

# **A History of Amston Lake**

*Researched and written by Anita Connor, Amston Lake Treasurer, 2016 – 2022. This document is for informational purposes only.*

## **Preface**

The Amston Lake District (ALD), straddling the towns of Amston, Lebanon, and Colchester, Connecticut, is a residential community of full-time and seasonal residents surrounding a 188-acre lake. Various documents, such as the ALD formation documents and bylaws, define the ALD's territorial boundaries and spell out who is entitled to use the lake and its properties. The Amston Lake District (ALD) owns the lake and various lots around it. Almost all other parcels, over 650 of them, are owned by private individuals. Properties are accessed via a mix of public (town-owned) and private (ALD-owned) roads.

How all of this came to be is a long story. There is a good book in the Douglas Library of Hebron about the lake area's history, *The Turner Legacy – A History of Amston Lake*, written by longtime lake resident Larry Zimmerman. I have indicated where Larry's book is used as a source for this work, which fills in and continues the Amston Lake story.

## **Key to Abbreviations:**

ALD: Amston Lake District

ALC: Amston Lake Company

ALIA: Amston Lake Improvement Association

ALMC: Amston Lake Maintenance Corporation

ALLTD: Amston Lake Lebanon Tax District

ALHTD: Amston Lake Hebron Tax District

RDC: Reed Development Corporation

ALPOA: Amston Lake Property Owners Association

COAL: Council of Amston Lake

## **A Little History**

Amston Lake and the surrounding land were primarily owned by Charles M. Ams as far back as 1912. He bought 20 tracts of land in December 1912 from Mr. Phineas W. Turner of Turnerville fame. The deal Mr. Ams struck for the Turner property included the water rights to North Pond, rights which Mr. Turner had battled in court to secure. After the purchase, Mr. Ams promptly renamed the community Amston and the pond Amston Lake.

Mr. Ams built a summer cottage on what is now Ames Road and also built a beautiful home on Lake Road, both of which are still in use as private residences. He was an avid hunter and fisherman. There is a detailed article in *Outing Magazine* Volume LXXII from 1918 (Appendix A) about Mr. Ams' work with the National Audubon Society to develop a wild bird and duck sanctuary on Amston Lake. To this day, the pond just beyond the lake is called the duck pond.

Between 1926 and 1928 a local group of outdoorsmen known as the Amston Lake Club, Incorporated (the Club), signed five 5-year leases with Mr. Ams to secure hunting and fishing privileges on acreage surrounding and including Amston Lake. The Club is the likely predecessor of what is now the Amston Lake Improvement Association. The 1928 lease (Town of Hebron Vol. 32, p. 434) describes in detail the boundaries, uses, and buildings the club could access, including the "lake shore cottage known as the clubhouse," and the right to use Lots 17, 18 and 19 as "game rearing fields." Mr. Ams died in 1931 before the leases expired but it is reasonable to think he would have renewed them. His heirs chose instead to sell the 200 acres, including the lake, to three investors.

Those three men formed the Amston Lake Company (ALC). Their plan was to subdivide the property into lots and sell them as summer residences with lake privileges. The ALC would own and maintain the lake, dam, beaches, and certain lakefront lots as right of ways. Together these would give property owners access for boating, swimming, and fishing. This is the closest we have to the start of what is now the Amston Lake District.

## **The Amston Lake Company – the Early Days**

Just as the Great Depression was landing hard on American families, the ALC embarked on a project to create and sell vacation property. During the summer of 1931, the three men drew up plans and began subdividing the acreage into lots. The following spring they contracted with Louis Bacon to install pipes and provide water to the parcels; in July, easements were given to Connecticut Light and Power (CL&P) for utility poles and guys.

The U.S. unemployment rate was in double digits and Kansans were living in the Dust Bowl, but in peaceful and scenic Amston Lake, three businessmen were in the midst of creating a new neighborhood. They divided the land into parcels, built roads and right of

ways, and throughout the 1930's and 40's made the dream of a lakeside summer cottage a reality to hundreds of families.

In the fall of 1942, the ALC formed the Amston Lake Improvement Association, Inc. (not to be confused with the current Amston Lake Association, Inc.). The corporation's purpose was to collect fees for maintaining the dam, lake, roads, beaches, parking lots, and right of ways. Initially, property owners were subject to an annual fee of \$7 (or \$12 for lots plus a house) to cover the cost of providing these services. When World War II ended, families continued to enjoy the lake and the summer population of the district grew. In 1946 the Amston Volunteer Fire Department was formed, and along with it a ladies auxiliary. Due to new statewide legislation to address the needs of communities, a fire district was formed and allowed to charge a fee to property owners to pay for the operations, including the costs of the firehouse built in 1947 on donated land next to the main beach.

