the 1850s that ended in a tragic fire.

Crystal Lake is a great pond in the state of Massachusetts because it is more than ten acres. Since the late 1600s, great ponds are owned by the state, and the public can fish and boat and traverse undeveloped private land to get to their shores.

A look at old maps reveals that the lake looks today very much as it did at the turn of the twentieth century.

By the 1880s grand Victorian homes lined the banks. Their occupants commuted by train to work in downtown Boston (sound familiar?) and the Newton Centre Improvement Society developed the two small parks at either shore and installed gas lights for nighttime ice skating.



Preceding page: Bird's-eye drawing of Crystal Lake and Newton Centre, 1897

Early History of Crystal Lake

1634 – “Mr Hayes Pond”

It's 1634, and we are standing in a wilderness that is officially a part of Cambridge Village. A man named John Hayes has been granted 1000 acres, including the lake and woods. The next year, he was chosen to be governor of the Colony. But in 1637 he moved to Connecticut without ever having made any “improvements” to this land. In fact, he probably he never even saw this pond.

1654 – Wiswall's Pond

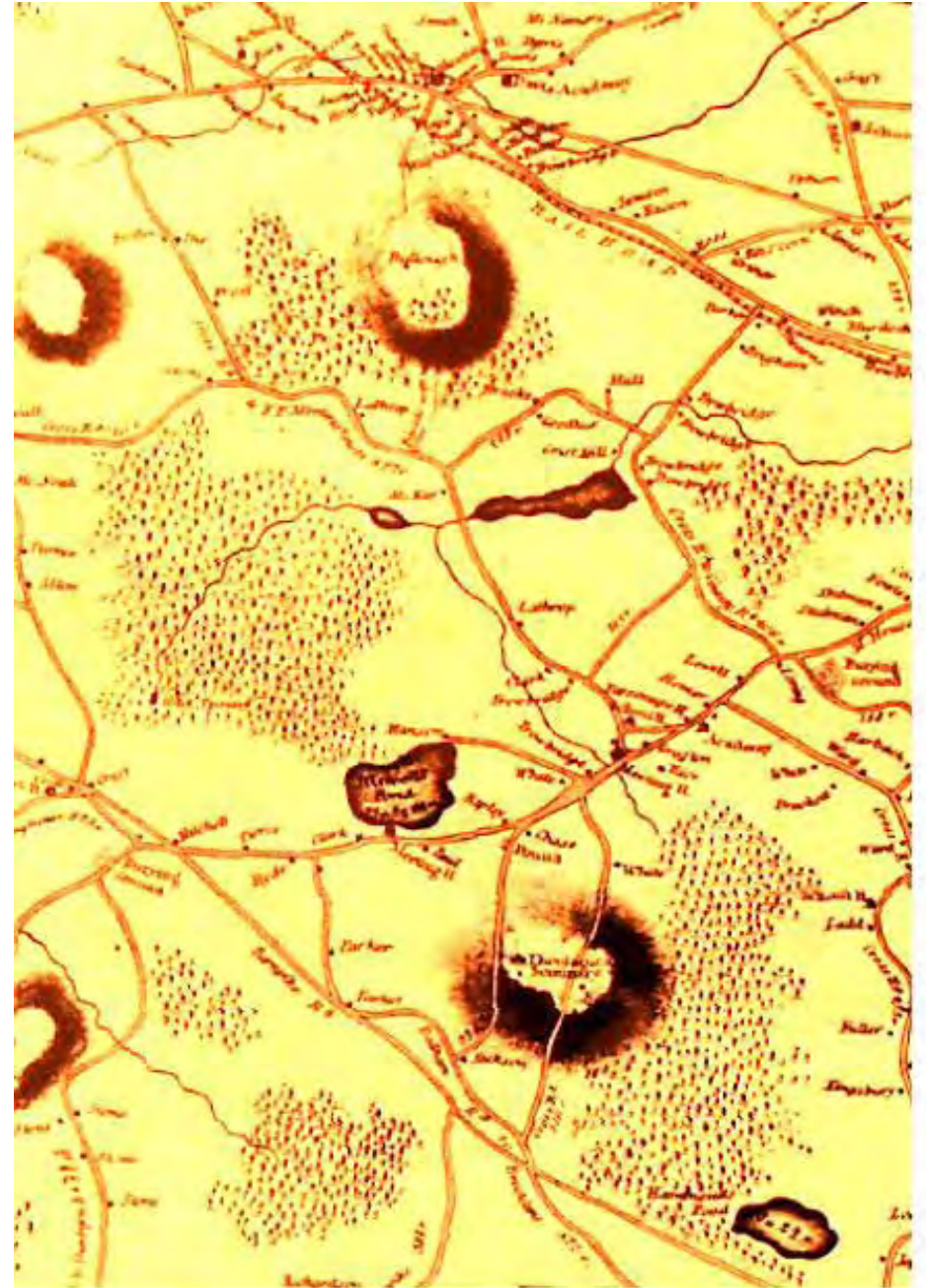
In 1654, 300 acres that included the pond was bought by Thomas Wiswall, who came from nearby Dorchester. He built a house on Center Street overlooking the lake. He worked to make Newton a new village, separate from Cambridge. He donated part of his land for a meetinghouse for those living nearby to attend, so they would no longer have to walk to the Cambridge meetinghouse. Wiswall was “a devout man. He was appointed to catechize the children and became the first Elder of the village church. One of his sons was killed fighting the Indians and two others settled elsewhere, but others of his descendants remained in the vicinity for many years.”

