



Morristown's  
**Forgotten  
Lakes**

*Morristown's  
Lakes Once  
Made it a  
Resort Town!*

**Arthur Mierisch**

In 1930, the *Daily Record* wrote:

### **Morristown is a Resort of Vacationists**

*Driving around town one may take a different direction each day and find new beauties. The quality of the town constitutes three rolling hills, delightful landscape, the Churches, and the quality of the farm products. The peaches are exceptionally celebrated and many other fruits are found on the estates.*

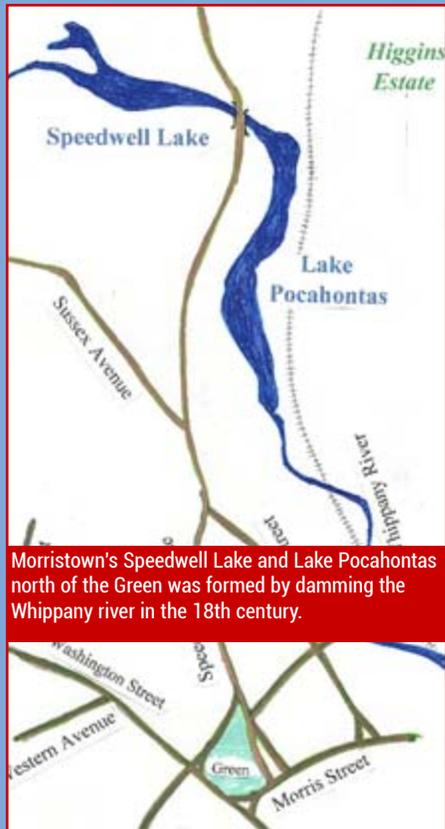
However, the article missed telling about the Morristown residents and vacationers, who from as far away as Newark and New York City enjoyed the refreshing waters of its lakes—all within town limits!

Morristown's Speedwell lake and Lake Pocahontas were formed in the 1700s, when wooden dams were built along the Whippany river. With the availability of waterpower, business and industry thrived turning Morristown into an industrial complex. There were smelters that converted iron ore into cast iron; forges that shaped metal by heating, beating and hammering; fulling mills that cleaned linen and wool cloths; grist mills that separated grain from the chaff; tanneries that treated the skins and hides of animals to make leather; sawmills that cut logs into lumber; planing mills that shaped wood into doors, blinds and moldings; rolling mills that squeezed copper and brass into sheets; slitting mills that converted iron bars into rods; stamping mills that shaped iron; and iron works that combined several processes to make steam engines for locomotives, and ploughs for the pioneers moving west.

In the early 1800s, residents swam and fished on the lakes, and picnicked and hunted along the shore. After the Civil War, wealthy families and businessmen escaping the plagues of the cities built palatial residences in Morristown, several having lake views. They organized private boat clubs for their enjoyment. Ice-skating, in the winter was shared with ice farmers harvesting the season's most important commodity—ice!

### **Ice Farming**

As December temperatures plummeted, ice farmers rushed to the lakes to measure the ice forming on the surface. When it was 12-inches thick, they prepared their crews and animals for the work ahead. At sunrise, men wearing layers of warm clothing encouraged reluctant horses snorting steam from their nostrils to pull snow scrapers across the lake. When cleared of the surface snow, the hard work began. Horses and mules dragged ice scorers across the surface, etching parallel rows 12-inches apart. At a 90-degree angle to the rows, grids scored 12- to 24-inches apart created a checkerboard pattern on the surface. Using a 5-foot long handsaw, men cut the first block and pushed the cube under the ice. Then using breaking bars and pikes, they separated blocks



### **Notice**

The subscriber takes this method to inform his friends and public, that he has rented the Forge near George Tucker's below Morris-Town. The Subscriber WANTS Coal for which a generous price will be given in Iron or Cash.

*The Genius of Liberty 1799*

weighing from 64- to 128-pounds. Some cubes were loaded onto wagons for delivery to customers while others were dragged to a nearby icehouse. The lakes froze several times before the spring thaw giving the farmer several profitable harvests. During 1877, 400 tons of ice was gathered from Spring Lake. In 1882, the Speedwell Lake Ice Company sold 800 tons, about 25,000 12-inch cubes to Newark breweries. Hugh Kelly, a local farmer advertised ice from Burnham's pond as "pure and clear." He sold 2,500 tons of ice that year.