By the 1950's the lakeside community had a clubhouse, a canteen, a sand and gravel pit, a dump, an athletic field, and several active social clubs including the Amston Lake Fish and Game Club and the Amston Lake Club, Inc. According to *The Turner Legacy* page 137, the Amston Lake Club dissolved and reformed under the name Amston Lake Improvement Association (ALIA), the same name used by the original investors in 1942. It's unclear what led to that decision or why the original organization was not still collecting fees and performing maintenance.

The clubhouse at 119 Deepwood Drive wasn't big enough to hold all of the community's meetings and events. In 1954, William Day, president of the ALC, quitclaimed three lots on Wood Acres Road (Vol. 48, p. 485-486) as a site for a new ALIA clubhouse. The new clubhouse was built on the parcel and is still used today for meetings and social events. The original clubhouse remained the headquarters/sales office for the Amston Lake Company (or so the sign outside said until the house was felled by a tree in 2014 and had to be demolished).

As lots sold, development continued. The ALC plot plan of 1934 maps out two sections: A and B. The section A lots were in Hebron only. The section B lots were in both Hebron and Lebanon. The subdivision of land into lots continued into the 1950's, including a section C in Lebanon and a section E in Hebron on Ames Road. (Section D map has not been located.) Due to the influx of residents, on June 27, 1960 the U.S. government opened the Amston post office on Church Street (Route 85) and Amston was given its own zip code – 06231.

## **The Amston Lake Company – a New Owner**

Despite the growth or perhaps because of it, in 1965 the ALC investors sold their shares to Elizabeth Bouchain and businessman Murray Ostrager. It is noteworthy that Mr. Ostrager and Ms. Bouchain did not purchase the properties but rather invested in the corporation that held title to the properties and the lake. Mr. Ostrager then took over as President of the ALC, and soon bought out Ms. Bouchain. The ALC continued selling lots from their office at 119 Deepwood Drive in Hebron, the original clubhouse building. By now, development activity in Hebron was substantially completed and activities centered on Lebanon properties. Mr. Ostrager also formed a new corporation, the Amston Lake Maintenance Corporation (ALMC), also headquartered at 119 Deepwood Drive.

On December 1, 1965 Mr. Ostrager, as the ALC president, transferred the properties over to the ALMC. As the name implies, the ALMC would be responsible for the maintenance of the lake, dam, beaches, parking lots, and right of ways much like ALIA did. (Later he would transfer properties back to the ALC or to other family members. It is unknown what the rationale for this was – some have speculated it was a tax maneuver.) Nevertheless, there is very little evidence that much maintenance of properties and roads was done by the ALMC during the late 1960's, 70's and early 80's. In fact, the opposite, at least anecdotally, is true.

The cost to maintain the properties and roads was perhaps more than Mr. Ostrager had anticipated. Almost as soon as he bought the lake, he tried to sell it. By 1966 he was offering it to ALIA, the social club. A group of interested residents tried to make that happen but at the April 1967 ALIA meeting the idea was voted down, primarily over the issue of the high costs and risks inherent in owning roads.

On the Hebron side of the lake, all roads are owned by the Town of Hebron and paved. On the Lebanon side, however, the town only owns some of the roads. Most of the side roads have never been paved. Whoever owned the roads was responsible for their maintenance. In September, 1969, Mr. Ostrager quitclaimed Woodland Road, West Woodland Road and a portion of Ryan Terrace to the Town of Lebanon (Vol. 85, p. 462 and Vol. 106, p. 599). In 1981 another small section of Ryan Terrace was quitclaimed to them as well (May 1981/Vol. 106, p. 598). It's unclear why the town agreed to take those on.

In 1983 the owner of the sand and gravel pit between Deepwood Drive and Hillsdale Road stopped the practice of allowing the ALMC to remove sand and gravel from the property (Vol. 108, p. 532) and sold the property (Hebron Records Vol. 107, p. 1144). The ALMC would need a new source of material to fill potholes and replace eroded beach sand.

