

Blue Hills History 4 – The AMC Cabins at Ponkapoag Pond

HISTORY OF THE AMC PONKAPOAG CAMPS

Some excerpts about the creation of the AMC Cabins, from an article written by: By Howard S. Whitley, which is on the Ponkapoag Camp website. Full article at: (<https://ponkapoagcamp.org/history/>) With additional notes and pictures added for your enjoyment.

“If the members of the AMC had come to Ponkapoag immediately upon the retreat of the glacier, they would have seen the pond at twice its present size, and in a terrain bleak and desolate. By waiting, they gave the trees a chance to grow oak and pine and flowering dogwood; and what they lost of the pond they gained in a marsh dear to the hearts of bird lovers, botanists, and naturalists generally. They waited patiently until the close of World War I.

With the end of that war came a period of restlessness. To both military and civilian, life had begun getting stuffy. People were tired of restriction and regimentation, of crowded trains and restaurants, of planned entertainment and spectator sports, of waiting in line and being told what to do. They wanted to be where they could do as they pleased, where each could go his own gait and wander as he chose. Some sought freedom on the hills, in the woods, or by the lonely dunes.

The members of the AMC were casting about new sites on which to pitch their tents. For nearly two decades they had maintained a camp at Three Mile Island with swimming, canoeing and tennis close at hand and hills not far away. Now, unsatisfied, they were establishing two new camps, one at Cold River in 1919 and one at Echo Lake in 1922. In the meantime, they were aware of the need of a camp near Boston, a camp which could serve them summer and winter and which would be accessible not only to a limited group, but to the entire membership. The widespread demand for a camp within commuting distance of Boston prompted the Council, in June of 1920, to send out a questionnaire asking for suggestions.

President Kelsey, at a corporate meeting held in January 12, 1921, commented on the favorable response to this questionnaire and on the number of additional pleas for such a camp. He suggested that the proposed camp “should be in the wilds, on water, and should provide boating, fishing, snow shoeing and all similar outdoor recreation.” In the following April he appointed a “committee on Camp near Boston: Mr. Fred Tucker, Chairman Messrs. Harland A. Perkins and William F. Rodgers.”

The Members of this Committee had started work even before their appointment. Various sites, including beaches on the south Shore and a wooded spot on the Ipswich River, were considered by them; but all these sites were found unsuitable.

One day Mr. Will Rodgers was driving along Randolph Street, just south of Ponkapoag Pond. He gazed from time to time at Great Blue Hill with its observatory tower, and at its image mirrored

in the water. Suddenly the thought came to him, "This is the place." From that moment there was no longer any question where the new camp was to be.

Will Rogers called upon his friend Mr. Arthur H. Tucker of Milton and described to him the advantages of Ponkapoag as a location for the proposed camp. Mr. Tucker's family had lived for generations in Milton and had given their name to Tucker Hill. Mr. Tucker, himself, had been closely associated with Mr. Rogers in exploration and trail cutting in the Blue Hills. He had much to do with the Development of Ponkapoag, first as a volunteer helper to Mr. Rogers, and later as chairman of the committee.

Will Rodgers and Arthur Tucker, having agreed upon Ponkapoag as the most suitable locality, began prospecting for a campsite. Tramping in along an old cart path that has since been made into the present motor road, they selected the high knolls at the eastern end of the pond as the most suitable spot. This land, even then, was part of the Blue Hills Reservation, and negotiations were begun at once with the Metropolitan District Commission for the privilege of establishing an AMC camp there. A report of the committee, published in the Bulletin for May 1921, the Secretary of the Metropolitan District Commission issued a formal document granting "the Appalachian Mountain Club permission to use a portion of the Blue Hills Reservation on the northeast side of Ponkapoag Pond for the use of members of the club and their guests"

The June, 1921, Bulletin carried the following announcement:

"There is a strong demand for an A.M.C. weekend camp near Boston. What seems a very satisfactory site on Ponkapoag Pond, Blue Hills Reservation, has been offered the Club by the Park Commissioners with free use of the land. This is a wild spot, little visited, with good tramping country all about, and has the advantage of being protected by the Park police"

This announcement then discussed the problem of financing the new camp, and suggested the purchase by members of shares at ten dollars each in return for the privilege of putting up their tents on private sites.

The Ponkapoag group began to lie out the camp. Their first problem was the transportation of equipment, for the only road to the campsite was an almost impassable cart path. At the far end of the pond, however, was an excellent road, Maple Avenue, leading through the golf grounds to the water's edge. Mr. Dean Peabody remembers bringing tents over this road and ferrying them across the pond in rowboats. It was a good fellowship, everyone helping everyone else to clear tent sites, set up board floors, cut kindling wood, carry water, cook meals, and do all the odd jobs familiar to August Campers. The main building was erected in portable sections by the E.F. Hodgson Company.

