

History of Old 99

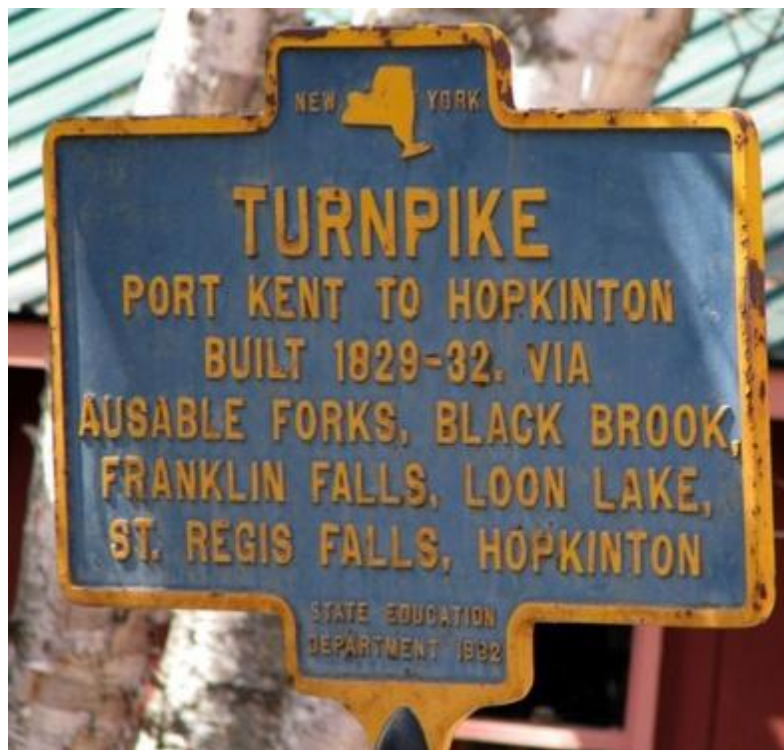
A Collection of Columns by Wendy Ungar Recounting Historical Events In and Around Loon Lake
From the Loon Lake Homeowners Association Newsletter

Part I. The Origins of Old 99

In 1829, eager to stimulate economic growth in the wilderness of Northern New York State by developing the burgeoning iron ore mining and lumber industries, the state legislature passed an act commissioning the construction of a turnpike stretching from Hopkinton, in St. Lawrence County, to Port Kent in Essex County. This road would serve as a vital link between the St. Regis River systems in the west and Lake Champlain in the east, from where goods could be further transported by steamship to southern parts of the state. In addition to the tolls along the road, by taxing all lands located within three miles of the proposed route, the state could earn more revenue from the development that would occur along the route.

From: "Reminiscences of Clintonville, New York" by L. Grant Palmer, 1921

"Old residents used to tell of the travel on this road, they said that it was not unusual to see a string of teams nearly a mile long taking their produce to and from the markets along the river and shipping at the Lake ports. This plank road was made of planks about eight feet long and three inches thick. A person riding along our fine highways now in their expensive automobiles cannot have any idea of the business activities that were so extensive along the valley years ago, or of the benefit to the teaming operations, that the old plank road was to the early settlers and the early business activities."



Part II. Growth Following Old 99

With the building of the plank road, a.k.a. "The Turnpike", between Hopkinton and Port Kent in 1829, industry came to this part of the Adirondacks. First came the saw mills. The largest mill at the time was at Franklin Falls, followed by those of Thomas Goldsmith, who built mills at the Flood Dam (a mile above Thatcherville), at Goldsmith's, Alder Brook, and elsewhere. A mill was built at Thatcherville, three miles above Hunters' Home (intersection of Goldsmith Road and 99) about 1840 by Avery Thatcher. Monroe Hall of Plattsburgh operated a mill on the outlet of Loon Lake about the same time.

