



Bergen County, Where America Begins

FRANKLIN LAKES by Reginald McMahon



It was in the early 1950's that I became acquainted with Franklin Lake when my wife Mary and I visited the Cider Mill. We made frequent autumn visits because of the

brew's excellence. A gallon jug cost maybe 50¢ and if we brought back the bottle for refills, the cost was less.

Over the years we took Sunday drives to enjoy the various seasons and to take photos of landscapes and sites because of my interest in local history. In 1975 I was engaged to research property on the lake's north shore. Upon completion I felt, as Chairman and researcher for the Bergen County Historical Society's marker program, that the lake should have a sign because of its natural and social history. I submitted a marker text to Urban Farms, the owner, who agreed to sponsor the project. It was installed on the site of the former Cider Mill in 1984. As I was still "hooked" on the subject, research continued, although other projects frequently delayed my efforts, but finally all information came together in the form of a chronological study featuring the lake itself as the "hero."

Ice lay heavy on the land. Its thickness has been estimated at 2,500 to 3,500 feet at the northern border of New Jersey. This was the last continental ice sheet which we know today as the Wisconsin glacier. It began during the Pleistocene epoch of geological history about a million years ago, advancing south from Canada to eventually cover northern New Jersey including what is now the Borough of Franklin Lakes in Bergen County.

The tremendous weight and movement of the flow often gouged out bedrock to form basins and depressions. As the climate entered a warming phase, the ice began to melt and retreat northward and melt water filled the basins to form ponds and lakes.

There is a theory that at Franklin Lake "an exceptionally large ice block [was] left behind as the main body of ice withdrew." As it too melted, the basin filled with water to create a lake some 10,000 years ago. Another glacial legacy was bogs and boggy meadows. 1

After the disappearance of the glacier, the land was bereft of vegetation. As flora gradually established itself, animals were attracted to the food supply, perhaps even the extinct mastodon whose fossilized bones have been uncovered elsewhere in the county. In time, this food chain was followed by man.

Man, of course, was a descendant of the Asian emigrant who crossed Beringia, the plain that connected Siberia and Alaska when ocean waters were low during the ice age. The descendants of these Paleo-Indians would populate the new world and become known as the American Indian.

When they moved into north Jersey and the Franklin Lake area, no one can say with certainty. In 1913 an archaeological survey was made for the State by Max Schrabisch for the northern part of New Jersey.² Artifacts were abundant. A concentration of camp and village sites were recorded in the nearby Pompton region. Numerous finds were also located in the Franklin Lake vicinity. Important was the discovery of "an ancient village [that] occupied the level tract of land extending northwest of Franklin Lake" and adjacent to nearby Blauvelt Lakes. Other sites dotted the shores of Franklin Lake which are believed to have been fishing camps.

Schrabisch mentioned that "the Indians, in their flowery language, called the sheet of water Crystal Eye" on account of its translucent waters but translation of the Indian's language is usually speculative.

Also described were "three rock shelters...showing earmarks of ancient occupation" located in the "Clove, a narrow ravine" south of the lake. One of the shelters was "often tenanted, not only by single hunters, but also by whole families...as indicated by the presence of potsherds." He thought the ravine was a much "trodden trail [because of] the evidence extant."

Schrabisch believed that an Indian path led northward from the great bend of the Passaic River to Franklin Lake which he dubbed the "Wagaraw Trail." It also connected with Sicomac to the east, an Indian locality in present Wyckoff which, it

is said, was the site of an Indian burial ground. Another path "ran along the base of the Ramapo Mountains" that he called the Suffern Trail," perhaps the origin - or at least partly - of present Ramapo Valley Road.

Although the report was made in 1913, the artifact findings are still valid. Many more were likely found in later years and there is a probability others are yet to be discovered. However, historians caution that the numerous discoveries may give a false impression of a large population but the Indian was on the land for a great period of time that involved many generations.

