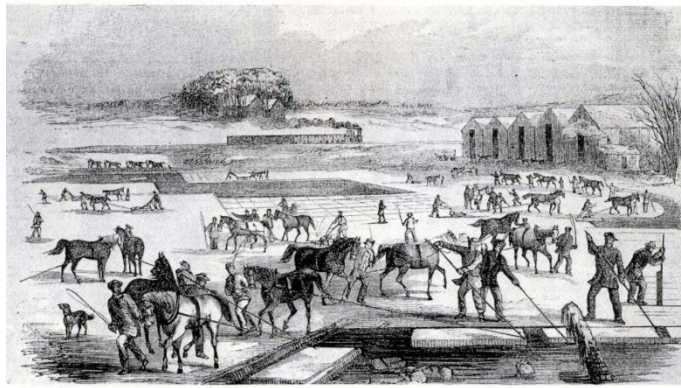




The Connecticut Ice Trade: A Look at Harvesting Ice from Hall's Pond

For a period of about 120 years, ice was harvested like a typical agricultural crop. We don't think much about the convenience of ice today. Simply grab the ice tray from the freezer or press a button on the refrigerator door and cubed ice falls into your glass. Head to almost any grocery store or gas station and you can purchase five to twenty pound bags of ice for a few dollars. Of course, it was not that simple throughout the 1800s and into the early 1900s. Before the large-scale New England ice trade, having ice for your drink on a warm day was a serious luxury. Sure, you had easy access to ice during the winter in northern US states to keep perishable food from spoiling,



Ice harvesting in Massachusetts. Early 1850s. Source: Library of Congress.

but what about during the summer? Only the wealthy of the early-mid 1800s could afford small ice houses on their property to use during the warmer months. Moreover, what if your state or country never had temperatures cold enough to make ice? A Boston industrialist named Frederic Tudor would be the first American to experiment with sending this "cash crop" overseas in 1806 (Laskowski). Ice, a ubiquitous and formerly useless byproduct of New England winter, would make many men rich. Shipping these cut blocks of ice would enable the growth of other massive American industries like meatpacking. Over the century, an increasing number of large ice houses would dot the New England landscape.

Many small companies handling local demand for ice could be found all around Connecticut. Names such as the Danbury Ice Company, Waterbury Ice Corporation, Hartford Ice Company, Allen-Beeman Company, Maher Brothers Corporation, Berkshire Ice Company, and more would regularly appear in the *Cold Storage and Ice Trade Journal*, a periodical covering the industry across the United States in the early 20th century (1905, 1909). Some companies found greater success, expanded their ice harvesting to ponds around the state, and stayed in business for decades. Connecticut's ice firms served more than just their own state - with ice heading to surrounding markets in Boston, New York, the southern United States, and even as far as India (Ambery).

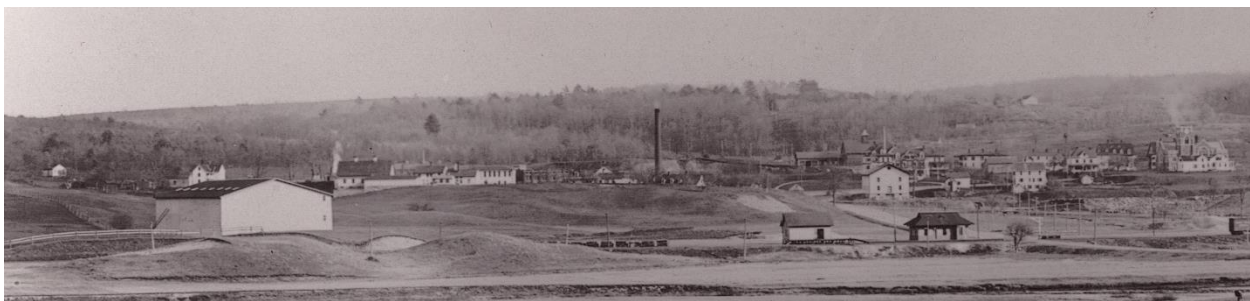
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In the Eastern half of Connecticut, Perry was a prominent name in the ice trade. Walter R. Perry was born in South Windham, Connecticut in 1848. After spending some years in both the locksmith and hardware business, he started the Perry Ice Company in New London during the late 1880s (*Ice Trade Journal*, March 1905). He purchased land and created a pond for ice harvesting. He found success rather quickly and sought to expand his company's production capabilities. This involved scouting towns for water sources while navigating ownership and property rights. In 1896, Perry became interested in Hall's Pond, also called Lake Beauty, located in Willington, CT. It takes almost an hour to travel from New London to Willington by car today, demonstrating that Perry's operations had expanded substantially or that Hall's Pond showed significant profitability in ice production. The pond was used to power the adjacent Gardiner Hall Jr. Company thread mill which had been operating continuously since 1862. The location also benefited from a nearby railroad station in South Willington to transport the ice blocks. Ice was already being harvested by the Gardiner Hall Jr. Company for personal and local use by the time of Perry's first visit in 1896. In February of that year, W. R. Perry, referred to as an "extensive ice dealer of New London" by a Stafford newspaper, had a team of workers harvest his initial crop of ice from the pond (*The Press*, February 20, 1896). Six train cars were filled with ice and sent back to New London. Perry reportedly believed the ice to be of high quality so as the weather became warmer, the Perry Ice Company began negotiations with Gardiner Hall Jr. for privileges to continue harvesting on the pond in the next winter season. The details for this more permanent operation were worked out between the two parties by September of 1896 and work on a new ice house began. The building would be 10,000 square feet with a capacity for 6,000 tons of ice. The design consisted of a barn-like storehouse inside a larger building. The space in between would be filled with sawdust as an insulator. Ice could last for months when stored this way. It was decided



