

SOUTHWICK'S PLAYGROUND

For untold centuries the Congamond Lakes lay quiet and serene. Native Americans paddled and fished in them, hunted and camped on their banks. But nothing changed. Follow the time line given below and trace the explosive utilization of the lakes.

- 1828 The Farmington Canal passes through Congamond Lakes on its way to Westfield.
- 1855 The New Haven and Northampton Railroad arrives in Southwick. Its path largely follows the course of the canal which had closed in 1847.
- 1860-1870 Abell's Picnic Grove opens on Point Grove Road on a rise of ground where the canal passed from the middle pond into the north pond. Home-built rowboats were offered for rent. At this time there were no houses or cottages around the lakes.
- 1879 The Berkshire Ice Company buys Congamond canal property owned by the railroad and establishes an ice harvesting operation which lasted into the late 1920's.

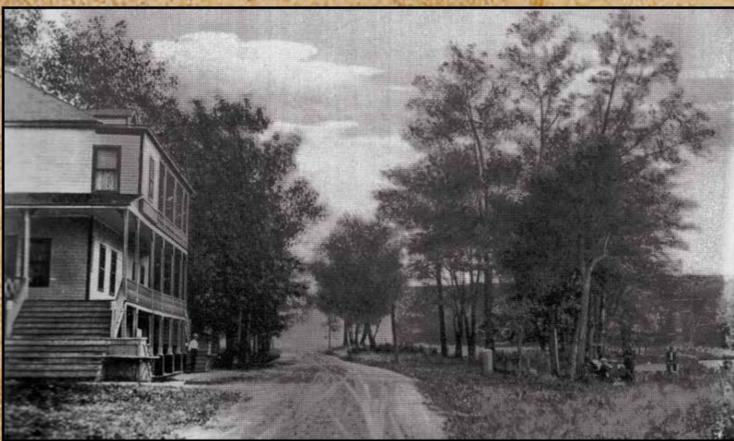
By the time the "Gay 90's era (late 1800's) arrived, Congamond Lakes had become a major recreation destination for the interior New England region. Literally thousands of people per day arrived in passenger trains at the Congamond Depot to enjoy the camping, picnicking, swimming, amusement parks, hotels, and steamboat rides that the enterprising Southwick residents had developed. This business and entertainment boom lasted through the "Roaring 20's" (1920 decade). The photographs and captions below will give you an idea of the magnitude of the entertainment and accommodations that became available.



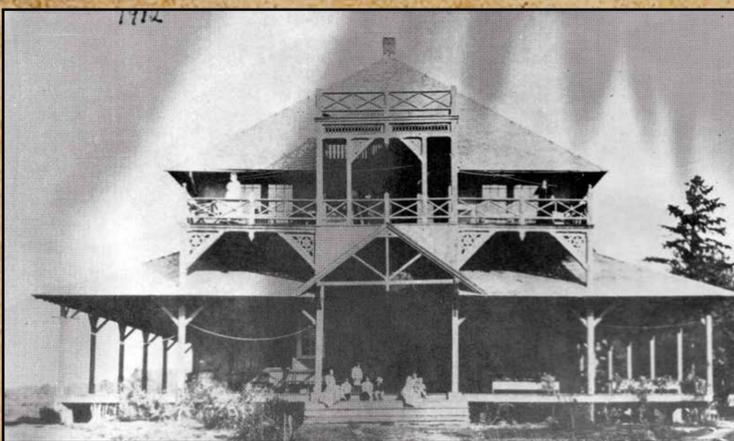
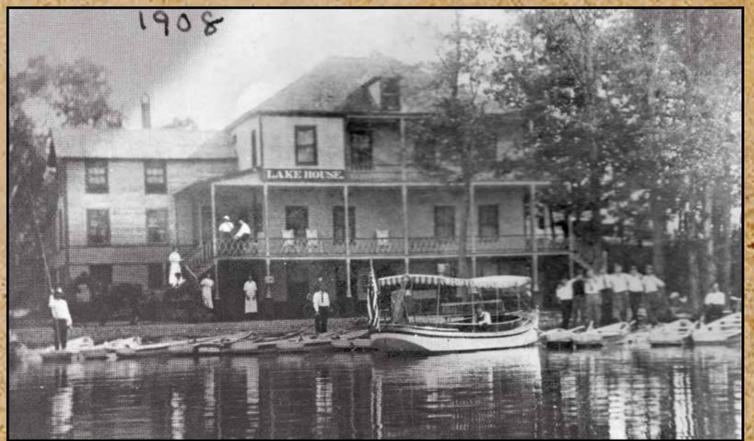
The Congamond Rail Station is shown in the L.J. Richards map of 1894, as being located about one-half mile north of Lake Road (now called Congamond Road). A long siding could accommodate 50 rail cars at a time to take patrons back to the cities after a day's outing at the lakes.



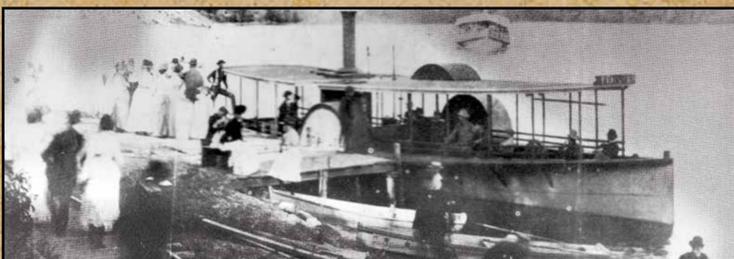
The Saunders Boat Livery is the oldest family-owned business in Southwick. Established in 1878, it is still operated by the Saunders family. The business complex is located on Congamond Road a few hundred feet east of the rail trail.



The Lake House, built in the late 1800's, was a popular hotel until it burned in 1925. It was located on South Pond, directly across the road from Saunders Boat Livery. The building started with one story but as business grew additional stories were added. Side and rear views are shown. In the left photo note Lake (Congamond) Road in the center and the Crystal ice house in the right background.



The Pavilion, built in 1887, accommodated picnickers and had a spiral staircase that lead to an observation deck that afforded a view of the lakes. The Railroad Hotel was located to the south of the pavilion. These facilities were on top of the rise behind the rail station. Concessions selling popcorn, ice cream, soda pop, and novelties were located nearby.



Above: A fleet of large side paddle steamboats was introduced to the lakes in 1875. The "Morning Star" and the "Josephine", shown here, were the first. These boats carried over 100 passengers up and down the 2-mile middle pond for \$.25 a head. They operated from a pier in front of the Pavilion and transported patrons to other venues on the lake.

Right: When the novelty of the large steamboats waned in 1900, they were beached, allowed to rot away, and eventually sank into the lake. The large steam boats were replaced by smaller motor launches.



During the period 1875-1890, huge regattas were held in which college rowing teams came to Congamond to challenge each other and the locals. There were also balloon ascents. Between 2 and 5 thousand people would attend these events, arriving by train or horse and buggy.

Imagine the noise, crowding, and excitement that were generated during this time! Then add to it the busy ice harvesting business that operated concurrently on the same real estate. In peak summer vacation months (peak ice consumption time) there were 60 to 90 railcars a day, six days a week, of ice being loaded and shipped to the cities south of the lakes. Also include the arrival of six passenger and four freight trains each day!

Enjoy your tranquil visit to this rail trail full of history.