

# Williams Bay's Rich Heritage of Recreational Camps

Throughout the years, recreational camps were established in various locations around Geneva Lake, but the five earliest camps, established between 1874 and 1898 were all located in the wilderness at the western end of the lake. In considering the historical significance of these camps, it is important to note that camping as a recreational activity was unheard of in the United States until the middle of the nineteenth century. Such camps shared a common belief that fellowship in a beautiful natural environment could have beneficial effects far beyond the short time spent at camp. As Williams Bay developed, recreational camps were established in various locations around Geneva Lake. Beyond simple recreation, visitors of these camps shared common spiritual beliefs that were enhanced by recreation and fellowship in a beautiful natural setting.

**Camp Collie** was the earliest of these camps, established in 1873 by Rev. Joseph Collie. The camp began as an informal retreat for members of the Congregational Church in Delavan, where Rev. Collie was pastor for forty years.



Cottage at Camp Collie



Camp Collie lakefront



Nichols Memorial Chapel, Conference Point Camp



Oaklawn, Conference Point Camp

The camp quickly gained in popularity and was soon opened to the public. In 1950 Lake Geneva Youth Camp opened with the objective of sharing God's love to children in an environment away from the distractions of city life. Programs dedicated to the religious and intellectual life has developed **Conference Point Camp** into a first class non-denominational Christian camp drawing thousands of people and families each year.

**YMCA George Williams College Camp** was the next camp to open in 1886 (now owned by Aurora University). It was the vision of I. E. Brown, William Lewis, and Robert Weidensall, YMCA leaders commissioned to develop the movement in the western United States.



Photo courtesy of Aurora University



The Lewis Auditorium

The campus thrived as YMCA workers from across the country gathered for physical activity, spiritual reflection and service learning. The training camp grew rapidly, and it moved to the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago in 1890 and became an institution of higher learning for students entering human service professions such as parks and recreation, education, and social work. The Lake Geneva campus served as a "college camp" used for retreats.

The first permanent camp building to be constructed in Williams Bay was the Lewis Auditorium in 1890.

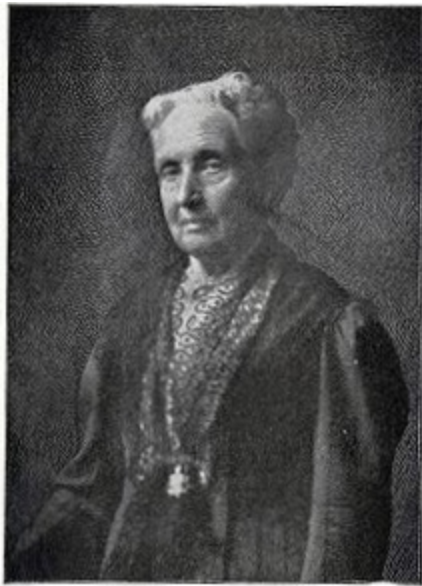


Weidensall Administration Building



The Young Women Christian Association Conference

**Holiday Home Camp** was founded in 1887 during the Fresh Air Movement, by philanthropic Chicago industrialists who were summer residents of the Geneva Lake area who formed the *Lake Geneva Fresh* was to provide weeks of outdoor life for under-privileged children of Chicago. Built in 1887, Founders Hall is over 120 years old and still retains many of its original fixtures.



Dr. Alice Bunker Stockham (1833-1912) was a physician, author, publisher, and successful business woman and suffragist worker. In 1897 she launched a New Thought School in Williams Bay, called the **Vrilia Heights Metaphysical School** to provide a site for formal discussions inspired by the *1893 Columbian Exposition and World Congress of Religions*.

By the mid 1890's Stockham was internationally known as a woman with modern views and courage to inform and educate the masses despite facing critics and discrimination for speaking about issues which had been considered private and of no business of general discussion. In 1905 when Stockham was in her seventies, the Society for the Suppression of Vice accused her, under the Comstock Law, of sending improper matter through the mails. She hired a lawyer and the case went to trial but she was found guilty and her books banned, forcing her publishing company to close.

*Alice B. Stockham*

The legal fees were so costly she was forced to sell **Vrilia Heights**.

The property was purchased on January 2, 1909 by The Olivet Summer Assembly Association led by Rev. Norman B. Barr and re-named **Olivet Camp**.



Dining Room, Olivet Camp



Tent Camping, Olivet Camp

On October 1, 1946 the camp was incorporated re-named **Norman B. Barr Camp** in honor of the late Reverend Barr.

**Wesley Woods** Camp began as **The Eleanor Camp** in 1898. The purpose of the camp was to provide a proper vacation retreat for female students and business women. As times changed the need for the vacation retreat declined.



Reception Hall, Eleanor Camp



Sleeping Tents, Eleanor Camp

The camp was sold in the late 1940s to the Rock River Conference of the Methodist Church and re-named Wesley Woods.

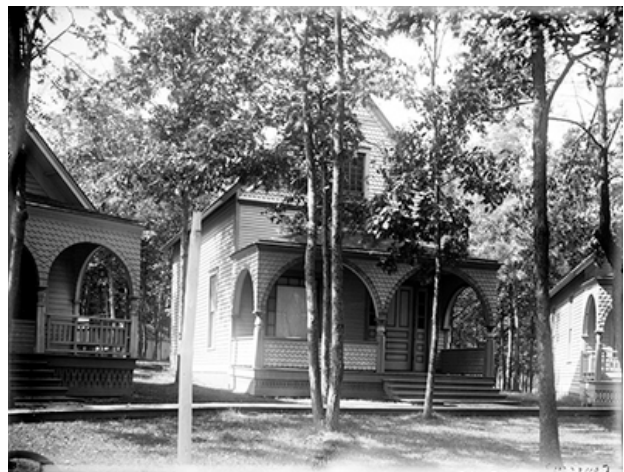
Private camping associations also gained popularity in the area surrounding Geneva Lake.

**Congress Club**, founded in 1876, was established as a social and musical club. The club was formed by residents who resided near Congress Street on Chicago's west side.

The first of several buildings was constructed in 1882. The Club's architectural significance rests on the 19th century interpretation of the Queen Anne style as an appropriate summer cottage form.



Dining Hall, Congress Club (Photo courtesy of KeefeRealEstate.com)



Congress Club 1896 or 1897 Photo Credit: University of Chicago Photographic Archive, apf6-00110, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.



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**Rockford Camp** was located adjacent to the YMCA Camp on land leased from Joseph Stam by Josiah Sloan and Milton Brown in 1888. The camp has also been known as Stam's Woods and Dartmouth Woods. Originally a tent camp with a shared kitchen and dining room, there was an icehouse and outhouses located behind the tents. Drinking water came from Collie Spring. The tents and shared kitchen and dining room were replaced by cottages; the icehouse was replaced by refrigerators, and the outhouses by indoor plumbing.

Reprinted from Village of Williams Bay Comprehensive Plan; Chapter Four: Cultural Resources. Adopted September 20, 2010.  
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