

# HARVEY'S LAKE HISTORY

## Hotels



The lobby and reception desk of the grand Hotel Oneonta, 1909

**F**or more than a hundred years Harvey's Lake thrived as a recreational attraction for visitors from the Wyoming Valley and beyond. No less than 10 public hotels welcomed guests beginning in 1855. Many of the historic structures are now gone--lost primarily to fires and the transition of the Lake from public playground to private residential community.



## The Lake House / Rhoads Hotel

The first public hotel, the Lake House, was opened in early July 1855. The three-story structure, seventy-five feet in length and forty feet in depth, was located near the Lake's front where Carpenter Road now enters the Lake Road.

The Lake House accommodated 100 guests. It offered sail and row boats, along with fishing tackle. It sported a porch and veranda the entire length of the hotel.

With the opening of the Lake House, a daily stage line to the Lake was also made available for the summer trade. The ride from Wilkes-Barre took at least two hours. Access to the Lake was severely hampered by poor roads that delayed the resort's development. Despite the advertisement of excellent fishing and hunting at the Lake, the Lake House apparently was not an attractive investment as ownership of the hotel changed many times within the next two decades.

James W. Rhoads, who had been managing the hotel, purchased it outright in March 1875 for \$8,500. The purchase included the fifty acres upon which the hotel stood as well

as 8,500 square feet of adjoining land. Rhoads was a retired Sheriff of Luzerne County. Under his management, and benefitting from the promotional talents of the Rhoads family, the Lake House had increasing success. Rhoads renamed the establishment the Harvey's Lake Hotel, but eventually it was simply called Rhoads Hotel.

On January 4, 1908, the Hotel completely burned to the ground. A defective pipe in the furnace caused the fire, which spread rapidly. James's brother Frank Rhoads was at the hotel and discovered the fire. He telephoned for aid, and although local caretakers and men from the Albert Lewis sawmill responded, there was no hose or pumping equipment available to halt the raging fire. An effort to save furnishings was also unsuccessful as only two trunks were saved. Since the hotel served as the local telephone exchange, telephone service to the Lake was disrupted. The loss was estimated at \$20,000.

## Lake Grove House

The Lake Grove House was built at the Inlet (Sunset) by Col. Jacob Rice in the spring of 1881, and it was ready for occupancy in June 1881. Rice, a Dallas merchant, was a Lieutenant-Colonel in the 115th Pennsylvania Militia, and later he served in the 53rd Pennsylvania Volunteers during the Civil War. The hotel was on the site where the Hotel Oneonta would later be erected.

When originally built, the Lake Grove House had a confectionery and general store, a picnic area, and stables for horses. The hotel benefited from the increasing popularity of the Lake in the early 1880s. One Sunday afternoon, in mid-July 1882, over 300 guests visited the Lake Grove House. It had a good reputation for bass dinners.

After changing owners several times, Samuel Gottfried purchased the Lake Grove House in 1891, and in April 1892 he expanded. On July 4, 1892, 200 people were entertained at the hotel. Fireworks crowned the evening. By August Gottfried was planning major renovations, and eventually he added a second extension. Gottfried also secured county funds

to help support the township's costs to replace the wooden Inlet bridge with an iron bridge for the 1893 season.

The Lake Grove House was sold to the Harvey's Lake Hotel and Land Company in 1897, which wanted the site to build the Oneonta Hotel. The Lake Grove House was used by construction workers while the Oneonta was built behind it. In late May 1898, after the Oneonta Hotel was completed, the Lake Grove House was torn down.



## Lakeside Inn

The Lakeside Inn was located at Warden Place, the present site of the parking lot for Lady of Victory Church. In 1915 Lakeside, along with the Oneonta, Avon and Tabard, was among the Lake's four major hotels. Lakeside had a capacity of 60 at a rate of \$2.00 daily or \$10.00 weekly. In the early 1920s Lakeside was "headquarters" for the Protective Association's police force.

The Lakeside Inn was the domain of Mrs. Martha James Schworm and her husband, Lewis. Martha Schworm was an extraordinary hostess. While chicken dinners were popular inexpensive dining treats elsewhere at the Lake, Lakeside was particularly known for Martha Schworm's chicken meals. Her reign lasted from the World War I era to 1939 when she died. Her husband, Lewis, continued at Lakeside until 1946 when he sold it to Melvin Sweeney.

