

# Ice Harvesting

*by Jennifer Stone Gaines*

Everybody loves ice cream in the summertime. Just look at the happy expectant faces of people in line at ice cream shops. See the contented faces of folks sitting at sidewalk tables with their ice cream. Watch children race off the beach when the ice cream truck jingles its bell.

One hundred years ago, ice cream would have been a rare and special treat. To have it at home, ice and rock salt would first have to be bought, then the laborious process of cranking the ice cream freezer would follow. Of course, the whole batch would have to be eaten right away; there were no home freezers then. One hundred years before that, ice cream would have been a great luxury available only to the very wealthy. In those days, most people kept their milk in a glazed pottery container put into a wooden bucket and lowered into a well. In winter people kept milk and meat in a "cold room."

Thanks to one Bostonian, Frederic Tudor, the idea and techniques for harvesting ice were developed in the early 1800s. In 1806, he began his scheme to sell New England ice to tropical countries. When he first attempted to sell ice from Massachusetts in Martinique, he lured people in by making ice cream for them, the first to be made in that Caribbean island. He harvested, shipped and sold ice not

only to Caribbean islands and southern cities in the United States, but also to India, on the far side of the world – months away by sailing ship. By the mid 1800s the demand for ice had spread across the eastern seaboard of the United States. Tudor had no idea that within 25 years New England cities would be demanding ice as well.

In New England, dairymen, fishmongers and butchers were the first to demand ice; householders soon followed. With the invention of the icebox (an insulated box with a compartment for ice and a compartment for meat and dairy products) in the 1860s, followed by more efficient models in the 1880s, the demand took off. By the 1890s the icebox was an important part of

most middle class kitchens.

During the many decades that people grew to depend on iceboxes in their homes, there was a steadily increasing demand for natural ice. All over New England, harvesting on local ponds became a common winter activity. Even Thoreau recorded ice harvesting on Walden Pond.

Ice harvesting became big business in northern New England and New York where ice was carried overland or down rivers to sea ports. From there it was shipped all over the world. By contrast, most ice



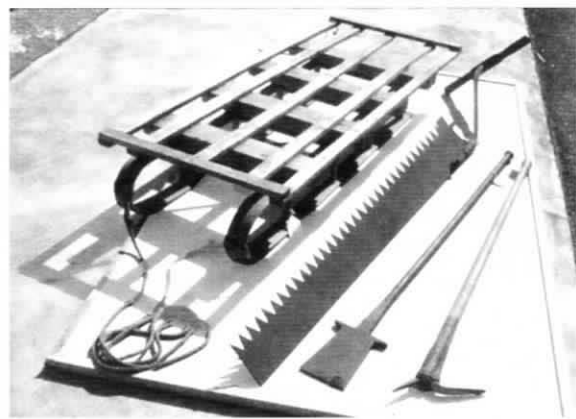
Ice Harvesting Plaque by Sarah Peters. Photograph by Jacki Forbes.



On Nobska Pond. People in background are cutting ice in front of the Fay Ice House. Photo by Sarah Bryant Fay, ca. 1899. Courtesy WHHC.

harvested in Falmouth was for use within the town. A look at a Falmouth map of 1914 shows ice houses at the edge of many local ponds: Shivericks and Weeks in the middle of Falmouth, Crockers (next to Bourne Farm) in West Falmouth, Mill Pond in East Falmouth, Bournes and Ice House in Waquoit. In North Falmouth there was ice harvesting on Trout and Flax Ponds.

Many big estates had their own ice houses. In fact, long-time local historian Clarence Anderson said, "I



Small wooden sled, ice saw, ice breaker and ice pick used for transporting blocks from frozen ponds to ice house. Photo by Paul Ferris Smith of the Woods Hole Historical Collection and Museum. Tools courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

don't know of ice houses in Falmouth prior to the coming of the wealthy summer residents building ice houses on their properties for their own use...I don't know that people used ice around here before the influx of outsiders, because everybody here salted their food, or sunk it in a dug well." The Fays had an ice house on the shore of Nobska Pond, which is still standing. The Emmons house on Mill Road had its own ice house. There is rumor of the Beebes having an ice house at the edge of the Punch Bowl, though there is no clear evidence. Pete Swain remembered being hired to help tear down the ice house on the Grasmere estate on the shore of the pond behind the present Coonamessett Inn when he was a teenager in the early '30s.