Active milling operations meant the taverns were soon to follow. Prentis "Print" Lovering ran a tavern at Loon Lake while William Squires ran another on 99 a few miles north, Harry B. Hatch ran one at Hatch's, Paul and Lewis L. Smith built a tavern at Hunters' Home in 1852, and John R. Merrill ran a tavern and a hotel at Merrillville. (The Merrill Inn, still standing on 99 diagonally across from the cemetery, was sold to James W. Littlejohn in 1860 and eventually was purchased by Maxine Summers who ran an antique shop from the adjacent barn.) These taverns were in fact small inns, all along The Turnpike, and the guests were generally people traveling with the teams of horses transporting lumber and other goods. These "teamsters" would stop only for a meal or for a single night, and the rates were next to nothing (see description of Hunters Home below). The closest one can come today to the experience of those travelers of 165 years ago is to drive the back 99, cross route 30, and continue for miles of wilderness following the east branch of the St. Regis River, when suddenly you come upon the Red Tavern, still in operation, and still off the grid.



John R. Merrill Inn
later was known as The James W. Littlejohn Tavern
Picture taken about 1928

Paul Smith returned alone in October of that year and laid the foundations for the Hunters' Home, which he established and maintained near the lake for some years. The Hunters' Home was a simple wooden structure, which had one fair-sized room and about eight or ten compartments into which men could retire to sleep. There were no accommodations for women. The guests wore their rough clothes and paid \$1.25 a day for board and lodging and \$2 a day for a guide. In those days the bill of fare consisted of venison, lake trout, partridges, ham, bread, and vegetables, with tea or coffee. There was no law against the killing of deer or partridges or the catching of trout in any season, and Paul Smith himself killed as high as sixty deer in one year.

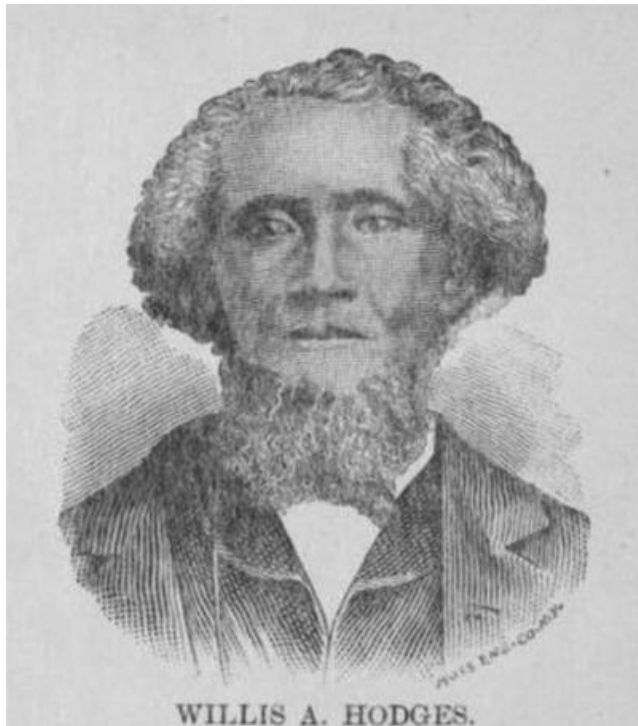
In those days the only beverage which guests were accustomed to was rye whisky and water. Whisky was then 19 cents a gallon, and Paul Smith kept a barrel of rye in the living room and a string attached to the barrel and a dipper upon the end of the string. When one of the guests wanted a drink all he had to do was to take from his pocket four coppers (nickels were hardly known at that time) and place them on the top of the barrel, put the dipper under the spigot, and help himself. The head of the barrel was usually well covered with coppers.

The New York Times

October 27, 1912

Part III. The first settlers.

There are some who believe that the first settlers in Loon Lake were Mary and Ferd Chase, who went on to develop one of the finest Adirondack resorts of the early 20th century. But they would be wrong. Willis Augustus Hodges was born to free African-Americans in Virginia in 1815. He spent a lifetime battling against slavery, cruelty and oppression of the black man. Willis and his older brother William became increasingly active proponents of political rights for black citizens and in 1849 Willis acquired 200 acres of land, generously granted by the abolitionist Gerrit Smith, to found Blacksville on the shores of Loon Lake.



The land-ownership project provided farmland to ten families of emancipated slaves. During its first year, Willis Hodges wrote his autobiography which was published by his son after his death in 1896 in the newspaper *The Indianapolis Freeman*. Unfortunately the experiment was short lived and the first Loon Lake community disbanded after two seasons. What remains however, is the beautiful Hodges Bay, where many a traveler has stopped, and continues to do, to take in the beauty, stillness and peace of Loon Lake.