

The History of Keech Pond in Glocester, Rhode Island

by *Barbara Westcott*, 1999

Originally the land under what is now Keech Pond in Glocester, RI was meadowland where Indians often camped and fished. Three large brooks, Saunders Brook, Peckham Brook and Fenner Brook (named in the 1800s or earlier, after the owners of the land where the brooks originated) plus several lesser streams, wandered down from the surrounding higher terrain; met, and became one large brook, at a point not too far out in the water from the center of the present dam. Water from these brooks flowed toward Chepachet, RI into the Chepachet River downstream, through Mapleville, Oakland, Glendale, Nasonville, etc. and eventually past the Slater Mill in Pawtucket, and into Narragansett Bay.

Much of this land surrounding the three brooks was included in the original parcel of land granted to Jeremiah Keech by King Charles of England during the 1600s, and was known as the Jeremiah Keech farm. Jeremiah Keech eventually parceled off his land to various sons. In 1801, a Jeremiah Keech (probably the grandson of the original Jeremiah) deeded to his son, Stephen Keech, the parcel which included the area where the three brooks converged and ran towards Chepachet. (The grave of a Captain Stephen Keech, a veteran of the Revolutionary War in 1776, is located not far from the present dam.)

Stephen Keech probably dammed up the brook enough to harness the water for operating a sawmill there. Whether Jeremiah Keech or his immediate descendants had previously used the water for any such purpose is not known.

In 1836, Stephen Keech deeded land and flowage rights to five persons who operated various mills and businesses downstream that required the use of water: Henry B. Lyman (2/3 share), Pardon Hunt, Samuel Hunt, Jenckes Brown, and Scott W. Mowry (1/3 share), for the purpose of "building a dam..... making the water in the flume as it is now near to the gate 7' 3", same to be used as a reservoir to run of mills in Chepachet".

The old records list a sawmill, blacksmith shop, cotton mill, cabinet shop, grist mill, woolen mill, all or most requiring water to operate. Owners of the water rights changed over the years as the businesses changed hands, and rights were deeded along with the property.

In 1847, H.B. Lyman and Samuel Hunt obtained rights to flow a portion of his land (but not the land itself) from John Peckham, who probably was already operating the Peckham sawmill by using the water from the Peckham Brook, upstream from Stephen Keech.

Before long, Daniel Whipple, who ran a mill in Mapleville, bought part of the water rights. In 1852, an agreement was signed by H. B. Lyman & Co. (2/5), Samuel Hunt (1/5) and Daniel Whipple (2/5) which reads in part, "agree to raise the dam belonging to them 4 feet for the purpose of enlarging their milts on the Chepachet River. And they further agree to draw the water of said Reservoir during the dry season of each year in such a graduated stream as in their judgment would draw it all down to the best

advantage of said mills before the autumnal rains. And for that purpose to commence the first year by drawing from said Reservoir a stream sufficient to operate 46 looms 1 yard wide in said Hunt's mill. And in case said stream should be found so large as to exhaust said Reservoir before the time mentioned, then the stream or quantity drawn to be reduced as to hold out through the dry season....." "They further agree that they will pay the expenses of building or raising said dam, of keeping the same in repair at all times, and of paying all charges for any flowage of lands caused thereby, or any other expenses or damage attending the erection or keeping up of said dam, also and attending the gates of said pond...."

Between 1850 and 1860 the above owners of water rights or their successors, all of whom may not be mentioned here, purchased enough of the land of the property owners surrounding Keech Pond to raise the dam in accordance with the above Lyman/Hunt/Whipple agreement. Lucy Keech(widow of Nicholas Keech, a son or grandson of Jeremiah Keech) Jonathan Wade, Obadiah Winsor, Silas Steere, in addition to Stephen Keech and John Peckham, were all involved. A roadway ran across the top of the dam, connecting Chestnut Hill Road and Chopmist Hill Road.

From 1848 through the 1850s, these same mill owners also purchased land necessary to create Smith and Sayles Reservoir (also called Sand dam Pond) downstream from Keech Pond and nearer Chepachet, Since this article is primarily about Keech Pond, no details regarding this reservoir are given. Other agreements among mill owners mentioned above probably also applied in the same proportion as Keech Pond.

The mills in Chepachet and Mapleville continued to operate through the 1870s and into the early 1900s. The owners' names and the nature of their businesses changed somewhat, but the water rights remained in effect, and the mills continued to use the water for power.

Sometime prior to 1874, William Legg had purchased one of the Daniel Whipple 1/5 water rights. In 1895 this was taxed to the Heirs of Betsy Legg (William Legg's widow). Taxes were paid by them until 1927, after which time they were delinquent. In the 1950s the Town of Gloucester removed the 1/5 from their tax rolls as no longer in existence.

By 1899 the second Daniel Whipple 1/5 water rights had been picked up at a tax sale for \$2.84 by George Burlingame, a local town official. By 1950 this was owned by his daughter Lena Capwell.

