

EMPIRE

THE POST-STANDARD

SUNDAY, JULY 19, 2015



LAKE OF LOST RESORTS

MORE THAN 100 YEARS AGO, FUN-SEEKERS FLOCKED TO THE SHORES OF ONONDAGA LAKE

Property of Onondaga Historical Association

A game of chance at Long Branch Park on the northern shore of Onondaga Lake.

THE CONEY ISLAND OF CENTRAL NEW YORK

By Rick Moriarty
rmoriarty@syracuse.com

Stroll along the western shore of Onondaga Lake and it's hard to imagine that, more than 100 years ago, it was dotted with great waterfront resorts, the Coney Island of Central New York.

The resorts were built before industry polluted the lake. They went by the names Iron Pier, White City, Lake View Point, Pleasant Beach, Rockaway Beach, Manhattan Beach, Maple Bay and Long Branch Park.

Thousands came every summer for the resorts' dance pavilions, water rides, bowling alleys, restaurants and hotels. Trolleys brought people from downtown Syracuse, and ferries ran from the southern end of the lake.

The pollution and the advent of the automobile, which made it possible for people to travel to the Adirondacks and

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

RESORTS DOTTED THE SHORE BEFORE INDUSTRIAL POLLUTION CHANGED THE LANDSCAPE



Property of Onondaga Historical Association

Crowds of people pack the White City Amusement Park on the western shore of Onondaga Lake.

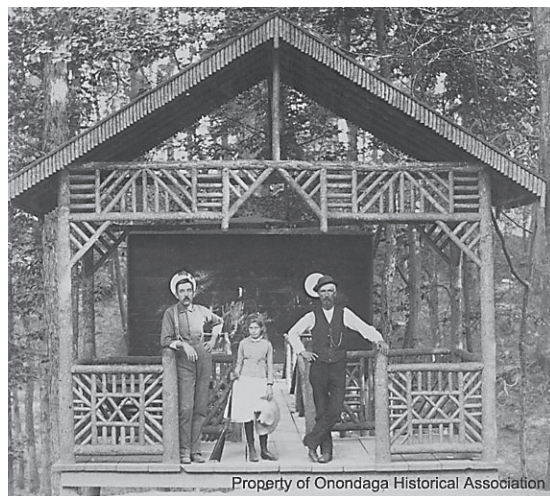
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

elsewhere for summer fun, ended the resorts in the early 1900s.

With the public once again viewing Onondaga Lake as a recreational resource, I decided to see what was left from the lake's resort era.

I researched the resorts using dozens of historical photos provided by the Onondaga Historical Association, publicly available records, aerial photos and Donald H. Thompson's excellent 2002 book, "The Golden Age of Onondaga Lake Resorts." Then I searched the lakeshore to see what I could find. Most of it is covered with thick vegetation and getting to the water's edge would take a machete in places.

Let's start at the northern end of the lake and work our way along the West Shore Trail.



Property of Onondaga Historical Association

LONG BRANCH PARK

Long Branch Park is the easiest to find because the area where it stood is still called Long Branch Park and is accessible from Long Branch Road. The resort stood north of the road, along the western bank of the lake's outlet to the Seneca River.

Long Branch was the biggest and longest lasting of the resorts. Built by German immigrants Ben and George Maurer in 1882, it featured a roller coaster, a dance hall, bowling lanes, picnic areas and carousels.

One of its carousels ("No. 18") later found its way into the Carousel Center mall, now named Destiny USA, on the southern shore of the lake. It remains there today.

Long Branch closed in 1938, the last of the resorts to shut down. The site was later sold to Onondaga County.

The only trace of the resort is a concrete foundation sticking out of the grass behind a small hill that children use for snow sledding.



Property of Onondaga Historical Association



Property of Onondaga Historical Association

MAPLE BAY

The county's West Shore Trail begins south of Long Branch Road. The trail curves around to the left, then heads straight south. At the curve is an alcove named Maple Bay. That's where Maple Bay Resort opened in 1889. Its name was later changed to Lakeside Park.

Built by Willis Barnum, it featured picnic grounds, a large hotel, a dance pavilion, an open-air theater, roller skating, a bicycle track and a wild animal cage. Visitors arriving by ferry disembarked at Maple Bay's 300-foot-long pier, the longest on the lake.

The resort billed itself as the "king of all summer resorts." However, by the early 1900s, the king had fallen into disrepair and closed.

Its 300-foot pier is still there, but it's now under

water because the lake level is higher than it was 100 years ago. (The lake was lowered in 1820 to drain a swamp that is now the northern part of downtown Syracuse. It was raised again in 1918 when the lake became part of the newly built Barge Canal.)