Before refrigeration, icemen delivered blocks of ice to homes, storing the cubes in ice-boxes. The ice chilled the air inside to 55-degrees. To get pieces of ice, a thin sharp pointed tool called an ice pick, chipped chunks off the block. Ice was an important commodity, as it was used to preserved milk, vegetables, meal leftovers, and cooled liquids—and corpses. In 1881, L. W. Johnston, D.D.S, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, advertised services performed at his "handsome parlor" at the corner of South and DeHart Streets. He crafted sets of teeth set in in gold, silver, and rubber plates, and extracted teeth using the "Entirely New and Harmless Process of Freezing the Gum at the most moderate prices."

During warm winters, ice crops failed and the ice farmer lost income. The local dairies that shipped milk to New York survived the lean seasons by churning it into butter. *The Jerseyman* reported the importance of ice to the community as a commodity and a luxury:

*The failure of the ice crop is a serious matter. It affects the milk and butter business and causes large losses to the farmers. So varied are the uses made of ice that it is a necessity in many kinds of businesses aside from the comfort which is derived from this almost universally used summer luxury.*

During the Gilded Age, electricity sparked the development of electric motors and the technology to manufacture ice. In the early 1900s, machine ice sold for \$1.50 per ton (\$115.00 today), half the price received by the ice farmer.

### Speedwell Lake

In 1836, Stephen Vail, the founder of the Speedwell Iron Works, used water power to build the first durable iron tire (wheel) for railroad locomotives, and manufactured ploughs and cast iron farm equipment. In 1837, the Works made the boilers and pistons for the Savannah, the first luxury steamship to cross the Atlantic. Stephen Vail assisted Samuel Morse in perfecting the telegraph instrument. Morristown became known for the quality and craftsmanship of its iron products.

In 1809, 26 years after the Revolution, people owned and



Currier & Ives commemorative stamp of an iceman cutting the first block.



Bunn's Preserver used ice to preserve a corpse until burial.

carried firearms to protect themselves from dangerous animals and criminals. The harmful discharge of a weapon in public was not unlawful. *The Genius of Liberty* reported a shooting as merely a *distressing accident*.

*On Saturday last, at the Speedwell works near this town, in consequence of the discharge of a gun which was supposed not to have been loaded, Mr. John D. Comers, aged 22 had the contents of the gun lodged in the lower part of his body, and after suffering extreme agony for 24 hours, he expired—No blame is attached to any person, other than what results from the too common practice of carelessly pointing the muzzles of both loaded and unloaded guns towards persons who may be standing by.*

Speedwell lake occupies 24 acres containing 40 million gallons of water having a maximum depth of 8 feet.



An 1890s pencil sketch of Speedwell lake. *The Jerseyman* advertised excursions aboard the "Athena," a side wheeler seen in the center. Samuel Morse's house is to the right.

After the Civil War, bathers cooled off in the refreshing water of Speedwell Lake. They swam, hunted, and fished while others picnicked along the banks. Lewis D. Bunn, a local inventor noted for preserving corpses, paddled his man-powered boat around the lake for fishing and hunting. He mounted a paddle wheel over a rectangular hole in the center of the boat and as if peddling a bicycle, propelled the craft while a second person steered using a rudder.

By 1871, the old wooden Speedwell dam broke, flooding Morristown along Spring and Church streets. Gangs of men made a temporary repair by dropping 1,000 bags of dirt into the breach. Farther down, the rising Whippany River washed away the Eden Paper

Mill dam near the present Eden Lane. In 1902, deeds recorded the conveying of Speedwell Lake to the Morristown Improvement Association for \$6,000 (\$1,050,000 today). Mrs. Julia B. Sherman deeded 7 acres north of the lake road (Speedwell Avenue) beyond the bridge to the Association and "She deeded the larger island above the bridge to John Claflin," a shareholder in the Association. Speedwell Lake became a "favorite resort of the town's young people."

For years the dam remained stable until 1916 when heavy rains flooded the river causing it to overflow. The Speedwell Lake Association, unable to maintain the property, gifted the land to Morristown. The town's aldermen proposed a "Speedwell Park" to include lake Pocahontas and a stream deep enough for a "canoe to pass" connecting the two lakes. After approval a year later, the town repaired the dam. In 1938, a WPA make-work project, rebuilt the dam creating a new structure 150-feet long that harmonized with the original stonework. It rests on solid rock 3- to 5-feet deep

and is bonded to the foundation eliminating any danger of undermining. Concrete was poured in three layers and reinforced with steel bars. It measured 12-feet wide at the base, tapered to 5-feet at the top, and was 12-feet high above the lakebed. Having two sluiceways and gates at the center to release water, the dam could withstand a maximum 4' crest. A dragline cleared the lakebed of weeds and debris and top soil removed from the lake formed two small islands at the deepest part.