Early 1700's

The Hydes built a farmhouse near what's now Moreland Street. They washed their sheep, hemp and flax in the lake. There were two houses on the lake, Wiswall's and Hyde's.

What's now Centre Street existed as a path running from Cambridge, through Newton, and on to Dedham and was called the Dedham Trail. The Worcester Turnpike (now Route 9) developed about 1808.

Hyde's path to Beacon Street is now called Lake Avenue. As a path it was one rod wide. That's 16.5 feet.



Map of Wiswall's Pond 1831

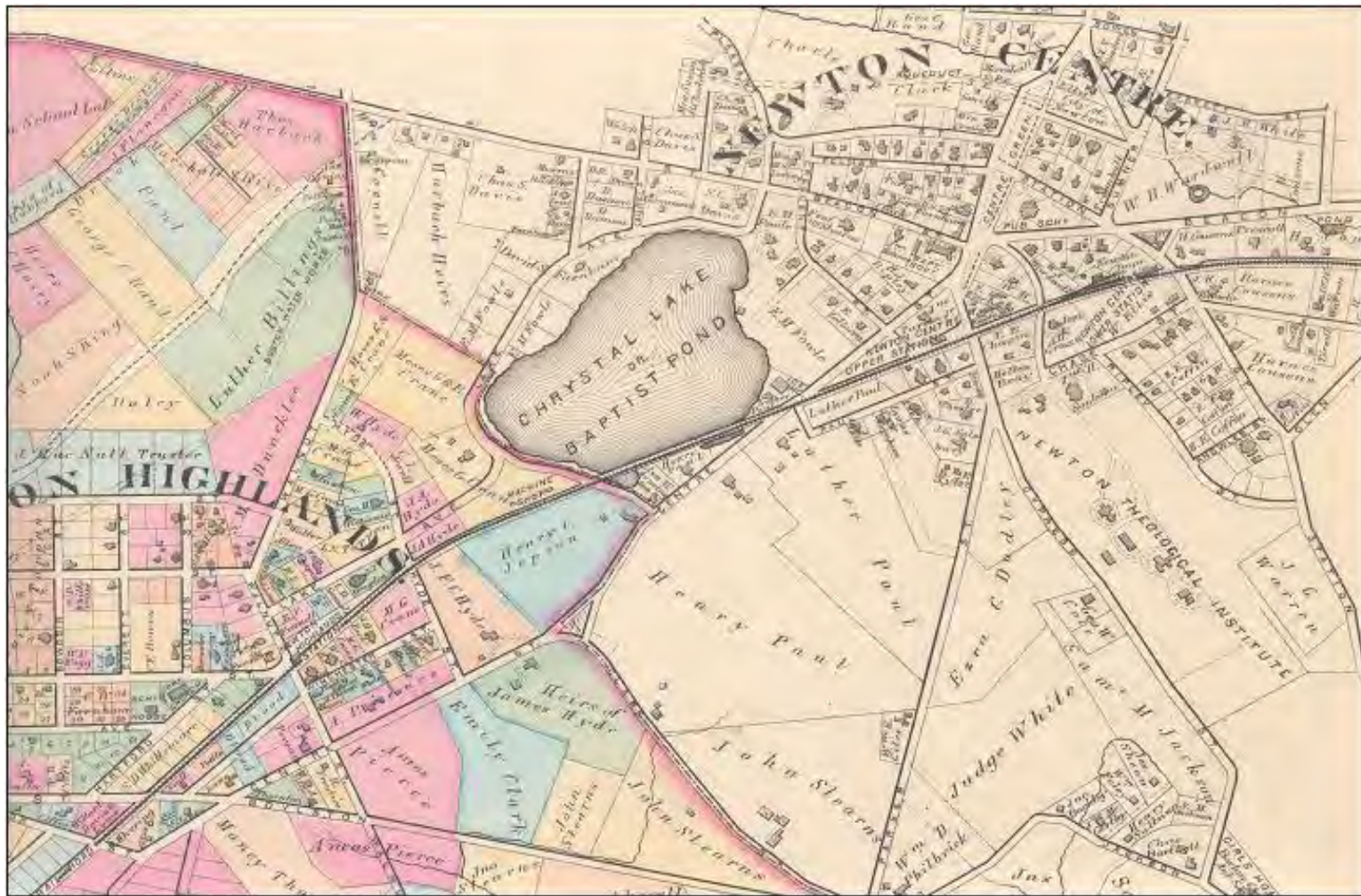


Moses Crane House at 219 Lake Avenue

In 1874, there were just three houses on the lake. Moses Crane's house was built in 1860. His property stretched half way around the lake and included a factory that stood on the site of today's Crystal Lake bath house. Crane was a mechanical engineer. In the 1870s he turned his machine shop into a factory that made fire alarms and telegraphs. The location was good because he could receive and ship using the railroad, now the Riverside T.

Across the street from Crane's house is Levingston Cove, given to the City of Newton in 1894 by Moses' widow Emeline.

