

## Brief History of Williams Bay

By Frank M. Van Epps

The first man to recognize the site of our present village of Williams Bay as a good place for a home site for himself and others was named Cole, who staked out a claim and even went so far as to mark off lots. That was back in 1836 and 1837.

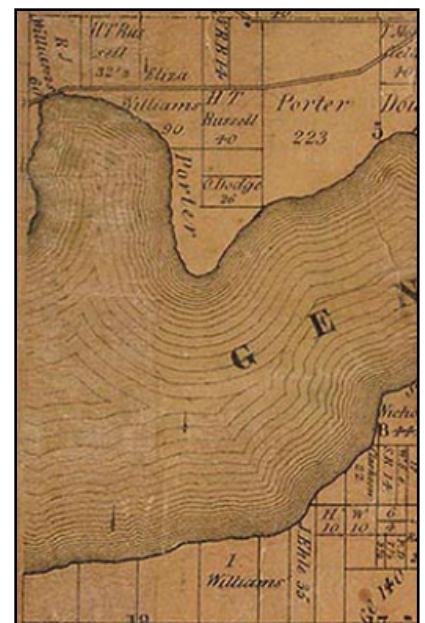
His claim was jumped by Captain Israel Williams who took advantage of the fact that Cole had not made any improvements according to the Settler's Code. When Cole showed up to fight over his claim he found that Williams and his two sons were too many to combat and settled with them for a cow.

Two sons of Captain Williams had preceded him from their home in Ashfield, Massachusetts. They, Moses and Israel Jr., came to Lake Geneva in 1836, staking claims on the south shore, Israel Jr. at Kaye's Park and Moses near Nine Oaks, where the E.E. Ayer home was built later. The depression of Israel's log cabin may still be seen just above the Kaye's eastern gate. Their good report of the land when they returned to Massachusetts, spurred the father to migrate also. Royal and Austin went on ahead and walked from Milwaukee whence they had come by boat on the Great Lakes.

Captain Williams and the other members of the family, including Mrs. Williams' mother, Mrs. Hannah Joy, came on July 4th, 1837 to Israel's cabin and six weeks later moved into a cabin which they built at Nine Oaks.

In the spring of 1838 they came to Williams Bay and during that summer Mrs. Williams made the first cheese ever made in Walworth County. The next year she made 800 pounds which was taken by canoe to Geneva and sold to Andrew Ferguson at a shilling a pound.

Captain Williams bought land and sold it. It is said that at some time or other he owned all the land from Kaye's Park to Harvard Club. In the spring of 1838, before moving over to Williams Bay (which did not have its name at that time), Captain Williams, who was a Justice of the Peace, performed the marriage ceremony of his daughter Hannah, and one, Robert Russell. In the fall of 1838 Mrs. Joy died and was buried near the Indian graveyard (now E.H. Hollister's lot on Elm Street, but later the remains were moved to East Delavan Cemetery. Squire Bell of Big Foot offered the prayer.



1857 map of Linn Township showing location of Israel Williams Junior's 1836 claim



Potawatomi Burial Ground on Elm Street

In 1839 there were several groups of Indians who had wandered back from Kansas, whence the tribe had been moved in 1836, and seeing that the graves of the wives of Chief Big Foot had been undisturbed, expressed their thanks by saying, "Good white man, no dig."

About the first nearby neighbors to come were Charles, Henry, and Parson Bailey, who lived along Delavan Road [Theater Road] from the four corners north. They came in 1839. The same year [1839] the Williams hewed timbers for a new house and in 1840 built what is part of the Williams Homestead, which has recently been remodeled by E.H. Hollister. [The homestead was located at the current site of the Bayview Motel on Geneva Street.] Over the door hung a pair of antlers and the name "Buckhorn Tavern" was given to it. Captain Williams became well known as the stage line from Beloit to Racine ran by the door.



Williams Homestead in 1958

The first school was in the home of Mrs. Moses Williams at Nine Oaks in 1839.

In 1844 Captain Williams was the first postmaster and at that time [Williams Bay] was called Geneva Bay. That same year a blacksmith shop was established at Delap's Corners by D.P. Hadley.

In 1845 there was an epidemic of malaria and typhoid fever which caused the death of Moses and Austin Williams, and the following year Captain Israel Williams. The cause of the disease was traced to the vegetable mould from so much plowing of the land where leaf mould existed. [We now know the bacteria that cause typhoid fever spread through contaminated food or water and occasionally through direct contact with someone who is infected.]



Graves of Austin Williams and Capt. Israel Williams at East Delavan Cemetery

In 1849 Kiah Bailey has a post office in his home at the west of town, it was called "Bay Hill"...later it was moved to East Delavan Zina Cotton was postmaster.

In 1855 Royal J. Williams, son of Captain Israel Williams, came from back east and acted as administrator of the estate and lived in the homestead until he died in 1886.