People often encountered wildlife other than fish in Speedwell Lake. In 1894, bathers killed a 4-foot nontoxic black snake. Nearby, they captured a 37-pound snapping turtle and displayed it at a home on Flagler Street. In 1897, the lakeside Boat Club celebrated the completion of their clubhouse with a day at the races. Members competed in double oared boat races, shell races, sailing, swimming, and wooden tub races. On land, three-legged and potato sack races challenged members. The day ended with refreshments, and dancing along the shore. Congregations held picnics at the lake and Boy Scouts camped nearby. Many remarked saying that "the grounds are very pleasant and nicely shaded and the best spring water is close by."

In 1898, Morristown awaited the arrival of The Buffalo Bill Show on its way from a sold-out performance in Paterson. Workers set up tents and stands on the Cutler property near Speedwell Lake. Billboards placed around town advertised a cast of 500 horses, and 700 riders and entertainers. From, 10,000 to 14,000 spectators soon awed at the daredevil performances.

Trolleys took passengers from the Green, traveling along Speedwell Avenue to the dam. *The Jerseyman* commented about how the beautiful trees planted along the lake would be celebrated by future generations:

*Morristonians may congratulate themselves that so historic a spot will be perpetuated for future generations and that they will be able to derive pleasure from the beautiful trees and water.*

### **The Higgins Estate**

Eugene S. Higgins, known as the wealthiest bachelor in Morristown enjoyed riding fast horses, driving racecars and hosting foxhunts on his estate. During the Gilded Age, his mansion and property north of Lake Pocahontas along Hanover Avenue attracted sightseers from miles around. Today the Mennen Arena and a Mercedes Benz service building occupy the property. The ornate gate posts at the intersection of Corey Road and Emmett Avenue, through which wealthy visitors once past, no longer exist.

In 1890, Eugene Higgins succeeded his father as president of the Delaware Lackawanna & Western Railroad, director of the Consolidated Gas Company, and the president of the Central Bank of New York. Higgins used his private train stop to commute to



Bunn's Floating Velocipede - an adaptation of a bicycle and a boat.

Photo courtesy of the Morristown & Morris Township Public Library



1880 Pattern Shop at Speedwell dam.

Photo courtesy of the Morristown & Morris Township Public Library

New York City where he and his father owned and operated a carpet factory. They employed "four thousand hands" earning \$35 to \$60 a month (\$3,500 to \$6,000 today) weaving floral Brussels tapestries selling for \$0.025 per yard (\$75.00 today). During the Gilded Age, Brussels tapestries in Europe depicted religious and political scenes. Higgins, Americanized them by weaving floral designs. These became popular and hung in the mansions from New York City to Boston. In 1882, the workers conducted an unsuccessful strike after receiving a 10% reduction in pay.

In 1891, Higgins remodeled his mansion's interior to his liking and built several buildings for his sporting interests. The project cost \$4,000 (\$400,000 today). He employed fifty Hungarian and other artisans who lived in shanties on the grounds. Inside the mansion:

*... new staircases and mantles being put in and the entire floor of the first story is being relaid with hard woods arranged in beautiful artistic designs to be smoother and polished to a high degree.*

Higgins built a luxury two storied coach house for his animals costing \$3,500 (\$350,000 today). It measured 120-feet long and 32-feet wide. The interior, trimmed in varnished yellow pine had two ventilating cupolas. The cypress stalls awed visitors, if not the horses. Throughout the house, polished brass accessories glistened from the sunlight entering the windows set with leaded glass. A large coach room had several dressing closets for riders, twelve stalls for horses and cows, all fitted with running water. The building had three large silos for storage of grain and straw. Tin lined chutes connected the two stories.