I could see the pier from the shore, but getting to it is difficult. The woods between the trail and shore are thick. It can easily be spotted in aerial photos on Google Maps or Bing Maps. I couldn't find evidence of any of the resort's buildings. The higher water level now covers up much of Maple Bay's old beach, and bushes and trees cover the rest.

Directly to the west, just past Interstate 690 and State Fair Boulevard in Geddes, is Lakeside Road, named after the resort.

ROCKAWAY, MANHATTAN AND PLEASANT BEACHES

Heading farther south, I walked past, in order, the locations of Rockaway, Manhattan and Pleasant beaches.

Rockaway opened in the 1890s and had a hotel and saloon, a dance pavilion, a bowling alley and a picnic area.

Manhattan Beach, a short distance to the south, was a smaller resort that did not last long.

Cowan's Grove opened in 1874 a short distance south of Manhattan Beach. It was remodeled in 1887 and renamed Pleasant Beach. Its attractions included restaurants, a bowling alley, a dance hall and three hotels, the last of which was demolished in 1954 to make way for I-690.

Rockaway's only remains are toppled concrete pillars near the shoreline and the ruins of its pier on the lake bottom. I spotted the ruins of the pier in aerial photos, but seeing the concrete pillars required leaving the trail and trudging through bushes.

Remains of Pleasant Beach's pier are also underwater but visible in aerial photos. Also underwater, a short distance north of the pier's remains, are what appear to be support posts for one of Pleasant Beach's old structures.

A pedestrian bridge over I-690 connects the West Shore Trail to Pleasant Beach Road, named after the resort.

LAKE VIEW POINT

A bit farther south, on a small peninsula, Lake View Point opened in 1872. Lake View consisted of a hotel and a picnic area and for a while was a popular summer escape. In winter, people came for iceboating, skating and ice fishing.

Unfortunately for Lake View, the Solvay Process Co. opened its soda ash plant in the early 1880s and began dumping calcium carbonate sludge, a byproduct of its manufacturing process, along the shore.

The pollution turned off visitors, and by 1915 the resort was gone. It was the first to open on the lake and one of the first to close.

I could find no evidence of Lake View's existence. Solvay Process took over the property after the resort closed and, over the decades, piled its waste 80 feet high. The location still carries the name Lake View Point, though.



Property of Onondaga Historical Association



Property of Onondaga Historical Association

SYRACUSE YACHT CLUB

One of the most impressive looking structures on the lake had to be the Syracuse Yacht Club.

The wooden, three-story building and several related boathouses were built in 1898 on wooden piers in the southwest corner of the lake, near the State Fair Boulevard exit from westbound I-690.

The imposing sight became a prominent social center, serving lunches and dinners to a membership that grew to 2,000.

An early morning fire burned down the yacht club on May 10, 1917. It wasn't rebuilt, probably because of the growing industrial waste nearby.

"The location was not as attractive as it once was," said Dennis Connors, curator of history at the Onondaga Historical Association.

Today, the only evidence that the yacht club existed are the remains of some of the wood pilings that held it up. They're

underwater and I could only see them from aerial photos.

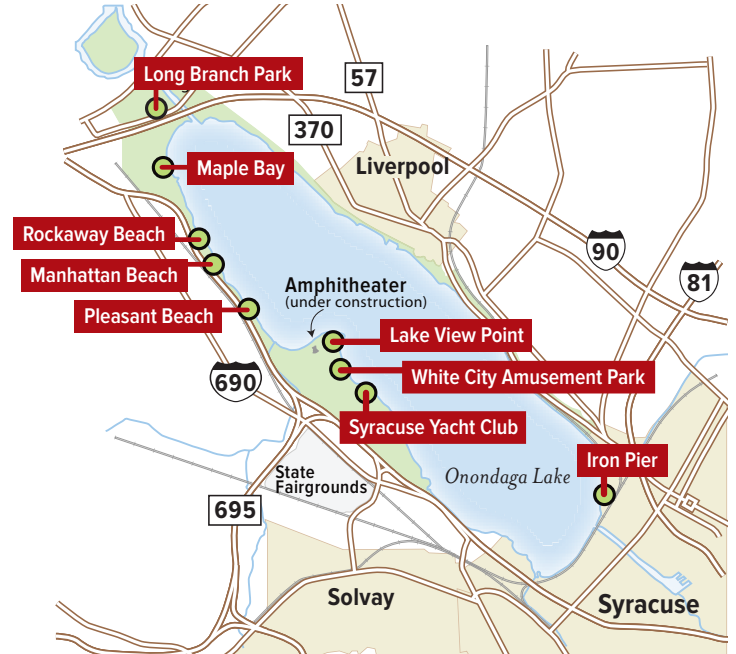
The club's boathouses continued to be used for several years but were then dismantled. According to an archaeological survey done three years ago for Honeywell International, the successor to Solvay Process, the wooden pilings that supported the boathouses are buried under slag fill likely from the nearby Crucible Steel plant.