In 1887 Henry C. White owned the Lyman mill and 3/5 of the water rights to Keech Pond. By 1906 the mill was taxed to William Prendergast, but Walter M. Olney owned the 3/5 water rights. Walter M. Olney died in 1925, leaving the 3/5 to his nephew, Walter M. Olney Steere, who was a child at that time.

Electricity arrived in the area at some point during the 1920s. Its use by the mills for operating looms and other machinery probably began part time, when the water flow had slowed down in the dry season. Gradually, electric power became more generally used, so water power became less important, and finally was not used at all. Some of the mills eventually went out of business, some hung on longer. By 1950 no business in Chepachet or downstream drew on the water from Keech Pond. Whether any of them used the water as it passed their premises is not known.

In 1927, the spring rains were so severe that there were flooding conditions throughout the area. Because of this, a section at the middle of Keech Pond dam was blown up with dynamite to relieve the pressure on the dam. It was feared that if the whole dam gave way the whole of Chepachet and other villages downstream would be completely flooded out. Since Walter M. Olney was no longer living, it is not known who was responsible for the dynamiting.

As a result, most of the water drained out, leaving the deepest water in front of the dam only about 6 feet deep, quickly tapering back to marshland. The breach in the dam was 12-15 feet wide, The dam lay open down to the old pipe under the dam, which remained in place, allowing water to drain from Keech to Sand dam (Smith & Sayles) Pond. Between 1927 and 1950, the pond remained at this low level. An occasional fisherman fished off the old dam, but it was primarily completely deserted.

In 1949 Robert J. Westcott and his wife, Barbara, bought the old Nicholas Keech farm, which had frontage on Keech Pond. In 1950 Westcott purchased one of Daniel Whipple 1/5 water rights from Lena Capwell (see above). In turn, he sold 1/2 of his 1/5 to Lester W. Ebbets, who by now owned the old Obadiah Winsor farm abutting the pond. Ebbets also had obtained an agreement to sell property for Norbert Bouchard, by then the owner of the old Silas Steere farm, also abutting Keech Pond.

As part of his 3/5 water rights, Walter M. O. Steere also inherited from Walter M. Oiney the unflooded portion of the Stephen Keech land with frontage on Keech Pond.

Steere, Ebbets, and Westcott entered into an agreement in 1950 to rebuild Keech Pond dam for the purpose of reflooding the pond, and developing their properties for the sale of summer home sites. At that time there was no house or building on or immediately near the pond. The Steere land became Chepachet Beach, accessible from Chopmist Hill Road. The Bouchard property was named Cherry Valley Beach with the entrance road off of Snake Hill Road. Ebbets' parcel was called Sunrise Gardens and connected with Chestnut Hill Road. The Westcott land became known as Westcott Beach entering from Chestnut Hill Road.

All the properties involved, and the complete pond bed had to be surveyed, a new dam designed and built, approximately 6 miles of roads had to be laid out and built, beaches for the owners of back lots set aside, plats drawn up and accepted by the Town Council. The woods were so dense that the surveyors frequently had to climb trees in order to locate the shoreline of the old pond.

Surveyor Lance Hall did most of the surveying. (Surveyor Lance Hall and his father Willard Hall reported discovering many Indian arrowheads on the floor of the drained pond bed in the 1930s.) Joseph Estes, an engineer from Harrisville, drew up plans for the dam. At that time, the Division of Harbors and Rivers, part of the agency now call the Department of Environmental Management (DEM) required that plans for any dam in the state be approved by their engineer, Joseph Kiley. He reviewed Joseph Estes' plans, and with few revisions, approved them. Since the volume of available water averaged yearly about 1 million gallons per day, these plans were crucial.

The old pond bed, having stayed untouched since 1927, had grown back to heavy brush and many good-sized trees. The old spillway was choked with growth. All this had to be cleared, the brush burned in huge bonfires on the pond bed. Then the pond

bed had to be bulldozed clean; and the old spillway cleared, to finish the preparation work. Walter Steere did the bulldozing.

The dam itself was built to Joseph Estes' specifications by Raymond Bergesson of Woonsocket. No written contract for this job was ever signed. It was an oral agreement sealed with a handshake. His men began in the early spring of 1951. The old dam had large and small trees with many roots and brush growing on top and the sides. All the old earth had to be removed, and replaced, after the stumps, roots, and other debris had been screened out. For extra strength, the center of the new dam had a horizontal wooden core about 25 feet wide of 18 foot tongue-in-groove boards sunk upright into the core of the dam. A concrete draw-off box was installed on the face of the dam, with 6 inch oak planks that slipped into the front slats. These flashboards controlled the level of the water by removing and replacing the boards as needed. In the rainy season any excess water ran off thru the spillway at one end of the dam. The new dam measured about 600-700 feet long, creating a body of water approximately one mile long and up to 20 feet deep. The top of the dam was wide enough for a foot path. The water quality was and remains very high.