Of Algonquian linguistic stock, the Indians of our area are generally called the Lenni Lenape or the Delaware. Those in north Jersey became known as the Munsee. It is conjectural whether the scattered local bands had individual names for themselves. Many of the appellations we hear today were likely bestowed by Europeans because of locality.

Indian title to the land was extinguished through purchase by Europeans, usually through trade goods. The Proprietors of East New Jersey controlled land distribution and the governor, Colonel Andrew Hamilton, held an interest in the lake area but on March 17, 1700, the Proprietors granted a patent of the property to Michael Hawden, a vintner (wine merchant) of New York City. Also recorded was a surveyor's return of the metes and bounds.³ It consisted of two tracts contiguous to each other. It was the second, or eastern parcel of 600 acres that is the concern of this study. The patent at that time was in Essex County; it was not until 1710 that it came under the jurisdiction of Bergen County.

The most conspicuous geographical feature noted in the east tract was "Ye pond called by ye Indians Michanagrape" which hereafter is to be "called and known at all times by the name of Christian Pool." This was today's Franklin Lake. Also cited was "a brook that runs out Christian Pool called by the Indians Katayack" which is present Pond Brook.

Michael Hawden afterwards conveyed the patent to George Willocks and John Johnson.⁴ Later Andrew Johnson, the latter's heir, would also be involved. At any rate, the Hawden grant has been variously called by his name, Willocks and Johnson, or simply, the "Pond Patent."

To the north was another patent known as the Ramapo Tract. A map was drawn in 1710 which included some landmarks outside of its boundaries such as Hawden's where a cluster of four unidentified ponds, in a very rudimentary form, are depicted. The largest obviously was meant to represent Franklin Lake.⁵

Indians had not entirely vacated the region for houses identified as such were shown toward Wyckoff and northwest in Oakland and Mahwah. The nearest European settlement was southwest where houses were depicted in the Schuyler and Brockholst Patent obtained in 1695. The Hawden tract remained vacant and settlement would come later.

I chanced upon a more detailed map, possibly made in the 1720's, that labels the lake as "Machanageap Pond." The outlet stream - Katayack/Pond Brook - is shown as well as a "Boggy Meadow." To the northwest are two small adjacent ponds. Below the lake, a prominent feature is titled the "Cedar Swamp." Generally called a bog today, it was narrow in width but over a mile in length and almost forty feet in depth. Naturalists say it was formerly populated with White Cedar, a tree considered to be unusual for the area.⁶ The aforementioned maps are not accurate by modern standards but they show the topography of the landscape that settlers would encounter.

Another early map, mentioned in deeds, was made by Alexander MacDowell in 1727 or earlier, where the patent was divided into smaller lots which were assigned numbers. Unfortunately, I have been unable to locate this surveyor's "chart or map" as it was called. Hopefully, it will surface some day for likely it would add to our knowledge of the area.⁷

Settlement of Hawden's Patent did not begin until it came into possession of Willocks and Johnson. They sold large lots to individuals, many of whom were descendants of the early Dutch who established New Amsterdam on Manhattan Island. Their culture, however, remained after the English conquest in 1664. For instance, there was language which in later days has been referred to as Jersey Dutch and the religion of the Dutch Reformed Protestant Church. Many of their Bibles were in the Dutch language.

The lake area became known as the Pond or Ponds which the Dutch called De Panne, after the English pond or pool; early documents use both the singular and plural.

After 1710 Dutch Reformed ministers began preaching, in Dutch, at irregular intervals, at a place they referred to as "Te Noord," meaning north of the established congregations at Hackensack and Acquackanonck (Passaic). There was no official church organization or edifice. "Te Noord" was southwest of the Ponds area, perhaps at or near the Schuyler and Brockholst Patent in the vicinity of the confluence of the Ramapo and Pompton Rivers.