In 2013, Honeywell opened the Onondaga Lake Visitors Center on the site, which is owned by the state. The company owns the land south of the center and plans to turn it into a public park.

Onondaga Lake had to wait 21 years before it got another yacht club. The Onondaga Yacht Club, with a much smaller building, opened on the eastern side of the lake in 1938 and still operates.

ONCE, A PLACE FOR RESORTS

The western shore of Onondaga Lake was home to many popular resorts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Changes in lifestyles and pollution from industry contributed to the decline of the resorts. Today, the area hosts trails, and soon, an amphitheater.



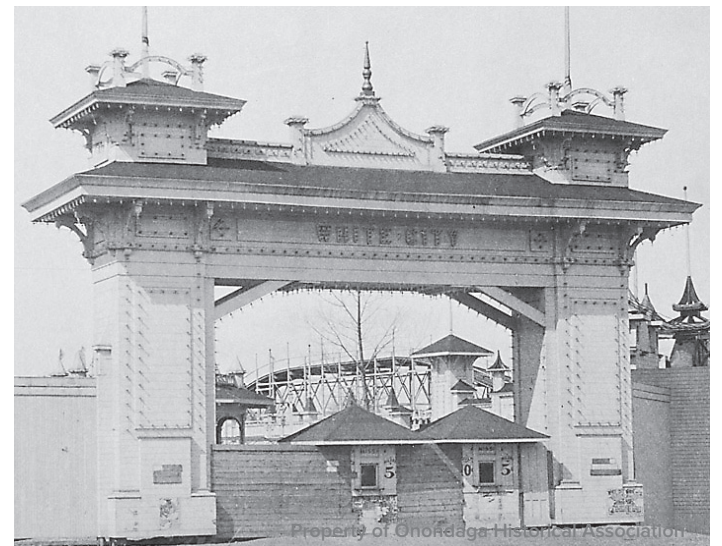
WHITE CITY AMUSEMENT PARK

On the other side of Lake View is a low-lying beach where White City Amusement Park operated from 1906 to 1915.

White City was famous for its 25,000 electric lights and its "Shoot the Chutes" water ride, which carried guests in boats down a steep ramp and into a manmade lagoon. The park also featured a ballroom, a restaurant, a Japanese tea garden, a miniature scenic railway, a children's playground and a platform for concerts and vaudeville performers, according to Thompson's book.

White City's relatively short lifespan likely was due to growing competition from other resorts, as well as the growing pollution.

It's that same pollution that makes the site where White City stood unrecognizable today. White, gooey industrial waste covers the land.



Property of Onondaga Historical Association

Resorts on the lake shore

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

IRON PIER

The Destiny USA shopping mall wasn't the first attraction to bring entertainment to the lake's south shore. A hundred years before the mall was built, there was the Iron Pier.

Built by the People's Railway Co. of Utica in 1890 to generate business, the resort's long pavilion wasn't actually iron. It was wooden and contained bowling alleys, a concert hall and a restaurant.

It operated until 1907, when competition from resorts along the western shore put it out of business.

Divers doing a study for Honeywell in 2010 saw the remains of the Iron Pier's dock underwater, but nothing remains on the surface.

There is no easy public access to the site, which is between the water and the railroad line along the southern shore. The northern end of the city of Syracuse's Onondaga Creekwalk comes close, but a fence discourages visitors from getting any closer.

At the end of the creekwalk, however, you can look out across the entire lake and get the view that Iron Pier visitors enjoyed more than 100 years ago.

The lake, polluted and abandoned in the 20th century, is making a comeback. Honeywell just finished removing the worst of the pollution from the lake's bottom. Onondaga County has spent tens of millions of dollars upgrading its sewage treatment plant on the southern shore.

Swimming has been banned in the lake since 1940, but the Upstate Freshwater Institute and the state say it is safe enough to swim in its northern end.

Onondaga County also is building a \$50 million amphitheater on the western shore, close to where Lake View Point stood. County officials estimate it will attract 200,000 concertgoers a year.