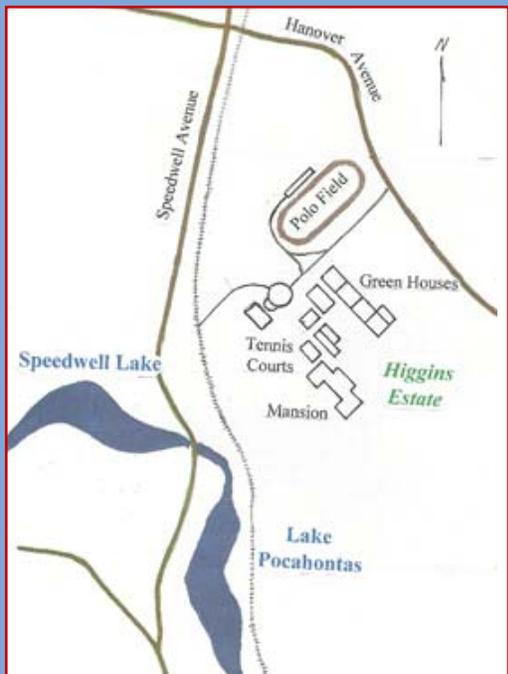
Higgins built a pleasure park that included a three-tier open-air grandstand overlooking a half-mile running tract also used for his racing cars. Inside the track, a polo field challenged the best of riders. Six racket and lawn tennis courts amused his gentlemen friends, while flowers and plants grown in his green-houses delighted lady visitors. Guests not wishing to travel at night along unlit roads stayed at one of the fully staffed guesthouses on the property. In 1901, the Polo Association changed the name of the Morris County Country Club to the Whippany River Country Club and held many events at the estate.

In 1886, Eugene Higgins, a generous benefactor known in New York City as an "amateur prestidigitator second to none in this country" organized and performed a benefit for the Children's Home, at Morristown's Lyceum. Always a generous contributor and a leader in Morristown Society, at his expense he secured the Stub's Orchestra known throughout New York and New Jersey for their good music. The money raised helped the Children's Home reduce their mortgage.

In the summer of 1892, E. F. Higgins entered the Great Horse



1891, the Speedwell Dam broke flooding Water Street.  
Photo courtesy of the  
Morristown & Morris Township Public Library



Higgins Estate existed along Hanover Avenue during the Gilded Age.

Show in New York City. Four categories of drivers and horses were judged in four-in-hand competition: roadsters, hack horses, saddle horses, and hunters and jumpers. Higgins took first prize driving his fore-in-hand team; two first prizes and two specials riding Lord Adell, a saddle horse; and second prize on Jim Dandy, also a saddle horse.

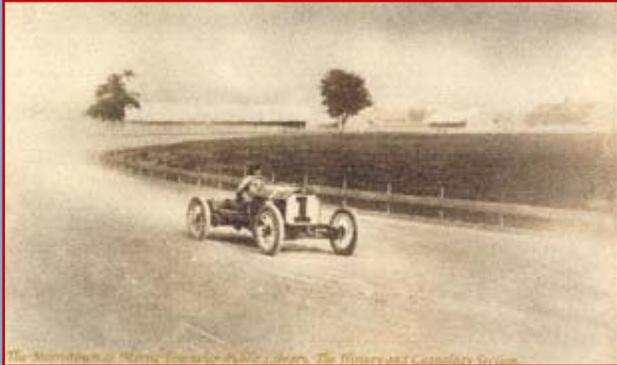
Higgins hosted foxhunts for his Morristown friends and business associates. Events began with an 8 A.M. breakfast an hour before the hunt and ended at 2 P.M. with an afternoon feast. The meals served by Sherry, a caterer included "every delicacy and dainty that was either in or out of season that tempted the taste of the most fastidious." Many attended to see the lavish mansion and beautiful grounds.

In 1902, a tinker's stove, used by plumbers making repairs tipped over and started a fire in the mansion. The butler, unable to control the fire called the fire department for help. An engine company arrived thirty minutes later with the boiler hissing steam. They connected their pump to the Morris Aqueduct Companies hydrant located near the stables. Not enough pressure, only a trickle of water came from the hydrant! The firemen could only direct a stream of water to one side of the building while gusts of wind spread the fire to the other side. Sparks leaped to other buildings burning everything in their path. Local spectators organized impromptu salvage corps. One hundred men and boys worked to save everything portable on the ground and second floors. They removed tapestries, furniture and chandeliers, unscrewed and carried out mantles and doors and moldings. Wagons were put to work carrying furnishings to the coach house where they were kept under lock and key. China, glassware, pictures, bedding, and other articles were left on the lawn unguarded. The firemen saved the farmer's house and stables. The fire burned into the evening making a brilliant spectacle over the property seen from miles away.