## **The Amston Lake Company – the 1980's**

During the 1980's Mr. Ostrager assessed fees and placed liens for nonpayment on the properties. The land records in the early 1980's show dozens of liens filed by the ALMC. Presumably the fees were unpaid as a protest by those residents who believed that the lake wasn't maintained to their satisfaction. Between 1981 and 1986 Mr. Ostrager increased the fees from \$12 to \$24 to \$36 per house. Some residents were not happy and believed that the fees charged were excessive and even illegal based on the stipulation of the \$12 per house fee in many original deeds. Even so, many residents continued to pay the fee, believing it was a small price to pay to enjoy Amston Lake.

The issue of lake maintenance and fees reached a tipping point in 1983. Residents started to discuss purchasing the lake. The main stumbling block was how to pay for repairs and ongoing maintenance. They too would need a way to collect more than the stipulated \$12 and it was too risky to rely on a voluntary collection system. To raise revenue via property taxes, a special tax district would need to be formed. If established, the residents could pursue purchasing the lake. After months of research and meetings with their state and local legislators and attorneys, the residents succeeded in establishing two special tax districts, one for each town.

On June 25, 1984, under Public Act 84-318 of the CT General Statutes, Lebanon voters approved the formation of the Amston Lake Lebanon Tax District (ALLTD). Hebron voters also held a vote in late June but the vote failed. It was passed two months later on August 8, 1984 and the Amston Lake Hebron Tax District (ALHTD) was formed. The new district also changed its boundaries to the mid-line of Lake Road, thereby excluding three properties on the south side of Lake Road. The formation of tax districts meant that residents had a legal entity and two boards of directors to negotiate on their behalf. In their first budget year, 1984-1985, they established a mill rate to cover a \$5,000 budget, mostly for legal fees and incidental administrative expenses. ALIA, as a separate corporation, continued its role as a social club.

From July 1984 until 1986, the districts' directors were in talks with Mr. Ostrager for the purchase of the lake. Each round brought up new issues and demands. Frustrated with the negotiations and failing to reach an agreement, residents sought counsel and wrote to State Representative Edith Prague and Connecticut's then-Attorney General, Joe Lieberman (who later became a U.S. Senator), challenging the legality of the increased fees and property liens. The Attorney General agreed with the residents and sued the ALC and the ALMC.

Perhaps because of the lawsuit, loss of fee revenue, and the impasse with the residents, Mr. Ostrager sought out another buyer. In 1986, a local businessman and building contractor, Ernest Reed became interested in the lake and formed the Reed Development Corporation (RDC). Mr. Reed spent almost a year in negotiations with Mr. Ostrager for the purchase of the lake. (It makes one wonder if he and his attorneys were aware of the

state's lawsuit against Ostrager and the ALMC.) The \$1,000,000 sale to the RDC went through in November 1986 in two separate transactions: \$500,000 to the ALMC and \$500,000 to the ALC.

Not all of the lake parcels owned by the ALC and the ALMC were sold to the RDC. Several large parcels including a strip of the north shoreline at the end of Ames Road were never conveyed to the RDC. Just prior to the closing with Mr. Reed, Mr. Ostrager transferred those parcels to himself and his family and/or kept them with the companies he controlled, the ALC and the ALMC.

Now that he owned the lake, Mr. Reed needed a way to cover his operating costs and repay the debt to the ALMC. In March 1987, prior to the return of the seasonal residents, the RDC offered a resolution in the form of a long-term lease arrangement with property owners: payment of an annual fee of \$200 per house in exchange for use of the lake. The offer was discussed at the April 1988 tax districts' board meeting, and in June the board voted to proceed with litigation. Meanwhile, the Superior Court approved a settlement in the ALC/Ostrager lawsuit. Both the RDC and the ALC were ordered to release all liens placed illegally on properties. The Court ruled that the ALC and Mr. Ostrager had illegally overcharged maintenance fees, and that residents would need to be paid back the almost \$20,000 in overcharges.

An annual maintenance fee of \$12 per house, or even \$36, was not nearly enough revenue for Mr. Reed and the RDC to pay the mortgage, repair the dam, and maintain the roads, beaches and right of ways. In addition to the maintenance fee, the RDC attempted to collect lake user fees. Mr. Reed put up warning signs and sent out bills, called "assessments," for \$250. He threatened residents who refused to pay that they were barred from using the lake. In response, the residents hired an attorney to advise them and possibly negotiate an out-of-court settlement with Mr. Reed and the RDC.

