

## The Watershed of the Quinebaug River

Written by George B. Wells: February 23, 1944

I wish we could get some literary student like one of the Chase girls in Sturbridge who is gone – there's another girl up there, a Mrs. Holly, I think; she might do the job – to write the history of the Quinebaug Valley of the Quinebaug Watershed. I'm sure it would be tremendously interesting, and it has such a tremendous influence on Southbridge.

We've always said that Mashapaug, whether upper or lower Mashapaug, was the source of the Quinebaug River – I've always wondered why, because my memory tells me that the May brook that flows into Holland Pond is a far bigger stream than the brook which is the main brook that runs into upper Mashapaug. I think the May brook 12 months of the year delivers far more water into the real source of the Quinebaug River.

Upper Mashapaug was always a curious name to me; it was on a height of land you might say; at the south end was high water which ran into Connecticut, down through Bigelow Hollow, and at the north end you come down into lower Mashapaug pond, then followed on to the Holland Reservoir and eventually to Southbridge and beyond. I've heard it said that it's 100 miles from Mashapaug to Southbridge following the river; it sound a little high to me, but it's a long distance. It turns and twists a great many ways. There's no better example than between Old Quinebaug Village and the bridge on Route 15.

It would be interesting not only to trace the source of the river and its tributaries, there are quite a good number of them, but it would be interesting to stop at the factories in the old days on this river. My memory isn't very good, and I can't go back far enough, but I well remember the cider mill on the Cleveland farm, that we now own that is on the Cleveland brook. Old man Cleveland used to make cider brandy, etc. Then in the little town of Mashapaug was a mill and that mill was not only a sawmill but a grist mill too. Let's go back – you know and we know that where our camp is at Mashapaug, there was a mill that had been torn town, I don't know how many years before we finally came into possession of the property, but there was a grist mill there as well as a sawmill. The little pond above was simply additional supply when the brook ran dry; of course, in those days with the country all heavily wooded, the brooks carried much more water. It didn't all come down in the run-off as it does today.

I don't remember anything about the mill privileges after you leave Mashapaug until you get pretty well down the river. I well remember the old mill at East Brimfield, and of course, the Fiskdale Mills – free water privileges there, the upper mill, the lower mill and the Augur shop. Then you came down to the sawmill and grist mill at Quinebaug Village, then you came down the stream to the shop of Westville. There used to be a big water privilege there; I think it was a woolen mill; they were burned down and were never rebuilt. I remember as a boy, George W. Wells told me that dam should be rebuilt; I remember 32 feet of fall there; then you come to the Shuttle shop, and below, then Shuttle shop was first a print shop and then a big mill, then the new mill where the Knife shop now is, on down to Central Mills, and between the new mill and the Central Mills there was another dam at one time. After you got down to the Central Mills, they took care of the factories where our factories now stand. There were at least 4 different factories drawing water from the canal; it has long since been built up.

The Columbia privilege where Lensdale is – the original dam was about opposite the west end of the big cement building and the Company built a new dam by the present power house, etc. I can well remember when that dam was built. They cut through the dam and put in what we boys called "the laundry wheels." There were 2 sets of wheels there. I can't follow this stream down very far, but of course, we all remember the (*blanked out*) privilege, the (*blanked out*) privilege, the Quinebaug privilege, etc.

As a family, we are tremendously interested because we have spent a good part of our lives at Walker Pond, and Walker Pond was one of the sources of the Quinebaug River on which one of the reservoirs was located, to hold water back to be used in Southbridge.

Above Walker Pond, there was a little dam; whether the water was ever used for the purpose of power, I do not remember, and I do not remember whether there were any mill privileges below Walker Pond to the Kit shop. I remember when I was a very small boy, George W. Wells pointing it out to me and asking me if I knew what the

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Kit shop was; I didn't, but in the Museum we have some of the tools that were used for cutting out leather, etc. The Kit shop was where the tools were made and assembled to be sold to shoemakers all over the country.

The little pond that supplies the water to the Kit shop was called Pistol Pond. There were two, one on each side of the road, and one dam took care of the whole lot.

I think the Hamilton Woolen Company bought the right to flow Walker Pond. It never amounted to a great flowage, somewhere between 2 or 3 feet. I can well remember the old dam and the plank spillway, and this was replaced not too many years ago by the Hamilton Woolen Company with an immense dam so they could draw water when they required it.