Men using pikes to move ice on Hall's Pond. Circa 1910-1920. Courtesy of Joe Froehlich.

Looking East at the mill village of South Willington. The large, white building on the left is Perry's ice house. The small building in the foreground on the right is the South Willington railroad station. 1910s. Courtesy of Tyler Hall.



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that the ice house would sit around 150 feet from the railroad track in South Willington with a short piece of track leading to the ice house for easy loading of train cars. However, being so close to the track put it over a quarter-mile away from Hall's Pond (*The Press*, October 01, 1896). The solution to covering this distance would be the construction of a steam-powered ice chute spanning over 2,700 feet. Gardiner Hall Jr. would order the construction of the ingenious conveyor belt and it was ready for its first ice harvest in February of 1897 (Symonds 16; *The Press*, February).

Ice on Hall's Pond could get quite thick. Upwards of 22 inches thick in some cases (*Norwich Bulletin*, January 24, 1918). The Perry Ice Company generally desired a minimum ice thickness of 9 to 10 inches, which seems to have been easily met during operating years in Willington. As you can imagine, the process of harvesting the ice was labor intensive. Men from



Mr. Comstock, a partner of the Perry Ice Company, overlooks the ice chute in Willington. The ice house can be seen behind him. ~1926. Courtesy of Joe Froehlich.



Another view of the conveyor belt / ice chute with blocks of ice moving towards Perry's ice house. ~1926. Courtesy of Joe Froehlich.

Willington's industries would assist with the seasonal work; some employees traveled from Stafford and Eagleville for the job (*The Press*, February 10, 1915). The process of harvesting ice begins by marking a grid into the surface of an area of ice on the pond. This was done by manpower alone in the early days of the ice trade. By the time of Perry's operation in Willington, teams of horses would pull large, weighted rakes across the surface, cutting straight lines into the ice sheet to a desired measurement. Next, groups of men would follow with large ice saws and cut through the previously marked grooves, creating smaller square blocks or "floats." These blocks were then further cut down into "cakes." The ice cakes typically measured 22 x 32 inches and weighed 300 pounds (Demers 221). After being cut free, the cakes were floated to the ice chute on the edge of the pond and hoisted out of the water using ice hooks and pikes. They were then placed onto the ice chute to be sent to the ice house. The chute could deliver an impressive 25 to 30 cakes per minute to Perry's ice house (Demers 220). Once the ice house was full, the product could be taken from storage and loaded onto train cars to New London where the Perry Ice Company was

located. One of the major customers for this ice was the New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad Company. Most likely to be used in luxurious parlor cars (Symonds).

Walter Perry would pass away in 1905. At the time of his death, he was serving as secretary of the Connecticut Ice Dealer's Association; a statewide association he helped found in 1889. By

this point, the Perry Ice Company was known as one of the largest handlers of ice in the state and continued under new leadership. The company had also bought out its major New London competitors by the early 1900s and expanded into Massachusetts (*Ice Trade Journal*, March 1905). However, the natural ice trade was declining overall. Plant ice, made artificially in chilled facilities, was becoming increasingly more common. By 1914, plant ice production had permanently surpassed natural ice. The industry



Man using a pike to move an ice float on Hall's Pond in South Willington, Circa 1900. Source: Gardiner Hall Jr. History Museum.

as a whole was shifting towards artificial production. The first electric refrigerator for the home would be invented in 1913 and enter mass production by 1918 (Energy.gov). That isn't to say that natural ice harvesting stopped altogether immediately. Newspaper articles discussed the ice harvest on Hall's Pond in Willington going on at least into 1922 (*The Press*, January 26, 1922). In other areas of Connecticut like Bridgeport, natural harvesting continued until 1939, though it was very dated practice by then (Bridgeport History Center). In time, the large ice houses that used to be a common industrial sight in Connecticut began to be taken down or fell into disrepair from sitting vacant. None of them still exist in the state. The tools of the trade are still around in other capacities. Some examples of the original ice harvesting tools used on Hall's Pond, such as an ice pike featured in some of these accompanying photos, can be seen at the Gardiner Hall Jr. History Museum. Today, the harvesting of natural ice is now performed for educational purposes, as a novelty, or tradition in some communities.

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The Gardiner Hall Jr Museum is open to the public Saturdays from 10:00am to 12:00pm. For more information, please call 518-791-9474.

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