As property owners in the De Panne area grew in numbers, the first church edifice was built. It is said to have been constructed of logs at an unknown date, followed

by a stone building situated at the juncture of Ramapo Valley and Long Hill Roads in Oakland. It was not until around 1736 that the congregation acquired the name "Ponds." Thus the original designation as a locality was stretched westward.⁸

John Romine of Hackensack was among the earliest to acquire land that bordered the lake. On May 19, 1724, he purchased a large lot from Willocks and Johnson. The deed described the property as on the west shore of "Machangrape Pond now called Christians Poole to the head thereof i. e., the south end] where Cedar Swamp Run or Brook falls into the said Pond." The northernmost boundary, to the west, touched upon another, but smaller pond, which likely was Crooked Pond. An exception in the deed required "Egress through [the] swamp to cut and carry timber or hay with carts [or] waggons" as others would own shares in this natural resource.⁹

Adjacent to Romine, the brothers Ackerman - Johannes Laurence and Jacobus Laurence - purchased 440 acres of the patent on May 19, 1727. Although it did not front on the lake, they had a share in the cedar swamp. By deed they divided the property between them.¹⁰ The Ackermans, of early Dutch descent, owned a Dutch Bible and called Pond Brook the Panne Val" and also mentioned "little ponds known by the name of Reit-Panneties,"¹¹ possibly Upper and Lower Blauvelt Ponds. James A. Ackerman, a grandson of Jacobus, built a house on the property about 1793 which still stands; it was later owned by Adam Boyd (this house is commemorated by a Bergen County Historical Society marker). An old cemetery is nearby Crooked Pond. Other eighteenth-century owners in the area included Jacobus Kipp (1727); Johannes Stagg; Peter Van Zile (c. 1748); Simeon Van Winkle on the east side of the lake (1771 or earlier); Isaac Conklin (c. 1769 or earlier) whose lot fronted on the north shore; John Van Horn; John M. Hogenkamp who made the purchase for his son Myndert Hogenkamp (1797/98); and Abraham Vreeland.¹²

Bergen County tax records for July 1780 listed 36 names under the title "Pond Neighborhood" which by then extended westward to Ponds Church. The tax collector started in this vicinity and generally worked eastward. Only individual tax payers are listed, not their families: Ryer Ryerson, Henry Shute, Garret Peterson, Abram Ackerman, Esq.; Gilliam Bogert; Stephen Bogert; Hendrick Bogert; Jacob Bogert; Cornelius Bogert; Edo Merseles; Hendrick Bertholf; Jacob Van Houten; Roelof Van Houten; Sarah Romine; Simeon Van Winkle; Jacob Storm; John Garritse; Albert Stagg; Frances Romine; Nicholas Romine; John Romine; John Banta; John Westervelt; Isaac Conklin; Benjamin Romine; Peter Van Zyle; Albert Van Zyle; Isaac Van Houten; Simeon Van Winkle, Jr.; John Ackerman; John Post; Helmigh Post; John H. Post; Lammetje Harris and Abraham Rutan.¹³

The tax record was compiled during the Revolutionary War. A year or two earlier, a map was prepared for the Continental Army¹⁴ that included an unnamed artery which is present Franklin Lake and Long Hill Roads. Sometimes it was simply the "Pond Road." Michanagrape was prominently labeled "Crystal Pool" and also showed the course of Pond Brook and Cedar Swamp Run or Brook, although they were not named. Also depicted but unidentified are two ponds to the west representing Upper and Lower Blauvelt Lakes. The road progressed west to Crooked Pond where, at that time, it made a jog around the northern tip which since has been rerouted several times. Through several courses, it then proceeded to Ponds Church at Ramapo Valley Road which this map noted as "Pompton Road." The areas around the bodies of water are given two names, "The Ponds" and the Dutch "Panne." Only two houses were identified: "Abraham Ackerman" and "Widow Romeyn." When the road came into existence is not of record. Perhaps sections originated as an Indian path but it must have been in use as a crude wagon road by the 1720's.