Led by a property owner/summer resident who was an attorney, residents formed ALPOA, the Amston Lake Property Owners Association, to build a legal fund and protect themselves from any civil suits. Although the fee dispute was with individual residents and not the tax districts, as a precaution the districts passed resolutions to indemnify any directors sued because of any actions taken by them as board members.

Residents who wanted to settle formed a political action committee called CALR, Concerned Amston Lake Residents.

The financial picture worsened for Mr. Reed and the RDC. In May 1987 Mr. Reed was ordered by the CT Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to make substantial repairs to the gate valve at the main dam at an estimated cost of \$70,000, and to prepare an Emergency Operations Plan in the event of dam failure.

The attorney hired by ALPOA was confident of the residents' legal position, namely that no user fees could be charged because use of the lake was already implied in their property deeds. Throughout 1987, 1988 and 1989 the dispute raged on with neighbors

disagreeing about a resolution. The RDC continued to mail out bills. Some residents believed it was a fair deal, while others feared legal repercussions and paid the assessments. Many did not pay the fee.

- Notwithstanding these issues, further real estate development was still being contemplated. In 1989 the Town of Hebron conducted an Environmental Impact Study of Additional Residential Development on Amston Lake. The property owners of a large tract of land on the west side of Hillcrest Drive anticipated building a new development. The parcel was subdivided into some 25 lots (see map "Plan of Properties Prepared for Amston Lake Co. Hillcrest Drive" Hebron December 8, 1995 Frances E. Hamm & Associates Land Surveying Engineering Colchester, CT). The town rejected the plan, however, and the development has never been built.

By the end of the 1980's the RDC and Amston Lake property owners and residents were in a tough spot. The RDC was going broke. The residents' interest in the work of governing and managing a tax district had waned and the district's boards had difficulty recruiting and keeping the seats filled. The idea of disbanding the Hebron Tax District was voted on and was narrowly defeated. Instead, a planning committee was formed to move forward. For only the second time in its young life, the districts assessed taxes on property owners, mostly to cover the cost of retaining counsel.

## **The 1990's**

From 1989 to 1991, Mr. Reed attempted to sell the lake for \$650,000. There were no takers. After completing the dam repair, the RDC struggled to pay its taxes and mortgage debt and in May 1991, under mounting financial pressures, Mr. Reed committed suicide. His son Brian took over, but by 1992 the RDC was in default of its mortgage from the ALC and Mr. Ostrager's patience had run out. Anxious to recoup his money (approximately \$360,000), Mr. Ostrager approached the towns of Hebron and Lebanon and offered to sell the lake to them for \$360,000. (He also offered it to the districts for \$340,000.) The Town of Hebron formed a Land Acquisition Committee to pursue the matter.

By June, Hebron's astute lawyers figured out that neither the ALC nor Mr. Ostrager held title to Amston Lake and could only sell the mortgage deed. The town declined to buy it and Mr. Ostrager started foreclosure proceedings against the RDC.

That's when Brian Reed approached the tax districts and again offered to sell the lake to them. Board members were still interested in pursuing the purchase if the price was right. Several rounds of negotiations later, a deal was struck. On September 3, 1992 the RDC executed a Contract for Sale of Real Estate to the ALHTD and the ALLTD for \$250,000. At long last, the property owners at Amston Lake could control their own destiny.

In the spring of 1993, the two districts created and executed an Interlocal Agreement. The agreement described a new Council of Amston Lake (COAL), made up of members from

each district's board that would develop the purchase, financing and management plans needed. COAL's role at this point was advisory; decisions would only be binding once adopted at the district level.

In April the Town of Hebron completed the installation of the sewer system for the lake district. Per the Sewer Benefit Assessment, property owners were assessed \$8,000 each to pay for the system.

Meanwhile, the financing of the lake via a bond issue was approved and the lake purchase went forward. Many details had to be worked out. And finally, on June 29, 1993 the RDC sold its rights to the newly formed tax districts in two separate transactions.

1. Sale to the ALLTD and the ALHTD jointly of the lake and related properties in ten (10) parcels
2. Sale to the ALLTD of the private roads in fourteen (14) parcels

The residents celebrated with ribbon-cutting ceremonies on both Main and Lollipop beaches on July 11, 1993.

