

LOOKING BACK

THE TICONDEROGA DAM

by Shelly Gautreau and Nancy Young

This first section of this article (*in italics*) was written in 1974 and was discovered in the archives of the Hague Historical Society.

An event of historical significance took place earlier this month when the International Paper Company (IPC) deeded the dam at the head (NOTE: Actually, because Lake George flows from south to north, Lake George Village is technically the “head” of Lake George and the outlet is in Ticonderoga) of Lake George to the State of New York. With the dam, the paper company also conveyed seven acres of land and presented the state with a check for \$150,000 for use in reconstructing the dam, removing the buildings, and grading.

The level of Lake George is about 220 feet above the level of Lake Champlain. Water descends from the head (See note in paragraph above) of Lake George through what the French called “La Chute,” but which is now known as “Ticonderoga Creek,” a distance of about 3 ½ miles to Lake Champlain. Obviously, a great source of power, grist mills and lumber mills were constructed along its course as early as 1800 - 1810.

To regulate the flow of water, a dam was constructed about 160 years ago. This was replaced by the present dam and locks, which were built in 1900 by IPC, which had acquired title to the five pulp and paper mills located at the head of the falls. In 1925, IPC gained complete control of the water when it purchased the three mills at the lower falls.

The dam was so constructed that the level of Lake George rose to about a foot above its natural level. The people on the lake wanted the paper company to maintain this level and, after considerable litigation, IPC, by law, was assigned the responsibility of maintaining the level between 2.5 and 4 feet on the Rogers Rock gauge between (unreadable) 1st and October 1st.

With the abandonment of the old mill several years ago, IPC has no interest in the water power and has sought to be relieved of its responsibility. The state acquiesced and the turning over of the dam and the properties places the responsibility on the (NY State) Department of Environmental Conservation.



At the presentation ceremonies, Albert Oetken, a vice president of IPC, said that if the dam were to be removed, the lake level would be lowered considerably, the shoreline would be altered, and there would be new hazards to boating from rocks and even islands, which would rise above the surface. He also pointed out that by maintaining a constant level, dock owners are not inconvenienced by wide variations in water levels. Their docks are neither flooded nor made unapproachable.

On a visit to the area the other day, we were amazed at the tremendous volume of water rushing over the dam. It is inconceivable that, in these days of energy shortages, the power generated by this water performs no useful function.

UPDATE 2024 (50 years later)

Lake George is a natural lake with an approximately 233-square-mile watershed. Precipitation results in surface water, runoff, or groundwater flows. The condition of the watershed's soil (frozen to unfrozen, dry to saturated), the level of intermittent lakes, ponds, and wetlands in the watershed, as well as the state of trees and vegetation, all affect the amount of runoff. Excessive precipitation and runoff can cause the lake to rise occasionally to undesirable levels. Lower than desired lake levels can also be caused by persistent dry weather and evaporation. During such periods, especially late summer and fall, evaporation from the surface of the lake can exceed the incoming water and the lake level falls.

During such conditions, the discharge gates of the dam are closed and the lake water may not be used for power generation. The hydroelectric facility is located at the base of the lower falls and is owned by Patriot Hydro Power of Manchester, NH. They provide the power generated by the water to the local electric grid.

The dam is, in all probability, promoting the continued health of our “Queen of American Lakes” by controlling the level of the lake.

We hope everyone will respect and enjoy this beautiful jewel in a clean, proactive way. If you see something that harms our “Queen,” say something, do something. Teach the love of nature and all it has to offer so that the lake will still be healthy and viable for generations to come.