### Walker Pond

There's no doubt but that a lot of the history of Quinebaug Valley, Walker Pond, etc., is in some of the old Quinebaug papers. It would be worthwhile to look them up to bring the history up-to-date or to know the story. Walker Pond was the great picnic spot or location for the town of Southbridge and Sturbridge when we were children 60 years ago, and I can well remember going there on picnics year after year. I'm not quite positive who lived in the farm looking down to the Pond. Of course, the last real occupant was a family by the name of (*blanked out*). Previous to that, it had different tenants, and my thought is that when we were boys, the farm belonged to a man by the name of Walker, but it might have been Hooker. Right here, let me say that Mrs. W. W. Crawford has a complete history of the property on the hill west of Walker Pond. You can get that together because it gives dates, etc.

Returning to the picnics – when we used to go to these church picnics, we went up in large carry-alls, and the tables were set about where George B. Wells dining camp now is located. The boats we used to row out on the pond with to go fishing, etc., were anchored at a little point of land just where you take the bridge today over to the guest cottage, from George Wells' camp.

Several years after, Elwood Sabin's father and mother took over this property; I mean the big farm house at Walker Pond. He was a great hunter; I don't know how he could ever shoot, because he couldn't ever hear anything. His dogs were trained with that knowledge and kept always in his sight and he would watch the dogs and get the birds. He built what we called the pavilion which is located very near where George Wells' dining camp now is located, and he used to give game dinners there. Sunday school picnics were still held there, and we young Wellses used to go up and spend some time with him and his wife. I remember in later years going to the house he moved to from there, which was west of Brookfield, the first farm on the right as you go through the abutment of the Southern New England Railroad. I well remember going hunting weekends with Uncle Sabe to the west of that farm, or rather to the south.

After Uncle Sabe moved away from Walker Pond, a family moved in – I'm in doubt about the name; it might have been Stockwood or something like that, but the picnic days were practically over. We were growing up and going to work then.

I can well remember when C. S. Edmonds and his family used to hire the pavilion for the summer and move up there and camp out so to speak. The pavilion had two small rooms facing east with a little chimney in between the two. Mr. and Mrs. Edmonds occupied one and their daughter, Josephine, the other. There was a big hall where they used to have dances and dinners. At the west end was a good sized kitchen and a little cubby-hole took up the balance of the ends at which they used to sell pop, dance tickets, etc. I can remember going there many times and for several years. You were always welcome for supper and they always had the same supper as far as I remember, or crackers and milk, a barrel of crackers and a big can of milk. All you were supposed to do was to wash your own dishes. Mrs. Edmonds and her daughter many times made cakes, etc.

I can well remember that if you stood on the pizza of this pavilion and looked toward where A. B. and E. B.'s house is at the present time at Walker Pond, you could see the little pines all over that piece of land, and the trees were so thick you couldn't see the ground. I remember that the two Edmonds boys, Howard and Stuart, used to camp there

somewhere after summer with a man by the name of Thompson. Of course, we used to go over there and visit them and call upon them. They were back and forth over to the pavilion.

About 1892, it might have been in '91, Mr. Edmonds made up his mind he'd like to buy that piece of property. The property where the pavilion was couldn't be bought, for what reason I don't know, but if you bought it you'd have to buy the whole farm and that would take several thousand dollars. Mr. Edmonds didn't have any success buying this property and came to George W. Wells and asked him to come up and look over the property with him. I can remember father telling about it, not only at that time but years later, that they went up and looked over the entire property. I think the name of the owner of that property and that date which the property was purchased can be discovered. The property ran from the inlet by the guest house up by J.C.'s camp, practically to Black's Landing, and from there back to the main highway and over to the corner across the path that we come in back of George Wells' stable, and on that side of the road there was an old barn – on the other side was the cellar hole of the old farmhouse. Well, Mr. Edmonds asked father to go in with him and they decided it would be an expensive proposition, considering it meant not only buying the land but building homes; they invited Alfred Cheney to join them, and father took on the job of buying the property. He bought the 90 acres of land for \$2,000.00. That same year, he and Mr. Edmonds built their first cottages there. George W. Wells' cottage was located practically where the living room of A.B.'s house is at the present time. Mr. Edmond's house was located practically where Mrs. A.B.'s sitting room is now, and the following year, Mr. Cheney built practically in the location where our servants' rooms are at the present time. As a matter of interest, those houses cost about \$750.00 each and contained no running water and no W.C.'s; they were in outside buildings. I well remember that father's water supply was a driven well driven by man-power. Our fireless cooker was in a little shed back of the kitchen toward where the barn used to stand and used the woodshed as well.

Of course, when these houses were built, they had to build a barn, and I have seen 14 horses stabled in that barn at one time. This was very popular for camping or summer homes for these 3 men and their families, friends, etc.

I well remember that we first went there, Walker Pond, well toward the end of the season in 1892 and so did the Edmonds family. It was about this period when Owen D. Young first came into our group. I think we'd have to look up the dates, but he was going to Boston University Law School and used to come up to Sturbridge or Charlton and if no one met him, would walk over. Later he married Josephine Edmonds, and they had a large family of 5 children.