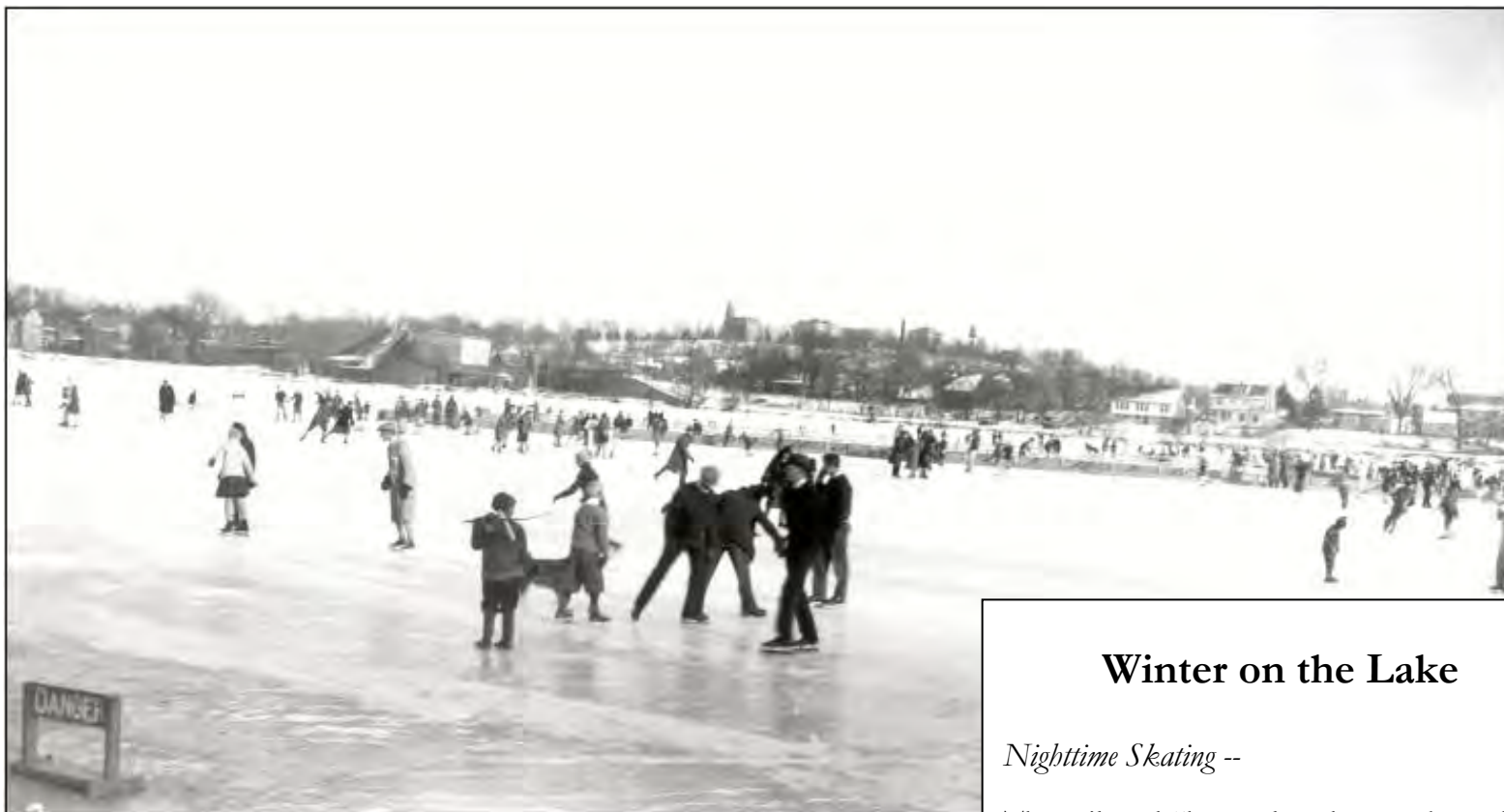




Crystal Lake – Baptist Pond in 1874

No longer called Wiswall's Pond, the lake has two other names, according to this 1874 map. It's called Baptist Pond because in 1795 a small group of Baptists were given land by the great grandson of Thomas Wiswall in order to build a meetinghouse near what is now Centre Street and Old Rogers Road. The pond is also called Crystal Lake to sound appealing to the customers of the ice that is taken from the lake each winter and sold all year long. There were many ice-harvested "Crystal Lakes" throughout New England.

In the 1850's you could take a stagecoach from Boston to Newton Center and on to Upper Falls, going along Centre Street. The fare was 37½ cents.



“The most popular sport on Crystal Lake is skating. On the clearest and crispest of winter days good ice brings out hundreds of skaters to enjoy the exhilarating and healthful exercise. ... Exciting games of hockey add to the zest, and sometimes an ice boat goes skimming by. In the frosty night air the sport grows merrier and the skaters are braced up to their best efforts.”

Sketch of Crystal Lake, 1911

Notice the conveyor to the ice house seen across the Lake at the George Ellis Ice Company

Winter on the Lake

Nighttime Skating --

The railroad “have placed a number of incandescent lamps about Crystal Lake, Newton Center, for the benefit of skaters.”

Newton Journal, February 3, 1899

In 1942 nighttime skating was discontinued due to dim-out regulations.

Olympic Gold Medalist Tenley Albright of Brookline practiced on the Lake. In 1956, she became the first American woman to win a gold medal in figure skating.

Building – and Lowering – the Railroad