For another 30 years the Lakeside Inn continued to offer hotel or bar services under different owners. On March 1, 1978, the Lakeside, then owned by Richard Tattersall, was housing for 4 families when it was extensively damaged by fire—and later razed.



## Hotel Oneonta

The Hotel Oneonta was a benchmark of the Lake's Golden Era. No public building at Harvey's Lake—before or since—matched the Oneonta for its grandeur or status. The hotel was situated just below Oneonta Hill and its trolley station and about 200 feet from the shoreline. The hotel's towering gables, elegant verandas and boat house dominated the Inlet area of the Lake, which would later be known as Sunset.

Like most public accommodations at the Lake, the hotel was seasonal, open from late May to late September, with the Independence Day celebrations as its annual highpoint. Days in advance of the holiday, preparations began in Wyoming Valley homes for the annual "basket picnic" at the Lake.

Crowds would assemble on Wilkes-Barre's Public Square to catch the trolleys that ran to the Lake from 4:00 A.M. until 11:00 P.M.

Family members struggled among the crowds to stay together as they boarded "double-headers" for the half-hour, 20-mile-an-hour ride. Tumbling out of the trolley at the Oneonta station with brigades of swinging baskets, they strolled down Oneonta Hill in awe of the huge hotel that overlooked the Lake.

Couples took advantage of a promenade walk along the Oneonta veranda. Families headed for the steamboat landing to be cramped aboard the *Kingston* or to wait for a chance to ride on the double-decked *Natoma* for a sun-splashed dash across the Lake to the Picnic Grounds.

The hotel was built by the Harvey's Lake Hotel and Land Company, incorporated on April 20, 1897, to take advantage of the increasing tourist

traffic—and burgeoning prosperity—of the Wyoming Valley. The investment was made possible by the trolley line linking the Lake





**Colorized “romantic” 1917 postcard showing the Oneonta’s lawn, tennis courts, and steamboat landing.**

to the Valley towns, which now provided the Lake’s tourist trade with a regular stream of visitors and sparked the resort’s golden age.

The President of the company was Christian Stegmaier; scion of Wilkes-Barre’s famous brewery family (a major development and philanthropic force in the region). Other major stockholders were Peter Forve, John Graham, P. R. Raife, John B. Reynolds, Pierce Butler, Edward Gunster and A. A. Holbrook.

The company purchased three parcels of land, including the site of the Lake Grove House. P. R. Raife, a well-known builder in Wilkes-Barre, was the general contractor for the new hotel, and McCormick and French were the architects.

Construction began in October 1897 on a site just behind the Lake Grove House, which housed the Oneonta laborers during the construction. The new hotel was 200 feet from the edge of the Lake and occupied a plot 196 feet wide and 105 feet deep. A formal inspection by the owners was held on April 14, 1898. At this time it was called the Hotel Graham, after one of the principal stockholders.

In the center of the hotel, a six foot wide main stairway reached from the basement to

the fourth floor. The basement contained a barroom, café, barber shop, pastry kitchen, wine cellar, laundry room, lavatories, billiard room and bicycle room. At the top of the stairway, a large skylight diffused light through its sixteen square foot well.

The main entrance led to a hall thirteen feet wide and forty-four feet long. The hall passed through the center of the building. To the left, a large lobby, with paneled wainscoting and an open six and one-half foot fireplace, held the registration and office area. To the left of the office area, an archway led to a large parlor with another fireplace. At the end of the parlor a ten foot wide hall led to a thirty by fifty-five foot dance hall with two sets of large double doors opening to the side porch, a glorious promenade for evening dancing guests.

To the right of the main lobby a 33’ by 60’ dining room lined with plate glass windows overlooked the Lake. An adjoining area served as the nurses’ and children’s dining room.

Seventy rooms filled the second and third floors with two sets of public baths on each floor. Many of the rooms were suites with private baths and fireplaces. The fourth story was used for storage. The eclectic exterior featured gables and towers in English half-timber with a distinctive veranda and balcony.

The porch was sixteen feet wide and 343 feet long. The building was wired for electric lights and a fire alarm system. A power house, 100 feet to the left of the hotel, was built to serve the hotel and the surrounding area.