The Camp, thus established in July, 1921, is described in the December issue of Appalachia, 1922, as consisting of the main building and twenty-nine tents, six of which were owned by the Club and the remainder by individual members. The resident caretakers, Mr. and Mrs. L.A. Springer, served meals on the porch of the main building. Two rowboats were available for the

use of the members; there was also a pier and sandy beach for bathing. During the four months that the camp had been open, there had been eleven hundred registrations.

Until Captain Joseph P.F. Rooney of the Park Administration directed the rebuilding of the old cart path, in August of 1922, to make the present motor road into Camp, members had to park their cars near Houghton Pond and walk in over the wagon track; or else they had to park at Mr. Bowley's on High Street, a mile or so south of Blue Hill River Road, and walk in over a large tract of land owned by Mr. Ellerton James.

The many visitors who did not come by car took the Brockton trolley at Mattapan Square, got out at High Street, and walked along the new Blue Hill River Road and thence by trail into Camp. To shorten the traveling time for these people, Fred Tucker, in the early part of 1923, presented the Camp with a new ten-passenger auto bus. The installation of a telephone at Camp enabled pedestrians to call the camp manager in advance and arrange for transportation directly to into Camp. This bus was used until it became practically unserviceable; it was sold in 1929. By that time the increasing use of private cars and laying out of a new foot trail had rendered it unnecessary.

This new trail was the work of George M. Smith and it is known in his honor as the Blue Smith Trail. It is the most direct and also the most picturesque path into Camp from Randolph Avenue bus line. Since Mr. Smith had planned this path for the use of A.M.C. members, purposely refrained from marking the entrance conspicuously enough to attract the general public. It can be found, however, by anyone who looks for it, leading from the west side of High Street just behind Howard Johnson's. It is linked by a connecting trail, also made by Mr. Smith, to the Fern Spring Trail in the Blue Hills.

[Note - This trail, the remaining portion now just called "Smith Trail" on the DCR map, was cut off from the cabins by the construction of Rt. 24. Also note that back then 'New' 128 and related cloverleafs had not been built, so the whole street layout was different:

Pre-construction of Smith Trail:



And Now:





Internet says this was the Randolph Howard Johnson ice cream stand c. 1932. I can't confirm exactly where it was, (however it sounds like the west side of Randolph Ave, south of Blue Hill River Road.) But as noted above the whole area has changed. The Ho-Jos was in the way of the new 128/RT. 28 cloverleaf... so it's long gone. – BV Now back to the story...]

Ponkapoag was still, so far as living quarters were concerned, a tent colony. The main building served as a meeting place and refuge for out of season activities. Dances and skating parties were held there, and groups would gather by outdoor fires in the evening. It was recognized from the beginning, however, that suitable winter housing would be necessary if Ponkapoag were to serve its purpose as an all year camp. With this end in view, Will Rogers got busy and set his fellow members an example. An experienced woodsman, he selected the sound timber from chestnut trees that had been killed by the blight and built a log cabin for himself. The North Cabin, built for the Camp Master's living quarters, and the South Cabin "to be used for social gatherings," both built of chestnut logs, are also mentioned in the Annual Report for 1926. Russ Palmer and Bob Clough announced a housewarming for February 5, 1928, to celebrate the opening of their new cabin, with coffee, doughnuts, and hot dogs. Most of the cabins erected later were of the portable-house type.

[Note: "More than a century ago, nearly four billion American chestnut trees were growing in the eastern U.S. They were among the largest, tallest, and fastest-growing trees. The wood was rot-resistant, straight-grained, and suitable for furniture, fencing, and building. The nuts fed billions of wildlife, people and their livestock. It was almost a perfect tree, that is, until a blight fungus killed it more than a century ago. The chestnut blight has been called the greatest ecological disaster to strike the world's forests in all of history." ²]

Mr. Wallace W. Morse, in his Annual Report for 1929, states that: "this past season we have used the Bryant Cabin as well as the South Cabin for overnight use by members." Mr. Bryant had died shortly after putting up his cabin, and in his will he left the cabin to the Camp. Mr. Irving Meredith reports in 1930: "In June a new cabin was built at a cost of \$155.00, which holds four people comfortably. In the six months in which this cabin has been available it has brought in as rent \$45.50." Mr. Meredith shortly after this, erected a similar cabin for himself.