Not much happened the next 20 years in the development of Williams Bay. Up to 1870 it was just the Williams Farm. At Observatory Hill was Robert Russell, and between was Joseph Stam, and at the north across the slough was Jonas Southwick, who came in 1852.

Festus Williams purchased several hundred acres, of which the Harris Farm is now a part, in 1874.

In 1883, J.W. Loft bought the 5 acres at the south of the village.

In 1889, first subdivision was laid out and W.G. DeGroff was the first purchaser of a lot and the next two were A.H. Arneson and Peter Stenstrom. That year John Hansen bought the acreage, part of which is now the Josephine Holmquist property.

A man of much importance east of the Bay was Major Edward Brown Meatyard, who owned hundreds of acres of land between Lake Geneva and Como, and had a fine home at what is now Cedar Point Park (about where the E.F. Moore home now is.) He was a big influence in getting the railroad through to Williams Bay and gave most of the right of way.



Lawn Glen Home of Major Edward Brown Meatyard

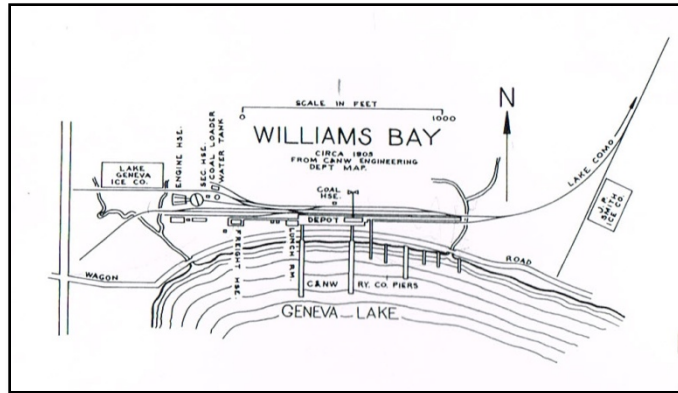


View east from Major Meatyard's estate

The road bed was built in 1887-88 and the first train came in 1888. Festus Williams gave 6 acres including 80 rods of lake shore and Lucretia Williams gave 12 acres from the depot to the creek.



In 1891 the Lake Geneva Ice Co. built a large ice-house, employing 125 men in season.



Map of lakefront circa 1905 with location of Lake Geneva ice Co.

In 1891 A.H. Arneson, Eric Anderson and G.L. Jensen, incorporated the Scandinavian Free Lutheran Church and proceeded to buy the land and build the church, which later was remodeled and enlarged into the present Gospel Tabernacle.

In 1892, Marie R. Williams became postmistress and the name "Williams Bay" was given to the village. Mail was first brought by team and later in 1895, when train service was established, there were two mails [deliveries] daily.

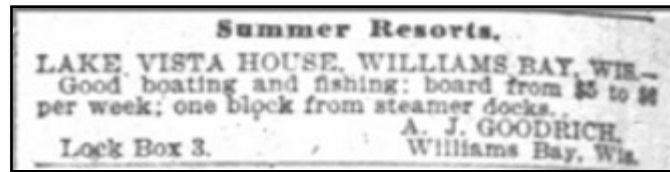
In 1892 Mrs. J. Pemberton opened a boarding house. In 1893, Harley Williams opened a coal, lime and brick business. The same year C.M. Williams opened a general store.

In 1894 W.A. Lackey established a bus line and livery. That year a deed was executed to Yerkes Observatory for land.

Meantime along the lake shore homes had been built and Camp Collie, Congress Club, Y.M.C.A. Camp and just beyond, Holiday Home were in operation.



Chicago & Northwestern train



1901 Chicago Tribune advertisement for the Lake Vista House

In 1895 Eric Anderson, A. Blix, Harley Williams, Henry Francis, W.G. DeGroff, U. Lockwood, and C. Slocumb built homes. Also the same year L.E. Francis built a store and put in general merchandise. The same year Joe Keat bought the hotel part of C.M. Williams store and called it Lake Vista Hotel.

On the shores of Geneva Lake have been the summer homes of many wealthy people for many years, some dating back to the 1870s.

With the building of Yerkes Observatory there came many artisans who boarded while here at work. Some brought their families and stayed. The eyes of the world became focused on our community because of the Yerkes Observatory and the camps.



Yerkes Observatory during construction

Gradually it grew, never very fast, but steadily, until in the 1920s to 1930s it had the largest growth of any section of the County. In 1919 the village was incorporated. Improvements were commenced. First, street lights, then better roads, some curbing and later in 1930, water and sewer and paved streets.

In 1922 Loch Vista Subdivision, an A.W. Jensen development, made a fine lakeshore improvement with fine new homes; the owners coming to enjoy summers with us. Next Cedar Point Park, considered one of the most attractive home sites on the lake. There are 456 lots and nearly 150 homes already built, many all year round.

Oakwood Estates and Summer Haven Subdivision have many attractive modern homes, beautifully landscaped.

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