It was an east-west artery that by an involved route connected Hackensack, the county seat, with the Ponds, Ramapo Valley Road and Pompton. Although there is no record of large scale military movements through the Ponds, likely it was used by small contingents at one time or another. Considerable military activity, however, was seen further west along Ramapo Valley Road. George Washington and the American Army proceeded north in 1777, passed Ponds Church to stop at the Hendrick Van Allen House where he made his headquarters on July 14-15 in Oakland, near where Pond Brook empties into the Ramapo River.¹⁵

On August 26, 1781, the French Army marched down the valley road on their way to join Washington and the Continental forces at Yorktown. Pond Neighborhood residents surely would have gathered along the way to view the American allies in their resplendent uniforms. The route was surveyed and mapped by Louis Berthier, a young French officer trained in military cartography. At "Pond Church" he noted that to the left was "a road to Hackensack" which passed through the Pond Neighborhood. The French, however, took a right turn which led to Pompton Plains where they encamped before continuing their epic journey to Virginia the next day.¹⁶

On occasion, the names Michanagrape and Christian Pool were used in later days and Crystal Pool infrequently. It is of interest that there was another Crystal Lake situated much further north near the New Jersey Midland Railroad depot where there was a hotel and facilities for bathing.

As settlers arrived they used their own pragmatic descriptions for Franklin Lake. For instance, a 1748 deed cited "Great Pond"¹⁷ and by the end of the eighteenth century, and into a greater part of the nineteenth, the most common appellation was

simply "Big Pond." The glacial body of water received the present name of Franklin Lake in the Victorian age when ponds often became "lakes," probably as a romantic inducement to attract residents. Today many ponds in the area are not natural but the result of the abundant streams which had been dammed for farm or mill use. Franklin Lake came into common usage about 1876¹⁸ although as late as 1885 a land deed described it as "Big Pond now Franklin Lake" to establish the location as clearly as possible.

The name Franklin was derived from the former township which comprised a very large area, organized in 1771. It honored William Franklin, son of famed Benjamin, who was the last Royal Governor of the Province of New Jersey. It was not until 1922 that the present municipality was set off from the old township with the legal description of the Borough of Franklin Lakes.

By the nineteenth century, some descendants of the original families such as Romine, Ackerman, Van Winkle, etc., remained. Old tracts were often divided into smaller lots which frequently changed hands. For example, while title searching property bordering the waters of the lake at its northern tip, later known as the "Farmhouse lot," there were frequent title changes beginning in 1769. Many of the new names were of old families but not native to the neighborhood. They were recorded in the Federal Census of 1850. An 1828 map depicts Franklin Lake Road (unlabeled) with the name "Ponds" near the lake.¹⁹ An 1854 revision adds more detail: the lake is "Crystal P." Just northwest is "Neck P." shown as one body of water while in reality it was two closely adjacent ponds (Blauvelt, Upper and Lower), and a short distance further west was : "Crooked P." To the south, below the lake and in present Passaic County, was "High Mt."²⁰ The new map was not fully revised for it did not show today's High Mountain Road which had been laid out in 1830. The surveyors drew a map with a course just east of "Big Pond" and a sketch of "Simeon Van Winkle's Dwelling House" at the southeast corner of the new road and a Franklin Lake Road.²¹ The southern portion led to Paterson.

The most detailed map of the area was published in 1861 which located houses and occupants at that time. The Ponds was labeled as a locality but the individual bodies of water were not identified. At the north end of Franklin Lake was "S. Mill" (saw mill) and "S. H." (school house). High Mountain Road is delineated but not named.²² The schoolhouse consisted of one room measuring 12 by 16 feet. The date when it was built has yet to be determined, but it was known to be in existence as early as 1834 when adjoining property mentioned the "Schoolhouse Lot" in a deed.²³ Situated in a precarious location between Franklin Lake Road and the steep embankment of the lake, the rear end had supporting posts to prevent the structure sliding down the bank and into the water. Heating consisted of a coal stove. The fuel was stored on the ground below and near the student's outhouse.²⁴

A newspaper article of 1876 described the school as a "Dilapidated building little better than a hut." The supporting posts or "pillars of education...are in danger" because of the "ravages of time." With tongue-in-cheek, the writer said that when "scholars become displeased at the teacher for any cause, they threaten to knock the props down and let the old school fall into the lake." The article concluded with "every scholar is a miniature declaration of independence."²⁵