Everything left on the lawn disappeared overnight. Three days later, many valuables were advertised for sale at low prices in New York City. Eugene Higgins did not rebuild. He departed for Newport, Rhode Island to race his yachts. His Morristown property was later sold and replaced with manufacturing and housing developments.

### Lake Pocahontas

Lake Pocahontas, seen on maps remains hidden from the public behind trees and shrubs south of the Higgins estate. The lake, no longer in use, once delighted residents who enjoyed outdoor activities all within walking distance from the Green. Year round activities included ice skating, hunting, swimming, fishing, boating, and picnics along its serene water.



Race Track on Higgins Estate. The polo field is seen inside the track.

Photo courtesy of the Morristown & Morris Township Public Library

**Mr. Eugene Higgins** was thrown from his horse on South street and was taken home in a carriage in a helpless condition. His injuries, however, are not serious.  
*The Jerseyman*, 1882

In 1859, Doctor T. B. Flagler acquired the paper mill at the end of Flagler Street below the dam and transformed it into a grist mill and distillery. Ten years later the mill became a soap factory, and then the Pocahontas House, a public home for women. In 1884, the prestigious Powhatan Boat Club built a "fine boat house with a commodious platform in front." In 1895, the Club purchased two cedar double-ended boats, 18-feet in length for excursions. Members purchased racing shells, similar to the type used for collegiate races each 18-feet long and weighing 40 pounds. They fished from a flat bottom boat.

In 1891, the Pocahontas dam over-flowed weakening the structure and flooding the town. The water rose up 18 inches at the Spring Street Church. "The current [along Water street] so swift that most horses refused to cross and all travel by foot was stopped." By 1902, the hole in the dam enlarged lowering the water level several feet. The shallow lake became overgrown with vegetable matter and bushes making the pond "unsightly." Long-time residents said that they were pleased about the decrease in the number of mosquitoes since the water level was "lowered and the grass grown up." They favored a new structure that would be safe for residents and businesses below the dam. Two years later, the decision to rebuild the dam to make the lake useful for recreational activities satisfied the community. In 1906, a new concrete dam, costing over \$4,000 (\$1,120,000 today) was completed. In 1915, part of the dam broke away during heavy rains. The town alderman condemned the property and the lake was taken over by Morristown. Five years later, after rebuilding the pond became a lake satisfying the residents.

In 1921, the New Jersey Game Commissioner notified the state superintendent to stock the waters of Morristown's lakes with "real fish." The Commissioner said that he would see that "every kind of fish including bass, pickerel, perch and sunfish that would survive in a lake would be put in the waters." A year later, poachers and careless workmen devastated the lakes by destroying the environment for thousands of fish. In 1923, a state law made it illegal to draw water off any lake, pond or stream for the purpose of reselling the fish and for any other reason without permission of the State Fish and Game Commission. Lake Pocahontas continued to entertain residents until 1928, when pollution from upriver made it unsafe for swimming and fishing.

### Spring Lake at Burnham Park

Burnham Park, at the intersection of Washington Street and Burnham Parkway goes unnoticed as travelers go to and from the Green. Inside the park, Spring Lake, constructed after the Civil War, once welcomed thousands to its many aquatic attractions. Burnham had built New Jersey's first theme park. Today it is a large pond. During the summer months, it is covered with lily pads and other plant life, and is the home for several geese. Near



A Four-In-Hand (one driver controlling four horses) coach and a touring car preparing for a tail-gate luncheon.

Photo courtesy of the Morristown & Morris Township Public Library

**Lake Pocahontas** occupies 15 acres containing 23.7 million gallons of water with a maximum depth of 8 feet.



1891 - Lake Pocahontas Dam breaks.

Photo courtesy of the Morristown & Morris Township Public Library

Washington Street, a small dam drains water into a municipal waterway. Along Burnham Parkway is a parking area and a tree-lined lawn known only to residents and a few salesmen taking midday breaks. At the edge of the lake is a reconstructed wall where once hundreds gathered to watch swimming events. In the park is a statue of Thomas Paine, the remains of a 1776 soldiers' hospital, and a chimney commemorating Washington's army that once occupied the area.

