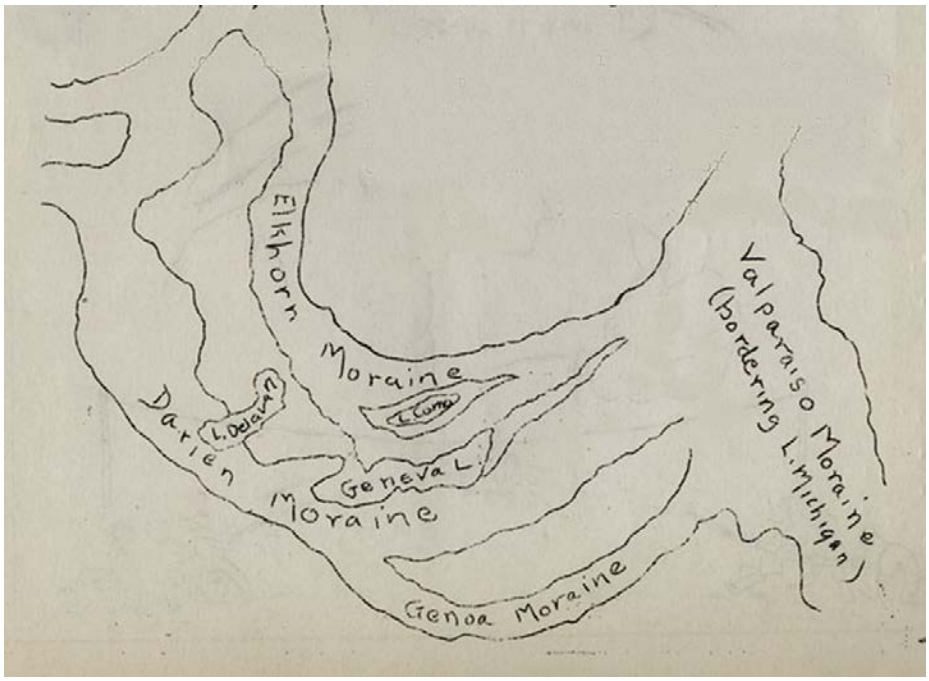
# The Origin of Geneva Lake


Some twelve thousand years ago the northern portion of North America was covered by huge glaciers. It was but one of many glacial periods that had preceded it. A tongue of the great ice cap, a mile or more thick, was slowly flowing south in the depression now occupied by Lake Michigan and spilling over its sides. A branch of this Lake Michigan glacier was crawling down Green Bay. Between these two was a relatively small projecting mass of ice now known as the Delavan Lobe.

For a great many years the front of this lobe stood just south of where Geneva Lake now is and extended, a wall of ice, east and west curving north. It was then warm enough in this region so the mass of ice melted its front as fast as it was pushed down from the north. It brought, on its surface and imbedded in it, dirt and stones grinding them down. All this material it dumped, unsorted, as its front melted, forming the semi-circular line of hills now known as the Darien Moraine, south and west of Geneva Lake. Such a deposit at the end of a glacier is known as a terminal moraine.

Geneva Lake was formed some 10,000 years ago as a result of glacial action, which created the lake basin and sculpted the landscape.  The geological formation of Geneva Lake begins with the melt off of a glacial lobe known as the Troy Valley. Troy Valley was a depression running from Troy, Wisconsin through Lyons and then westward through Lake Geneva and toward Beloit.  The cascading water from the Troy Valley's outlet formed connecting channels that evolved into the present lakes Geneva, Delavan and Como.

Then due to a succession of warmer years the front of the glacier retreated. As it went it deposited debris irregularly, filling more or less an old valley that existed before the glacier came, a valley that opened westward, one whose rock floor is 220 feet below the level of Geneva Lake. The front of the Delavan Lobe then remained stationary for a while and piled up another terminal moraine known as the Elkhorn Moraine. It is the line of hills up which Elkhorn Road [highway 67] climbs as it goes north from Williams Bay. Between



Origin of Geneva Lake - map of moraines

these moraines, the Darien and the Elkhorn Moraines, Geneva Lake formed in the partially filled old valley.

Geneva Lake took its present shape with the Late Wisconsin glacial period when the sedimentary deposits of the Delavan Lobe divided Geneva and Delavan, which is three and one half miles to the west. Second sedimentary deposits separated Geneva and Como, which is a mile north of Williams Bay. Both Geneva Lake and Como Lake drain to the east.

The surrounding landscape was barren for these hills of rock and dirt were not covered with vegetation until long after they were formed. The plants and animals that lived upon them moved in from the south and west as the climate mild once more.

The lake was first discovered in 1831 when an Army party, under the command of Major John Kinzie, was traveling along Indian Trails from Fort Dearborn in Chicago to Fort Winnebago. There is a bronze marker located on the south shore lake path just east of Fontana marking the location where the Kinzie party first observed the lake.

Geneva Lake remained in its natural state until early settler, Christopher Payne built a simple dam on the eastern end of the lake at the White River outlet in 1836. A more substantial dam was constructed in the 1840s which raised the water level in the lake about 6 feet.


Dam and mill at White River outlet

Later floods and droughts raised concerns about inconsistent lake levels. In 1894 H. H. Porter, a Chicago railroad entrepreneur and lakeshore summer resident, bought the dam and adjacent property. Porter and other lakeshore residents formed the Lake Geneva Water Power & Lake Level Protection Company (LGWP & LLPC) in April 1894. Lake Geneva Water Power & Lake Level Protection Company constructed control gates which kept the water level within narrow limits.

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