The last bit of stone rip-rapping was laid on the face of the dam just ahead of the unusually heavy 1951 fall rains, which rapidly refilled the pond and crept up the front of the dam with remarkable speed, just behind the men installing the last stonework.

Some of the lots were sold as early as 1951, even before the dam was rebuilt. From then on, people began to buy and build summer homes there. As the years passed most of the houses have converted to year-round residences.

Steere, Ebbets and Westcott, acting as the SEW Association, had for about twenty-five years managed the upkeep of the dam, the pond, the private beaches, the roads (around the 1960s the Town of Gloucester agreed to take over maintenance of the roads), and collected dues from property owners to maintain the dam and pond; after which they decided that some more permanent method of operating Keech Pond should be set up. In the 1970s they drew up an agreement to deed the dam, the pond, the roads, the private beaches, the water rights, and their land under the pond to a new organization of Keech Pond property owners, set up specifically to carry on the long-term management, regulation, control, and responsibility for all of the above. This group was incorporated about 1975 as the Property Owners Association of Keech Pond. This organization has an elected slate of officers, and a board of directors. They hold an annual meeting of all property owners.

This Association has continued to be the operating body of the pond. It has made improvements and properly maintained the dam.

In the 1990s the Association replaced the original flashboard system of controlling the level of the water with a more up-to-date 1 1/2 inch steel plate in the front of the draw-off box, with a 20-inch flip valve (or butterfly valve) at the bottom of the draw-off box, which is controlled by a screw at the top.

By 1999 there were several hundred houses on or near Keech Pond, most of them now year-round residences. The area is enjoyed in all seasons for fishing, boating, swimming, ice skating, ice hockey, cross country skiing, walking and biking by residents, their families and friends.

<u>-- Keech Pond --</u>	<u>--- Summary of Ownership and Water Rights ---</u>
King Charles of England 1600	Granted Jeremiah Keech original parcel of Land of the Keech Pond area.
Jeremiah Keech 1801	Jeremiah Keech Farm - Jeremiah Keech Probably the grandson of the original Jeremiah Keech deeded to Stephen Keech
Stephen Keech 1836 ^ (Captain of 1776 Revolutionary war)	Gave Water Rights to: 2/3 = Henry B Lyman 1/3 = Pardon Hunt Samuel Hunt Jenckes Brown Scott W. Mowry
1847	Obtain flow rights From John Peckham 2/3 = Henry B Lyman Co. (H.B. Lyman & Otis Sayles) 1/3 = Samuel Hunt
1852 Created the Lyman/Hunt/Whipple Agreement	Water Rights was purchased from Henry B. Lyman 2/5 = Daniel Whipple - Purchased rights from Henry B Lyman 2/5 = Henry B Lyman & Co. 1/5 = Samuel Hunt
Prior to 1874	1/5 = William Legg - Purchased rights from Daniel Whipple 1/5 = Daniel Whipple 2/5 = Henry B Lyman & Co 1/5 = Samuel Hunt
1927	1/5 = William Legg - Heirs of Betsy Legg widow of William Legg went delinquent on taxes
1899 1887	1/5 = George Burlingame Purchased tax sale of Daniel Whipple 3/5 = Henry C. White from Samuel Hunt & Henry B Lyman Co
1906	1/5 = Heirs of Betsy Legg widow of William Legg went delinquent on taxes in 1927 1/5 = George Burlingame Purchased tax sale of Daniel Whipple 3/5 = Walter M Olney from Henry C. White
1925	1/5 = Heirs of Betsy Legg widow of William Legg went delinquent on taxes in 1927 1/5 = Lena Capwell daughter - George Burlingame Inherited. 3/5 = Walter M. O. Steere Nephew - Walter M Oiney Inherited.
	1/5 = out of Existence per town (Legg's tax delinquent) 1950 1/5 = Lena F Capwell daughter - George Burlingame Inherited. 3/5 = Walter M. O. Steere Nephew - Walter M Oiney Inherited.

11/17/1950	3/5 = Walter M. O. Steere 1/5 = Robert J Wescott from Lena F Capwell 1/5 = out of Existence per town (Legg's tax delinquent) 1950
	In 1927 Dam was Blown and In 1951 was rebuilt.
12/8/1952	3/5 = Walter M. O. Steere 1/10 = Lester Ebbets - received 1/2 from Robert J Wescott 1/10 = Robert J Wescott
12/8/1952	All Water rights now belong to S.E.W.
Around 1951 Land owned With flowage rights.	Robert J Wescott , Nicholas Keech Farm. 1/10 Lester Ebbets , Ohadah winsor Farm, Sold land for Norbet 1/10 Norbet Bouchard, Silas Steere Farm Walter M. O. Steere 3/5
12/10/1970	All water rights and common property was transferred by 12/10/1970 from S.E.W. to the Property Owners of Keech Pond
9/13/1971	Change of Officers. The Property Owners' Association of Keech Pond, Inc. Nominations of new officers and the resignations of the old S.E.W. officers.