In the 1700s, the Mills family owned land including a large pond along the Road to Mendham, today known as Washington Street. During the Revolution, the Continental Army drained the pond to grow feed for the Army's horses. A chimney built by the Burnham Park Association, honors the soldiers that lived in the area. A plaque that tells how the soldiers, under the command of Brigadier General Henry Knox from 1779 to 1780 survived:



Spring Lake at Burnham Park

### Small Boy Dies

William King Harris, nine years old, died from injuries received when he fell from the cliff in the old stone quarry on Mendham road, opposite Burnham Park.

*The Daily Record 1943*

*... [they] used the field covered by the pond for pasture for the Artillery Horses. The soldiers lived in log huts on the hillside to the west.*

In 1870, Alfred Mills sold his home and pond on nearby Mills Street to F. G. Burnham, Esq. Today, a family occupies the home acting as caretakers preserving the property. In 1876, Burnham built a 200-foot dam and enlarged the pond dividing it into three sections: one for swimming; one for aquatic events; and one for geese. The remains of the sections are still seen while walking along Burnham Parkway. Burnham renamed the pond Spring Lake. He sold the ice farming privileges to Joseph Gregory of Morris Plains who contracted with E. M. Quimby, the owner of lake front property to build an icehouse.

In 1890, *The Jerseyman* wrote about John J. Mills, aged 74, a relative of Alfred Mills who lived at the corner of Mills and Early streets. After his wife's death, Mills became an eccentric living in a "wretched" condition, and a miser who went without enough food and warmth and who rejected help from relatives. John died after his frozen legs were amputated following the blizzard of '88. His lawyer while settling the estate discovered two bags of gold valued at \$4,200 (\$120,000 today) hidden in his home.

In 1911, Spring Lake was donated to Morristown. The town repaired the wall along Burnham Parkway and cleared overgrown plant life from the lake. During the 1920s, the lake attracted people from surrounding towns and as far east as Newark to its pleasant waters. In 1923, an application made by a Newark bus line asked for permission to run busses to the park from Newark. Their Sunday schedule upset the town's businesses, industry, and residents. Businesses feared that busses would carry shoppers

"at all hours of the day" to Newark and New York who would otherwise shop in Morristown. Manufacturers reasoned that they were entitled to a fair and equitable trade, and need not fear out-of-town competitors. "Self-protection is the first law against outside industry" became a slogan. Residents believed that Burnham Park was dedicated to the people for social and religious purposes, not intended to become a Coney Island resort. The application did not pass.

The water of Spring Lake "being pure and clear" became popular for fishing, boating, swimming, miniature yacht races, picnics, and community get-togethers the year-round. In the 1920s, large swings were installed near the wading pool, and a slide twenty-eight feet long and twelve feet high placed near the fireplace kept children amused while the mothers were busy washing and repairing skirts and trousers. In the winter, flare lights lit in the evening added a romantic aura for skaters.

During the 1930s, the neighborhood changed when developers built houses close to the lake. Improved lots, having frontages up to 300 feet sold for \$500 to \$1,000 (\$30,000 to \$60,000 today). "Make Your Dreams Come True—Build at Burnham Park Estates" read an advertisement. After World War II, interest in Spring Lake faded. Newly constructed highways carried bathers and boaters to the fresh waters of larger Lake Hopatcong and the salty Jersey Shore. In 1948, the Burnham Park Association, now caring for Spring Lake erected a statue of Tomas Paine, a writer who helped spark the American Revolution. Today, a dock remains once used by swimmers and a wall where crowds gathered to watch exciting events.

The dams built in the late 1700s, created Speedwell lake and lake Pocahontas. At first, they supported manufacturing and were later used for year round sporting events. Spring Lake created during the Gilded Age also manufactured ice and added casual and organized aquatic activities. Today, the lake is a quiet retreat, one of Morristown's secrets. Visitors parking or walking along Burnham Parkway can look upon the lake and imagine hearing the footsteps of revolutionary soldiers walking to the old hospital, or the sound of an ice farmer sawing the first block, or the rattle of a 1930s Ford parking behind the wall, or the cheers as a contestant dives off the dock. While Morristown peaches and Speedwell and Pocahontas lakes have been forgotten, Spring Lake survives. 



Spring Lake at Burnham Park in 1930s. Hundreds of spectators surrounding the lake watched an aquatic event. Automobiles parked along Burnham Parkway, and on the other side of Washington Avenue now a strip mall.



Burnham Park in 2016. Seen is the reconstructed wall and dock originally built in the early 1900s.

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