There were many schoolmasters over the years and, at one time or another, payment was \$600 a year to teach all grades. They usually were young men. In 1856-57, at the age of 18, Henry C. Neer taught the youngsters . He lived with his pharmacist brother in Paterson and walked to school - about six miles - every morning. He studied medicine, received his degree and eventually practiced in Park Ridge. Neer would later become President of the Bergen County Medical Society.²⁶ Another young teacher was John C. Storms who presided over the classroom in 1888. He and his brother James would later found the newspaper, the Park Ridge Local. James compiled A Jersey Dutch Vocabulary which was published by the Pascack Historical Society in 1964.²⁷

The schoolhouse was demolished in 1890 and the story is that it had been the oldest school structure in the county at that time.

Franklin Lake, as a name, appeared in the 1776-1876 Atlas of Bergen County.²⁸ Property on the east and west banks now carried the title of "Sharley and Seward." adjacent to the sawmill was the house of Daniel Yeomans, the miller at that time. His father, John D. Yeomans, operated the mill before him.²⁹ Pond Brook, the former Indian Katayack, was the mill's power source. The "tumbling dam" was situated a short distance from Franklin Lake, backing up the stream's water top form the mill pond. It is not certain when the first structure was erected. Secondary sources vary - 1791, 1800, 1818 - but the dates appear either to be speculative or based on various oral traditions. It is likely that more than one was built on the site over the years.

In 1863 John D. Yeomans entered into an agreement with neighbor Jacob R. Romaine to prevent the millpond from flooding the latter's land. A gauge was set up as a "Lawfull mark" to record water level but with the exception of when the "sawmill is in motion."³⁰ The building was taken down in 1900 and, it is said, material from an 1818 mill structure was used in its construction. The water wheel gave way to a new turbine submerged under the water which could turn in winter below the ice. Built in Paterson, probably by the Watson Machine Company, it was called the "Perfection Water Wheel."³¹

The mill turned out various products including apple cider. In its later years it was called the Cider Mill. The building became a magnet for artists and photographers

but in the 1970's it burned to the ground. The remains of the foundation exposed the dam, flume, turbine and a set of millstones.³²

Nehemiah Wade, a Bergen County judge, lived at Sicomac, eastward of the lake. His diary entry of 1880 records that he and a friend "took a ride together and a bath in Franklin Lake. That is the most beautiful body of water. Its landscapes are delightful."³³ Earlier he had visited Crystal Lake to the north at Campgaw. In a newspaper article he wrote that it was "known in the Indian dialect as Crystal Drop, so transparently clear and pure are its waters."³⁴

Inventories of some residents near Franklin Lake record ownership of boats and fishing boats, indicating that fish were harvested just as the Indians had before them. Although used by the public, the lake was always privately owned from the time it was patented in 1700. Andrew Johnson owned the share that included Michanagrape and title was handed down to his heirs and a succession of many later heirs over a great period of time. It was not until 1887 that the executors of the last heir sold the lake to Daniel S. Appleton of New York City. In turn, the executors of his estate, in 1894, sold it to Duncan E. MacKenzie of Brooklyn who transferred title to John MacKenzie in 1906.³⁵ It is worthy of note that some of the later conveyances continued to use Michanagrape for the pond in deed descriptions. The Mackenzie family, it is said, tore down many of the old buildings which surrounded the shore although a new mill was built. The executors of John MacKenzie's estate sold to the Roman Catholic Diocese of Newark in 1948.³⁶ Urban Farms, Inc., acquired the lake and adjacent land about a decade later. A large, upscale housing development was established which became a community in itself with Michanagrape pond as the focal point that was for private use only. Many of the newly created streets were given Indian names of various American Indian tribes, likely in remembrance of those who occupied the Ponds area before the Dutchman's arrival. Franklin Lake is not only a natural but a social historic site that is commemorated by a Bergen County Historical Society marker placed near where the former cider mill once stood.