A railroad was built along the Lake in 1852 when Boston was filling in the Back Bay and needed a lot of dirt for landfill. The line went from Brookline to Newton and out to Needham. For 24 hours a day, train cars of dirt came along here.

After the filling in of the Back Bay was completed, the Boston and Albany Railroad acquired the line. The new owners rerouted the Newton Highlands line to their main line at Riverside, and converted the stretch into a passenger railroad that eventually became part of the MBTA.

Suddenly there was an intense demand for house lots in Newton. A new village, Newton Highlands, was developed and streets were laid out around the Lake.

The tracks were lowered along much of the Riverside line during 1904-1907 as seen in this photo.





Who Lived on Lake Avenue?

These homes were called estates. Imagine having six children, a few servants, and perhaps other family members living together. Imagine walking to Newton Center or Newton Highlands to take the train to your job in Boston. This was an early bedroom community, an unusual thing at the turn of the century when families moved onto Lake Avenue. In contrast, Moses Crane worked in his factory just steps from his house. Most people were farmers working their land. Others walked to farms to work as laborers, or walked to work in small shops or to other houses to do domestic work.

The Jackson Homestead where the Newton History Society is headquartered has many old and detailed maps of Crystal Lake. Among the most useful other sources for the Lake's history are the Newton business directories that first came out in about 1860. These directories list the names of people who lived in every house, their occupations, and their work addresses.