¹ <http://www.nahant.com/hojopage/a%20randolph%201933.jpg>

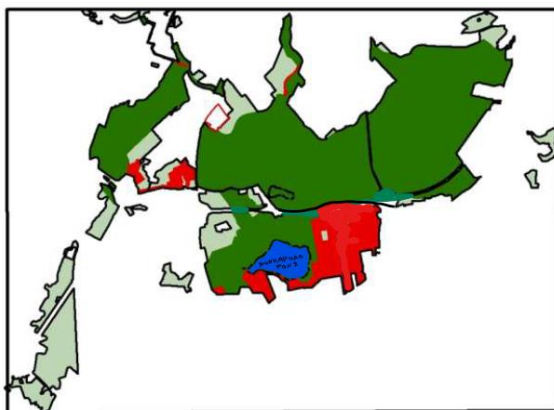
² <https://www.acf.org/the-american-chestnut/history-american-chestnut/>

Gradually, over a period of years, all the tents were replaced by cabins until there are now, in addition to the main building, twenty three cabins owned by members and six cabins held by the Club for the use of members at a nominal rent.

At the time the A.M.C. Camp was established much of the pond shore lay within the Blue Hills Reservation. Mr. Rogers, however, was concerned by the fact that a considerable stretch along the western portion of the south shore was privately owned.

On one of his off-season visits to the pond he saw a lone skater approaching the shore, hailing the stranger, Will explained to him the desirability of having all of the land bordering the pond brought into the reservation. The skater happened to be Mr. Augustus Hemenway, owner of a parcel of land bordering the pond. As a result of Mr. Roger's eloquence, Mr. Hemenway offered not only to give his own land, assessed at \$21,500, to the Reservation, but to do his best in the way of persuading the other land owners to give theirs. Mr. Rogers, with his fellow members of the Ponkapoag Committee, then visited Mr. James Bailey of the Metropolitan District Commission to urge the acquisition for the reservation of the remaining shore frontage. Mr. Bailey told them to go ahead and do what they could do to obtain the land; the Commission would cooperate. Will Rogers, with the help of Mr. Hemenway, worked hard to carry out the project. In 1928, Will himself was appointed to the Metropolitan District Commission, and as Associate Commissioner he continued his efforts. His success is recorded in the Boston Transcript for October 31, 1934, in an article announcing that all of Ponkapoag Pond had been brought into the Reservation

“What completed the commission's link around the pond was the acquisition just announced by William F. Rogers, Associate Commissioner, of a strip on the southwest shore about 1800 feet long which constituted the waterfront of the estate owned by Mrs. Robert Saltonstall. This strip is 200 feet wide in places and is heavily wooded down to the water's edge ... Property owners around the shore have been in sympathy with the idea and have cooperated generously. Among those most helpful have been Mr. and Mrs. Robert Saltonstall , Augustus Hemenway, Jr., William Prescott Wolcott, Mrs. Ellerton James and Horatio Hathaway, who have released their possessions by gift or nominal purchase prices to complete the commission's plan.”



[Another addition:

From FBH

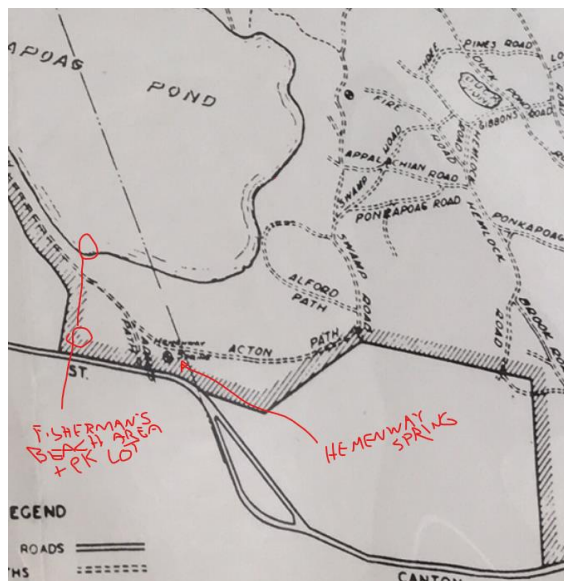
Red area shows lands added to Blue Hills 1928-1938. Note Little Blue and a section of Fowl Meadow are also included (we will come back to those sometime later), as well as the land on the southern and eastern side of Ponkapoag. The red area added includes land later taken for 'New Rt 128' and Rt. 24. The white rectangle in the red is the Duck Pond. And now back to our story again...]

With all of the shore frontage of the pond under its control the commission set about to build new paths. For this work they utilized the services of the young men of the newly formed Civilian Conservation Corps. Until now there had been no path leading all the way around the pond; such a path was completed adding connecting links between the old paths.