Mr. Anderson, born in 1912, remembered his first job, when he was only eight years old, helping to harvest ice on Oyster Pond for the Emmons estate. He led a team of two horses along the trail through the woods which is now Elm Road to the edge of the pond. Explaining the process, he said, "The first operation at the pond, wherever it might be, let's take Shivericks Pond where I remember it best. The people involved would get out their ice plows and a horse. They would go down a strip of ice with the horse dragging the ice plow, which would cut a slot in

the ice probably half the thickness of the ice, perhaps six inches deep. They would cut a slot in the ice, the ice plow would. Then at the end of the distance to travel, we would turn around and move over, I think it was two feet. We would return with another slot cut in the ice. Then we would turn around and repeat the operation back and forth over a given distance of perhaps two hundred feet. So we would end up with a section of the pond that is completely filled with slots. Then we would criss-cross these slots... and go the opposite way still using the ice plow with a horse dragging it.

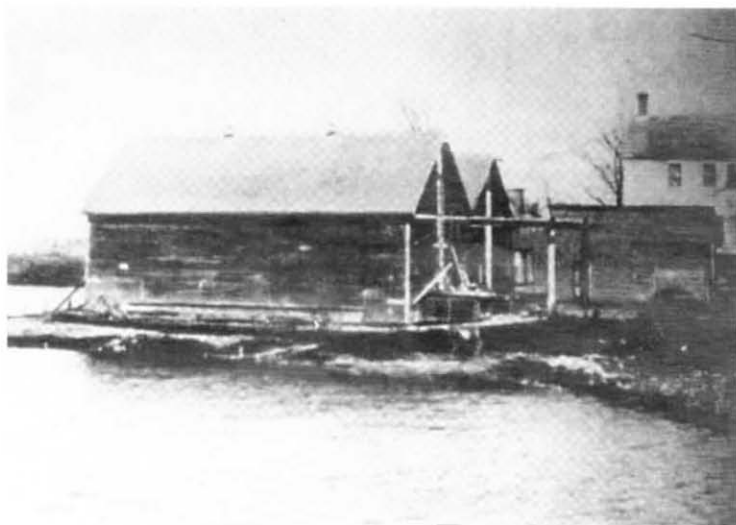
"Then after all this was done it was time for a man and a saw... One man stood on top of the ice and worked the saw up and down (in the slot)... and progressively backing up all the time... There was many a man when they were cutting ice that fell in the pond because he'd cut through somewhere and the ice would give way underneath him and

down he went. It was just one of those things; you weren't greatly concerned about it. You just got up and went home and changed your clothes and went back to work." Pete Swain remembers that horses sometimes fell through the ice too, but "we always got 'em out."

After sawing through one slot about twenty feet long, a man sawed through in a parallel slot, about four rows over. Then he'd cut off the ends so he had a big block made up of smaller blocks that were partially cut through. This slab was floated over to the ramp at the ice house. Then the workmen hit one of the long grooves with an "ice breaker" which broke the slabs into one long piece, many blocks long and only one block wide. As the long thin slabs were led to the ramp they were chunked off into single pieces along the grooves. Each of these single pieces was about two feet wide and four feet long and weighed about two hundred and fifty pounds. On Shivericks

Pond the big commercial ice house had a continuously running conveyor belt with spikes on it. The spikes caught the block and ran it up into the ice house. On the smaller ponds the lifting was done with block and tackle, heaving the ice up into the ice house, or onto sleds or wagons if there was no ice house right on the shore.

Clarence Anderson tells us, "The walls [of the ice house] were hollow, about twelve inches thick, filled with sawdust, all the way from the ground to the roof-line. We laid a layer of sawdust on the floor and then a layer of ice and then a layer of sawdust and then another layer of ice and another layer of sawdust until we filled the whole building to the roof-line. Then we put probably a foot



Falmouth Ice Company on Shivericks Pond. This area has since been filled in to make a parking lot and a portion of Katharine Lee Bates Road. White building on far right is rear of Falmouth Academy, now the Falmouth Chamber of Commerce building. The ice houses could hold 2000 tons of ice. Photo from *Falmouth by the Sea*, 1896. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

or maybe two feet of sawdust on top of the whole mass. Then it was all set until we opened it up whenever the ice was needed" many months later. When asked about the source of sawdust, Elmer Hallet, who worked on the Whitney estate in Woods Hole and harvested ice on Nobska Pond, said, "We got that down in Carver, down at the saw mill; that's where that came from." In talking about sharing the harvest, he said, "Of course, the Fays cut ice first. After they got their ice house filled up, then we filled ours. Then I think... Sam Cahoon cut ice there too."



