



Much of former town beach still covered with sand, but many weeds and murky water.

Photo, Google maps

## History of

# Robert B. Walsh Park

In 1927, Frederick H. Prince gave the town an acre of land bordering Chebacco Lake. Prince also paid to clear the underbrush on the area and had a path built from Chebacco Road down to the shore. The town placed a Chebacco Park sign at the path's entrance. The park, the only public access in Hamilton to the lake, became a popular picnic spot.<sup>1</sup>

The park previously was part of a 994-acre estate Prince acquired from the 1880s and early 1900s. From about 1900 to 1910, Prince owned the Chebacco House hotel that was on a rise at the south end of the lake. In 1950, the Prince estate sold the property to Gordon College.

In 1927, the Hamilton Park Commission made the following statement in the annual town report: "Chebacco Park, located on the shores of Chebacco Lake and just off the road that winds through the woods to Manchester, offers an ideal spot for campers and picnic parties. We hope that more townspeople will make more use of this beautiful spot."<sup>1</sup>

Many people responded and the park became widely used during the summer for picnics. It was not unusual, on weekends, for many cars to be parked along Chebacco Road.<sup>9</sup> During the winter, the park provided access to the frozen lake for ice skating.

In 1930, the Park Commission began to maintain the beach. This included cutting back weeds and tree branches.<sup>2</sup>

Three years later, 1933, during the country's great depression, the town's Unemployment Committee, working with the roads department, erected guardrails on the roadway leading from the main highway to the park. Weeds and bushes along the waterfront were removed.<sup>3</sup>

The Parks Commission, in 1935, built three benches at the park.<sup>4</sup> They faced the lake.

Swimming began in 1938, when a W. P. A. project created a sandy beach and removed weeds from the bottom of the lake, near the shoreline. The project also included the removal of tree stumps, tree trimming, brush cutting, building a new path, and erecting a fence around the park.<sup>5</sup>

During WWII, with its gas rationing, driving to the park was not an option for most people.

After the war, the selectmen reminded people, "about the existence of a very good beach and picnic grove that is available at Chebacco Lake Park."<sup>6</sup>

In 1946, the town spread a large amount of beach sand, from Cranes Beach in Ipswich over the beach. Signs were erected restricting the use of this beach and park to Hamilton residents only.<sup>6</sup>

Following the beach upgrade, the Parks Commission began a once-a-week bus trip to Chebacco Lake Park for swimming. The Commissioner said that instruction in swimming should be an important part of the town's playground program.<sup>6</sup>

The park name changed in 1947. At the Hamilton Annual Town Meeting, Chebacco Park became the Robert B. Walsh Park.<sup>7</sup> He was a former trustee of the library and served as the town meeting moderator and served as town counsel for more than 30 years. Further, Walsh was very instrumental in establishing the summer recreation program at Patton Park.<sup>8</sup>

He and his wife, Adelaide, moved to Hamilton about 1912. In 1916, Adelaide was elected to the school committee. She was a strong advocate for a new school to be built in the east part of Hamilton. When built in 1918, it was named the Adelaide D. Walsh School. She died in 1926. The school building, in 1947, became the home of the American Legion Post 194.

While the 1947 vote to change the name of the Chebacco park to the Robert B. Walsh Park was unanimous, in years to come, the name was not used. More often, references were just to the "town beach."

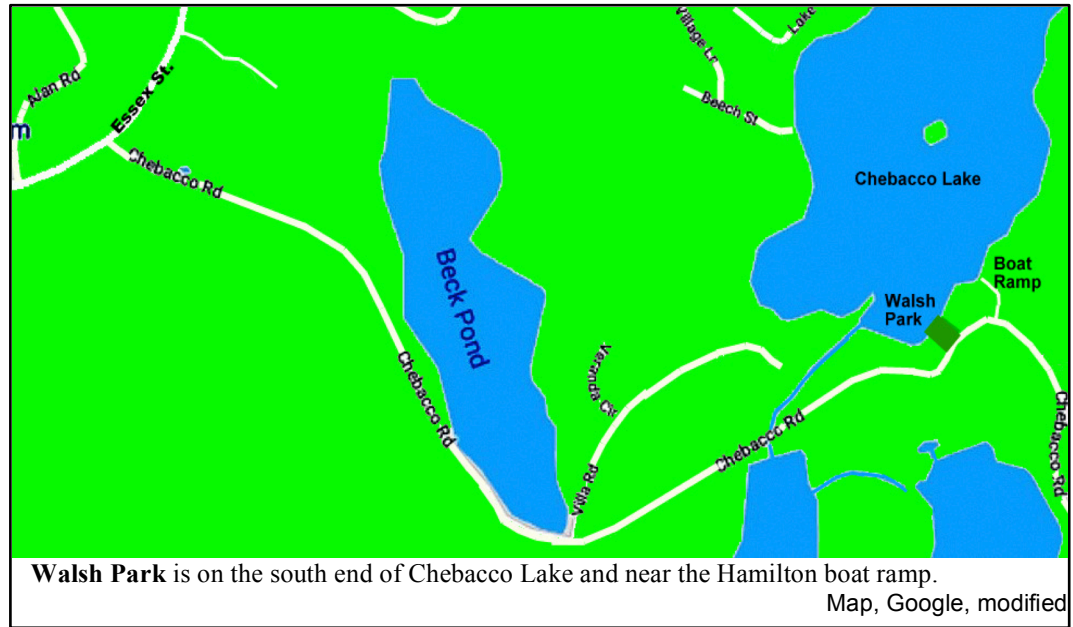
The town beach remained very popular. Often, during the summer, many cars were parked on the side of narrow Chebacco Road, in the area of the beach. Therefore, in 1964, the town acquired an extension of the "town beach," to accommodate about 15 cars. Also, the parks department added more sand, from Cranes' beach, with the help of the highway department.<sup>11</sup> This was done again in 1966<sup>13</sup> and 1973.<sup>15</sup>