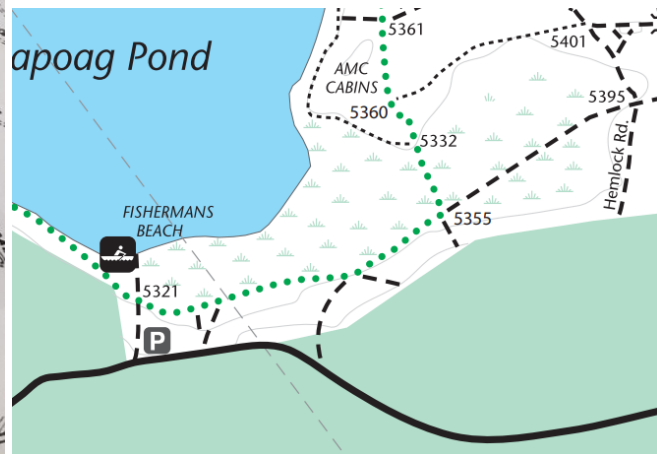
One of these links, named "Acton Path" on the Reservation map, opened up a new approach to the Camp. Less rugged than the Blue Smith Trail, it is a favorite route with snowshoes and with those who do their snowshoeing on skis. Running along the south shore of the pond, it connects the eastern end of the Maple Avenue with the southern end of Swamp Road, the latter being an extension of the only motor road into camp. The Acton Path, a woods road closed to motor vehicles, passes through a beautiful growth of mixed evergreens and under occasional arches of white birches. At a convenient resting place along this path, not far from the Camp, is a spring that has been cleaned out and walled up by the Reservation Administration. The water flowing from a pipe tinkles into a little pool; and here the walker often stops to fill his cup. This spring is designated on the Reservation map as the "Hemenway Spring" to commemorate the donor of the adjacent land.

[Another Bob map addition:

Then:



and Now:



To reach the camp by way of the Acton Path one takes the Canton or Stoughton bus to the Ponkapoag Golf Club, and walks along Maple Avenue through the golf grounds (also part of the Reservation) until he reaches the outlet of the pond, where the Acton Path begins. Here by the dam, he may pause; a mile away, due east across the pond, he can see the cabins of the A.M.C. Camp; to his left is a wide expanse of marsh and, beyond it the broken sky line of the Blue Hills.

The marsh is one of the interesting features of Ponkapoag. A half mile across, it is bounded on the west and north by the Redman Farm path, known as "Pond Bank" to the early settlers, Bordering the watery edge of the marsh are cattails, pickerel-weed, sedges, black alder, button bush, laurel, sphagnum moss, High and low bush berries, and wild cranberries; Closer to the high ground are cedar and maple swamps. Mink, muskrat, and otter make their homes in this marsh; black ducks in winter seek its all year open spring; an occasional great blue heron rises from its ready margin.

Mr. William J.V. Babcock, Professor of Biology at the Eastern Nazarene College and director of the Rover Scout Camp on the North Shore of the pond (and also a member of the A.M.C.), has been studying the marsh. At one point he determined the position of the original shore line of the pond to an accuracy of six inches. By making a series of borings through the mud, he located the original pebbly bottom; in some places, he found it fifty feet below the surface. What is now the shallow end of the pond was once the deep end.

According to Mr. Babcock, the marsh was not formed by the deposit of silt because the pond is fed mainly by springs. It has been built up, through the ages, by gradual accumulation of

organic material. Plants growing in the shallower portions of the pond die and their remains sink to the bottom, spreading, to some extent, into the adjacent deeper portions. As this material decays, the resulting bubbles of entrapped marsh gas render it buoyant and cause clumps of it to rise to the surface. These clumps, seeded by natural agencies, become floating islands of vegetation; many of them sink with the added material and repeat the process, and others attached to the edge of the marsh, extend to the shore at the expense of the pond. All this is going on now in much the same fashion as it did thousands of years ago.”

[Note: Between 1911–1923 permission was granted for the Newsboy’s Association, Boy Scouts of America, Appalachian Mountain Club, and the Young Men’s Christian Association to establish camps. The AMC and YMCA camps continue today. We’ll be back and learn about the others in the future. - BV]

[And, on the following pages some pictures of the AMC Camps, from the AMC library, thanks to Sandy Johnson.]

Until next time...

Bob Vogel



Campers 1922



Mr. Rogers Camp at Ponkapoag (1927)

Building a Cabin (1925).



Interior of New Cabin (1925)



Cabins in Winter (1926)