

Title: Gilford's Birch and Steamboat Islands on Lake Winnepesaukee

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Picture Caption: Birch/Steamboat Island Bridge - Photo by Dick Walker of Gilford

The first thing I feel compelled to tell my readers is that in my last island article, the one on Locke's Island, I made two mistakes that have been brought to my attention. My reference to Merrill Faye (I'll bet some of you also noticed the misspelling) should have read Merrill Fay (of Fay's Boatyard). Also he himself informed me that he delivered the ice every two DAYS not two weeks as I had written. He very nicely explained that the ice would have melted before two weeks had passed! He also very generously invited me to stop by his boatyard and enjoy the many island pictures he has there. I was delighted and hope to take him up on this offer in the near future.

Now then, on to Birch/Steamboat Islands. Originally, John Ridge's Lot 9 included Birch Island among others. In 1837 George Sanders of Gilford offered to buy Birch and nearby Jolly Island together for \$40.00! A group of Methodist ministers from southern New England visited the lake in 1880-85. The following year two of these ministers, George Bates and Walter Yates, purchased two individual halves of nearby Belnap (Steamboat) Island from Ellen Brown of Lakeport and so the connection between these two islands began. The name Belnap was changed to Steamboat due to the fact that the first steamboat



ever to sail on Winnepesaukee was wrecked there in a storm in 1841 while towing a raft of logs to a sawmill. Steamboat Island is connected to Birch by a small picturesque bridge built in 1933. This bridge was made out of a rare type of wood, hornbeam, so tough that not even a knife could possibly cut it. The arches supporting the bridge are a natural formation of hornbeam trees. William and Christine Tucker purchased the island from Yates' son in 1933. They built a large cottage on the site of the first camp. This nine-bedroom, seven-bathroom house was quite a departure from the camps on Birch Island and was designed by Fish Island's architect Edgar Self, who also happened to be the designer of this little bridge between the two islands. The reason for this bridge was to allow emergency access for Mrs. Tucker's brother-in-law, a physician, who lived on Birch. Indeed Dr. Tucker's services did come in handy more than once for his island neighbors. He is said to have removed Jolly Islander Walter Holmes' appendix on his kitchen table! If you are still out there Mr. Holmes, will you verify that claim?

Church colleagues of Mr. Yates brought together a group of congenial families to acquire 18 acre Birch Island and establish a summer colony on Birch and Steamboat. Thus the Birch Island Camp Company was formed. One of the articles of incorporation went as follows: "No intoxicating liquors shall ever be manufactured, landed, or sold on these Islands for use as a beverage."

At the time of purchase there was a small building at the head of the main dock. Several folks improved it bit by bit until in 1920 Dr. Tucker of Lynn, Massachusetts purchased it furnishing it with "modern equipment." It was the first camp on the island with private electric lighting and power outfit. In 1894 the island was divided into thirteen lots only one being slightly more than an acre. The center of the island was kept as undeveloped common land. The first new camp, named Camp Passaconaway, was built by Mr. Ward that same year. By 1905 each of the lots had a camp, mostly bearing colorful Indian names. The cohesive nature of this island's settlement was sealed. Of course, over the passing years, many improvements have been

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made to many of the camps. One unusual one, was the retrofitting, around 1960, of Camp Maskwamozis' outhouse. A picture window featuring a view of Mt. Washington and bearing pink ruffled curtains was added! That was quite a few years ago, I wonder if it still stands!

Between 1908 and 1911 the communal boathouse was refurbished, a communal bathhouses arose and construction of a community tennis court at the island's center took place.

Religious services were a very important part of island life. In 1897 someone suggested meeting out on the lake an hour prior to sunset to sing hymns. Captain Luce would anchor his cat boat in a quiet spot, sometimes in the lee of Birch and sometimes Jolly island for full view of the setting sun. The Captain usually had his baby organ on board and would accompany the singing. Other boats would gather around tying boat to boat. After the singing a prayer would be offered and as the sun sank below the horizon the boats would quietly drift away singing "God Be With You Till We Meet Again". Once motor boats became prevalent as many as 150 people would join in from the surrounding islands. Learning about this brought a very vivid picture to my mind and I could almost feel the peace and tranquility that experiencing such a service would evoke

In 1993 a centennial celebration for Birch, Jolly, and Steamboat Islands drew over 300 lake residents for a three-day celebration. Traditions of three generations of island rusticators were reflected. Communal picnics, a gathering and baptism in the Birch Island outdoor chapel also took place along with a boat parade, inter-island swim, and last but not least, an evening hymn sing in a raft of boats off the Jolly Island shore.

I am quite sure that this article contains nothing new to many of you reading it. Hopefully, for those who are, or have been, as unaware of Gilford's Islands as myself, this has been an interesting and informative read.

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