In March 1898 the owners of the hotel also incorporated the Harvey's Lake Light, Heat and Power Company to supply the hotel's power system. Electric current was sold to cottagers in a two mile area near the hotel. An electrical system to serve the rest of the Lake was 20 years away. Steam heating and a sewage treatment system were additional features of the new hotel.

In June 1898 the hotel was renamed the Oneonta, an Indian name meaning a "place of rest." Within a week the landscapers at the hotel found an Indian canoe buried on the grounds. It was carefully removed and cleaned for exhibition. On July 7, 1898, the Hotel Oneonta was opened for guests.

The hotel was the equal of any summer hotel in the state and signaled an incredible two decades of resort fame for the Lake. Soon after the opening, a barn and stable along with picnic grounds were planned for the rear of the hotel.

A line of sailboats was available for guests. A twenty foot flag was raised in front of the hotel and red shale paths were laid around the hotel grounds. The trolley brought crowds to the Oneonta for Saturday night dances, and the hotel guests enjoyed concerts during luncheon and dinner hours. In 1899 a large boathouse was built for the Oneonta, and its landing became the principal stop for the steamboats. In 1903 tennis courts were added to the lawn. Masses were held at the hotel on Sundays drawing summer guests as well as servants and maids from the summer homes.

In the early afternoon a brief lull reigned before the steamboats renewed their incessant runs from the Picnic Grounds to the Oneonta landing as thousands of holiday guests flocked to meet the return trolleys to the Valley. Then, as cooler breezes signaled the early evening,

the trolleys to the Lake were full again with new crowds arriving for the evening dances at the Oneonta or the Picnic Grounds.

The Oneonta always provided musical entertainment with summer meals. String ensembles were popular with the dinner crowd, with better area orchestras for dancing in the ballroom. A popular tune, "Johnson's Rag," was written at the Oneonta by two musicians, Guy Hall and Henry Kleinkoff. Tradition held the song was inspired by a cheerful waiter at the Oneonta who had a wide smile and dancing feet. The ever-popular "Moonlight and Roses" was composed by Joe O'Connor, who played piano at the Oneonta before becoming a priest.

After 1901 the Oneonta had a succession of



**Detail of a woodcut from the Oneonta's letterhead showing the iron bridge at Inlet and the new boathouse, c. 1908.**

managers, including John A. Redington, until James F. Poland assumed the position in 1909. He held the position for ten years, longer than any previous manager. Poland owned early hotels in the city, the Windsor and later the Hart. Poland's hotels were popular with vaudeville entertainers who played the area. The popular character actor, Edward Everett Horton, played summer stock in Wilkes-Barre and was a frequent guest at the Oneonta.

The Oneonta's most famous guest was the former President, Theodore Roosevelt, who had dinner at the Lake hotel on August 22, 1912 while on a visit to the Valley. As the Lake's most celebrated time was ending, James Poland died on Christmas Eve 1918, and in six weeks the Oneonta would be lost to fire.



One of many color postcards published by the Lake's H.E. Hill. The Hill family operated Hill's Pavilion for 40 years. The steamboat is the *Acoma*.

## Destruction of Hotel Oneonta

On Sunday, February 2, 1919, Mrs. James Poland and a few friends were visiting the Oneonta. In the early evening, at about 6:00 P.M. she left the hotel and was about to drive home when her party saw a blaze in the basement area. Within minutes the entire hotel was in flames. Farmers were aroused from the area to respond to the fire. Holes were cut in the ice, and a bucket brigade was formed to save neighboring buildings.

The illuminated sky began to draw crowds from miles around, and the roads were filled with cars as the hotel became a destructive furnace. A high wind showered sparks the ignited trees and cottage roofs. Several times flames caught the hotel's power house and

ice house, but they were extinguished. The fire burned for more than three hours with no injuries to anyone, but nothing remained of the landmark hotel after the fire except a brick chimney, fireplace, vault and foundation. For some time, the Oneonta company had been in default on the mortgage to the hotel. The Polands had not planned to manage the hotel in the summer of 1919, and Prohibition was on its way. The cause of the fire was never determined, and the \$45,000.00 fire insurance was inadequate to rebuild it.

In August 1919 the Wyoming Valley Trust Company, which held the mortgage, foreclosed on the estate and sold it to John P. Schmidt, Peter Forve and P. R. Raife, who laid out the area in building lots. *HL*