Family harvesting ice with specialized tools. Note the straight lines family members with saws are following as they walk backwards, cutting the ice into long narrow blocks. From the postcard collection of Philip Stanton. Courtesy WHHC.

Oscar Hilton of Woods Hole remembers other years. "We'd cut the ice, and fill George Cahoon's ice house down at Quissett, where Sam Cahoon had his icebox there for a good many years later on... We filled this place at the [Marine Biological] Laboratory. Horace Howes had a place that he stored quite a bit... He had his in back of his meat market, right there," pointing to Pie In the Sky Bakery in Woods Hole, "where that little building is there, between the post office that's there now and what we consider the bank... Then Sidney Lawrence, he used to have... a man drive an ice wagon and peddle ice to put in an ice chest."

The biggest commercial ice house in Falmouth was on the banks of Shivericks Pond in the center of town, right in back of the present Eastman's Hardware store. Ice from this Falmouth Ice Company was sold to more than 300 families. All the ice harvested in Falmouth's ponds was "considered perfectly clean drinking water... [with] no pollution or contamination. The ice was considered pure. It was used for

refrigeration purposes. It was for household use, it was that clear and clean."

Both Pete Swain and Clarence Anderson remembered skating on Shivericks Pond, even as ice was being harvested. Anderson says, "Now Shivericks, of course, in the old days, everybody went to Shivericks Pond skating, both young people and old people. Everybody! We'd have this great, huge section where the ice had been all cut out and open water, and you were skating right along the edge of the water. That was considered the common thing to do. You never fell in the holes where they'd cut ice. People were skating there all day long while the ice was being cut." Pete said that when he was courting the young woman who was to become his wife, "We'd walk up from Quissett to skate on Shivericks Pond with the other young people. When we'd done skating we'd go over to that little cafe on Main Street for a cup of soup. Then we'd walk home again. Oh yeah, we loved to skate."

Woods Hole, Mass., Sept. 4 1895

Mr. Edward E. Swift

**Bought of ISAIAH SPINDELL & CO.,**  
Wholesale and Retail Dealers and Shippers in

**FRESH FISH, LOBSTERS, &C.**

Aug 2	55	16	Ice	22
5	50	"	"	20
6	74	"	"	29
9	75	"	"	30
10	31	"	"	12
12	60	"	"	24
14	70	"	"	28
16	75	"	"	30
19	85	"	"	34
21	70	"	"	28
23	65	"	"	26
26	70	"	"	28
28	75	"	"	30
30	65	"	"	26
				867

Free Payment  
Isaiah Spindell & Co.  
by J. B. Barth

1895 bill from Isaiah Spindell & Company to Edward E. Swift for ice during the month of August. Courtesy WHHC.

The delivery of ice by wagon, and later by truck, is remembered vividly by many of Falmouth's citizens. Priscilla Robb Billings (Mrs. Elliot Billings), who summered at Gunning Point as a child, remembers the ice man who came to her house delivering ice from West Falmouth. He "wore a sort of leather cape over his shoulder and slung the block of ice up on his back with the tongs." Olive Crowell Beverly of Woods Hole remembers that "the ice man knew how much ice to bring in by the sign we would put up in the window. It was a big sign that said 'Ice' and we'd clip numbers onto it showing how much we wanted. Many times we came in and found the ice man cornered in the kitchen by our dog. That dog really hated the ice man." The ice man carried the blocks in from his truck, then chipped it with his ice pick to fit into the icebox. When the ice man

came to fill the icebox, children gathered to collect the shards and suck on them. Lucena Barth showed a hatch cut out of her kitchen wall so the ice man could deliver the ice into the pantry without even coming into the house.