That the well-kept park with its sandy beach was attractive to many people living in nearby towns was evident in remarks made by the Board of Park Commissioners, in 1964: "This beach is for Hamilton residents only and while it is difficult to always be there to enforce this, we shall do our best."<sup>11</sup>

Police began to check beachgoers for being Hamilton residents.<sup>12</sup>

Another concern arose in the 1970s. It became necessary, in 1972, to restrict alcoholic beverages from the park.<sup>14</sup>

Voters, in 1979, approved a Chebacco Beach Program under the direction of a Recreation Director. For



the first time, the beach had an assigned lifeguard. To limit use of the beach to Hamilton residents, beach patrols began.<sup>16</sup>

An annual beach problem was the spread of dense weeds in the water along the beach. The weeds were cited as a reason for closing the beach on Jun. 30, 1986. The Hamilton Board of Public Works, reported that a youth, swimming at the beach, had been entangled in weeds. The beach was closed, until a solution was found to the weed problem.<sup>20</sup>

A "No Swimming, Beach Closed" sign was placed on a tree, visible from the parking area of the beach. The sign later was removed by an unknown person and not replaced.<sup>19</sup>

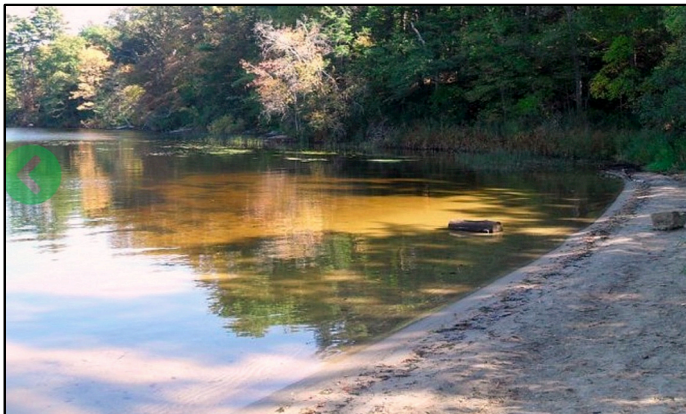
The town halted all maintenance of the beach, such as raking the sand, and mowing and pruning the grass. Further, the town removed a line of floats that had designated the swimming area. However, the Chebacco Lake Association later placed a line of buoys near the beach as a navigational guide for boats.<sup>19</sup>

Efforts to solve the weed problem continued In the fall of 1987. Hydroraking began in Chebacco Lake. A long boom with a wide, curved metal rake, at the stern of a pontoon boat powered by paddlewheels, scooped plants from the lake bottom. The weeds were taken to a dump site. More hydroraking followed in the following spring.

After the beach area was cleared of plants, benthic weed barriers were placed in the water along the beach.<sup>19</sup> The barriers were thin plastic textile mats, anchored on the lake bottom. The mats blocked sunlight from reaching plants during the growing season.



No Swimming sign marks the location of former town beach, the Robert B. Walsh Park. Photo, J. Hauck, 2018



**Beach closed in 1996** had debris and water was murky. Photo, Patch



**Plaque**, provided by the town in 2018, was placed near former town beach, in 2018, to commemorate the lake being the site of the first airplane flight in New England, on Feb. 28, 1910. Photo, J. Hauck, 2018

With the weed problem resolved, Chebacco Lake reopened, in 1988,<sup>10</sup> but Hamilton did not provide a life guard at the park. A line of floats marked the swim area free of submerged weeds and debris.<sup>19</sup>

Hamilton joined with Essex in on-going hydro-raking and weed-screening efforts to rid the lake of the plants and silt that made the water murky.<sup>19</sup>

The park closed again, in 1996, following a drowning in August.<sup>19</sup> The town also stopped all maintenance of the park and removed the floats and rubbish barrels.

Attention was drawn again to Walsh Park in 2018 when a bolder with a plaque, provided by the town, was placed there. It commemorates the lake being the site of the first airplane flight in New England, on Feb. 28, 1910.

A Gloucester Early Times reporter wrote, "It swooped along an inch or two in the air, gradually ascending, until at 95 feet (*from the starting point*), it was in full flight, about 30 feet above the ice, under perfect control, it droned along for about 120 yards and then gently dropped back to the ice."<sup>3</sup> The flight lasted 94 seconds.

## References

- 01 - 1927 Hamilton Annual Report
- 02 - 1930 Hamilton Annual Report
- 03 - 1933 Hamilton Annual Report
- 04 - 1935 Hamilton Annual Report
- 05 - 1938 Hamilton Annual Report
- 06 - 1946 Hamilton Annual Report
- 07 - 1947 Hamilton Annual Report
- 08 - 1951 Hamilton Annual Report
- 09 - 1926 Hamilton Annual Report
- 10 - 1988 Hamilton Annual Report
- 11 - 1964 Hamilton Annual Report
- 12 - 1965 Hamilton Annual Report
- 13 - 1966 Hamilton Annual Report
- 14 - 1972 Hamilton Annual Report
- 15 - 1973 Hamilton Annual Report
- 16 - 1979 Hamilton Annual Report
- 17 - 1980 Hamilton Annual Report
- 18 - 1987 Hamilton Annual Report
- 19 - <https://casetext.com/case/mccarthy-v-town-of-hamilton>
- 20 - Hamilton Board of Public Works, minutes of Jun. 30, 1986

Jack Hauck, February 2019