Most people who lived on Lake Avenue in 1899 listed downtown offices as their workplaces. Some of their occupations: "cutlery business," "bookkeeper," "bank cashier," "salesman," "paper business," and "student." As for ownership, houses were often put in the wife's name. The reason probably was to protect assets of the husband's business. Many people owned small businesses or shops.

Dear Aunt Gladys,

*Having a good time in Newton.
Today we walked around Crystal Lake.*

*Wish you were here,
Hattie*



A Visit to Cronin's Cove 1905

At the turn of the century Cronin's Cove was the focal point for recreation on the Lake. The Newton Centre Improvement Society lobbied to build this embankment that "reserved to the public a very accessible part of the shore." The cost was \$500. You could moor a boat or hitch your horse or just admire the view.

You might come to Newton to visit friends for a few days. You'd send a postcard like this one to your family back in Lincoln or some other "far away" town.

In 1911 the Society published a small book, *Historical Sketch of Crystal Lake* that included a description of the great Fourth of July celebrations held on the Lake: "It was a civic affair. During the water sports of the early evenings and the band concert, pyrotechnic display, and general illumination with which the celebration always closes, thousands of people mass themselves on the embankment and from that vantage point enjoy the magnificent spectacle in progress on the lake."

Crystal Lake Ice Company

The Lake was used for ice harvesting starting in the early 1800s when area was owned by the Paul family. Later George Ellis took over the business. Ice was needed to keep food fresh before electric refrigeration. Packed in sawdust, the ice stayed frozen all summer. The company's insulated building was located on Norwood Street where the brick condominiums stand today.

Horse teams cut blocks of ice...



John Robertson made door to door deliveries of ice from the Crystal Lake Ice Company. Notice the tongs slung over his shoulder.

This photo was taken in 1924. The Company operated into the 1930s.



...and delivered door to door.

“Mr. George Ellis started a gang of men cutting ice on Crystal Lake on Tuesday morning. This ice is about nine inches thick.”

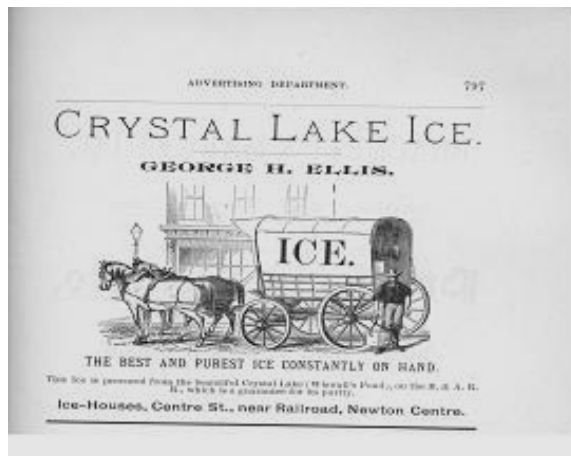
--*Newton Journal*, February 3, 1899

The Fire of 1915 at Crystal Lake Ice

One day in 1915 the insulating material in the walls of the Crystal Lake Ice Company caught fire and destroyed most of the facilities. Owner Mr. George Ellis lived on Norwood Avenue just across from the site.

The company continued operating after the fire, and its ads continued to appear in the Newton Business Directory shown below.

Coincidentally, 1915 was the year that the electric household refrigerator was invented, dooming the ice business. Demand for ice continued for a while longer since the new refrigerator cost \$900, as much as an automobile.



Summers on the Lake

In 1916 a private group built a simple bathhouse, and shortly afterwards the City considered building a larger bath house. From 1918 until 1930 they debated the issue. The bath house that still exists today was built in 1930. It's Spanish eclectic style. It was open for summer swimming and until recently, for wintertime skating. Records show that in 1930, there were 215,000 summer visitors and 80,000 winter skaters. (The summer is ten weeks long, so 215,000 people in 70 days = 3071 people per day). You'd get a ticket that was good for one hour.



These photographs show floats from a water pageant put on by the Civic Arts Association in 1932. Standing on canoe-supported platforms, Newton residents portrayed characters from *Carmen* (above) and *Faust* (below). It sounds like a good way to have fun during the depths of the Depression.

The picture of the bath house below was taken in the 1940s, when one could walk around the entire lake. During World War II, the City of Newton encouraged servicemen stationed at Boston College to come swim.