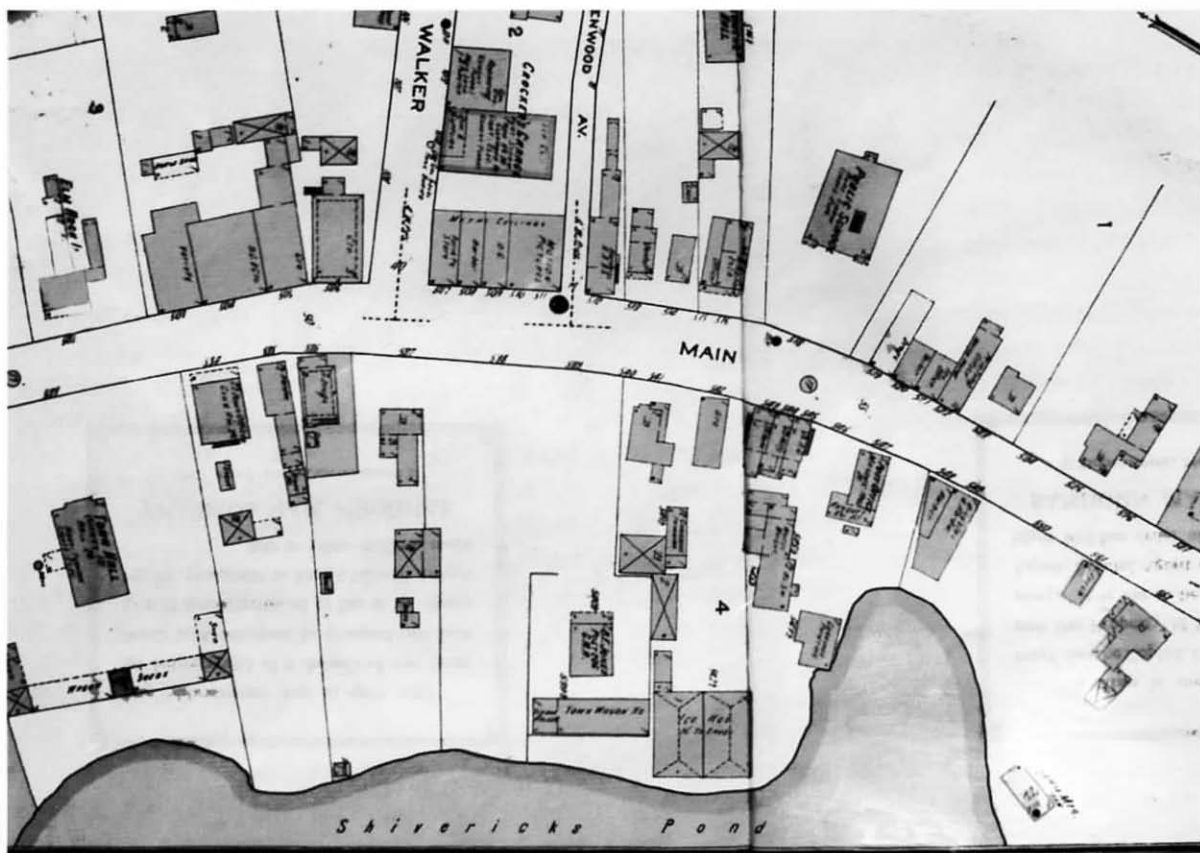
The demise of the natural ice harvesting industry came from two related causes. First, the introduction of electricity to the homes of America. Second, the invention of man-made refrigeration. In 1882 a steam driven ice making machine made its debut at an international exhibition. It rapidly took over the ice industry in India, but it couldn't compete with natural ice harvesting in North America for another thirty years. In 1918 there were no home electric refrigerators, but just ten years later they were found in more than one and one quarter million homes across

the country, as towns built their electrical plants and wired their streets so most homes could be electrified. General Electric introduced its popular "Monitor Top" refrigerator in 1927, the first hermetically sealed refrigerator. The first small freezer compartment in a home refrigerator appeared in 1929. Home freezers were introduced in the 1940s.

Ice harvesting in Falmouth stopped around 1933. Though many people still used iceboxes, the ice was either man-made or imported from Maine. The old ice house on Miles Pond in Sippewissett was replaced

with a plant that made ice. Though it mostly supplied ice for Sam Cahoon's fishing business in Woods Hole, some ice was also sold to the public.

With modern freezers, people can have ice cream any time they wish, but even today the delight in the ritual of going to the ice cream parlor for ice cream on a fine summer day is still with us. Next time you go out for a cone, feel the ice cream melt in your mouth, and think of yourself as taking part in an historic act. Think back to when men cut ice on the



Part of Main Street in Falmouth as it was in 1914, showing the two buildings (above the word Pond) used for storing ice on the edge of Shivericks Pond. The map was published by the Sanborn Map Company of New York. Courtesy WHHC.