About this time, of course, the younger Wellses were at work, and we drove by horse and buggy back and forth to and from Southbridge. I do not remember where we had our dinner, but undoubtedly on Main Street. At Walker Pond, mother had one servant to help her. We used to leave pretty early in the morning around 6:00 – it took pretty nearly ½ hour to drive down over Fiske Hill, and then we'd come back after 6:00 at night, and we certainly enjoyed our summers up there hugely.

At the time of the automobile craze, I mean the bicycle craze, we had bicycles, and I know I rode back and forth 2 or 3 summers and very likely my brothers did as well.

When these cottages were built, the roofs of the cottages stood right up above the little pine trees. It doesn't seem possible, but we can well remember that that was the absolute truth. We had a very fine garden up near the stables and, of course, we had an ice house. Naturally, we went up there in the winter to fish through the ice. Of course, we'd pick out the coldest day to go; I'd been up there several times when the thermometer was below zero.

I remember, I wish we could find the date, when the Monday Club had a clam-bake at Walker Pond. The table was set in the hollow just at the south of where Ethel B. Wells' sitting room is at the present time. The clams were baked using the stones that were in the wall separating this property at that point between A.B. Well's house and C.M.'s present house. Some of the old tables or the legs of the tables are still in existence. I wish we could find those because they undoubtedly would have names written on them of those people who were there.

We spent every summer up there. The 3 boys occupied the room over the sitting room; father and mother had the room over the dining room, and our sister, Mary, a small cubby-hole which was another big room divided into two, one room for her and one for the servant over the kitchen. We had canoes and rowboats and can remember the

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building from old timbers of the old barn, the first boathouse or wharf a little to the south of George Wells' camp.

George W. Wells was continually after trimming the trees, and the reason we had such beautiful trees on this property was as a result of his persistency in trimming the trees and giving them room to grow. I remember that the trees were spindly at the south of the Edmonds' camp, but Mr. Edmonds didn't want the trees cut. The first thing we did after we bought the camp was to cut off 13 trees and after they were out, you'd never miss them. A great mistake is made in allowing trees to grow too close together – they must have breathing space.

Right here, I want to jump quite a good number of years. One Sunday sitting on our dining porch, a part of our camp which was formerly a part of the Alfred Cheney camp, we saw an old gentlemen walking out in the grove between this piazza and the stable. I recognized him as Charlie Weld, an old man over 80. I went out and he said to me, "Mr. Wells, I hope you don't mind my trespassing." "Well," I said, "I don't know who you're talking to – I used to be Albert to you and you were always Charlie to me, notwithstanding that perhaps you're old enough to be my grandfather." He laughed and said, "Well, Albert, I came up here today with one of my grandchildren because I wanted to walk over this property; here are trees 125 to 140 feet high and you will not believe me but when I was a boy, 18 or 19 years old, I well remember ploughing this very land on which we now stand and planting the same with corn." This checked because after the hurricane when these trees were cut, we counted the rings on quite a good number and the trees were anywhere from 85 to 90 years old. Charlie Weld died a few years later.

There were never many changes made in these three camps as long as the three original owners used them. Shortly after we were married, A.B. and E.B., that was in 1900, I think we occupied the Edmonds property. It still belonged to them; they were not using it and we paid something for rental. A year or two later, we purchased this camp, and at about the same time, we purchased the Alfred Cheney camp, and Mr. and Mrs. A.B. moved into the Cheney camp. Alterations then came gradually and we had many happy years in these camps.

In 1929 when A.B. was enjoying himself in the hospital in Boston at Brimmer Street and in Southbridge, the George W. Wells' camp was moved to its present location. The three buildings were too close together and A.B. had faith that he was going to be living back at Walker Pond and wanted more room. I well remember that I was staggered when I paid the bill for the moving and grading, etc. – it was something over \$6,000.00 – quite a jump in a span of years from the original cost of the camp.

If there's enough interest in the history of Walker Pond, it would not be too big a job to check up the property, the years it was bought; it might be more difficult to pick up the prices paid, but starting with 90 acres in 1892, I think the last purchase was in '41 or '42, and the land that now belongs to the Quinebaug Forestry Company surrounding Walker Pond amounts to some 1,200 odd acres. Some of it is utterly useless, but had to be bought to get property that we did want.

When we first moved to Walker Pond, the west side was all heavily wooded from directly opposite our camp way down around the island. Years later, that was cut off and Arthur Seymour bought property of about 100 acres at \$275.00. After he died, we bought the property and had to pay over \$10,000.00 for it. It's a long story, perhaps it's hardly worth recording.