One of the first projects the Lebanon district undertook was to negotiate for the transfer of the private roads to the Town of Lebanon. The town declined, perhaps because they were thinking about the letter they received from the DEP. The DEP was reactivating the earlier order (DEP Pollution Abatement Order # WC-4468 November 1986) regarding conducting an engineering study for a wastewater disposal system in Lebanon under PA 91-407 Sec. 37 CGS and Sec. 7-327. (It would be 2013 before the Town of Lebanon completed the sewer system installation and as of January 2023, five homes were not connected to the system.)

In other news, the Aqua Treatment Company took over from Coginchaug Valley Water Company, providing potable water to residents. They also built a new well house and replaced the water tank on St. Ronan Road. Customers were charged a flat rate per month regardless of usage.

The momentous 1993 year closed out with the completion of the DEP-mandated dam repairs and not surprisingly, the dissolution of the RDC as a corporation.



## Mapping the District

These maps and surveys detail the various sections and parcels. Certain carve outs have not been detailed especially those as described in the deed transferring parcels 1 – 30 from the ALC to the Amston Lake Maintenance Corp. (ALMC) in December 1965, as recorded in Hebron Vol. 59, p 249.

- “Map of Lake Amston Section A Hebron, Conn.” July 1931 Developed by the Amston Lake Company H E Daggett Civil Engineer Meriden, Conn. Amended July 1932 by addition of Lots 242-339
- “Map of Lake Amston Sections A & B Preliminary Map” Sept., 1934 Developed by the Amston Lake Company H E Daggett Civil Engineer Meriden, Conn. (on file in both Hebron and Lebanon, Leb. Map #273)
- “Map Showing Land of the Amston Lake Vol. Fire Co. Inc. & The Water Co. AT Lake Amston Town of Hebron Conn.” Survey Nov. 17, 1947 Thomas B. Danielson Conn. Reg. Surveyor #666 Windham, Conn.
- “Map of Lake Amston Lots 20 to 31 incl. Section E Hebron Conn.” Dec. 1950 Developed by the Amston Lake Company H E Daggett Civil Engineer Meriden, Conn.
- “Map of Lake Amston Section C Lebanon Conn.” Oct. 1952 Developed by the Amston Lake Company H E Daggett Civil Engineer Meriden, Conn.
- “Map of Lots 1 to 47 incl. and 119 to 179 incl. Section C Lake Amston Lebanon Conn.” Oct. 1952 Developed by the Amston Lake Company H E Daggett Civil Engineer Meriden, Conn.
- Lake Amston Section E September 1954 G. Pitcher & Son civil Engineer Hebron (see V53/600)
- “Map of Lots 180\* to 239 Inc. Section C Amston Lake Lebanon, Conn.” October 1954 H E Daggett Civil Engineer Meriden, Conn.  
\* Sometimes typed as 189
- “Map of Lake Amston Section C Lebanon Conn.” Sept. 1959 Developed by the Amston Lake Company H E Daggett Civil Engineer Meriden, Conn.
- “Section C subdivision of property N/F The Amston Lake Co. Lebanon Conn.” Sept. 1959 Primus & Welti Engineers Glastonbury, Conn. (Map #284 Town of Lebanon)
- “Plan Showing Parcels of Land to be conveyed By ALC to Hill and Lussier” Hebron, Conn. June 1962 George H Dieter L.S. (1.1 acres on Hillsdale Rd.)

- Extension C Lots (No. 90 through 101) on Section B of Map of Lake Amston Section A & B Developed by ALC
- “Subdivision Map of Lots 544a, 544b, 544c Section B of Amston Lake prepared for Amston Lake Company” Hebron, Conn. November 1964 Ferdinand A. Cswaczka, Reg. L.S. (Hillsdale Rd/Sand and gravel pit & Athletic field n 1934 map maybe?)
- Plan of Properties Prepared for Amston Lake Co. Hillcrest Drive” Hebron December 8, 1995 Frances E. Hamm & Associates Land Surveying Engineering Colchester, CT

List of Roads in the Amston Lake District – Lebanon  
(North to South)

Deepwood Dr. (town-owned), paved  
Spafford Rd.(town-owned), paved  
Kelly's Corner  
Manion Lane  
Mike's Place  
Ryan Terrace (partially town-owned, paved portion)  
Ledge Rd.  
Beech Rd.  
Woodland Dr. (town-owned)  
W. Woodland Dr. (town-owned)  
Island Beach Rd.  
Catherine St.  
Louise Rd.  
West Island Beach Rd., paved  
Andrews St., millings added 2022  
Scanlon Terrace  
Bush Rd., millings added 2022  
Rock Rd., millings added 2022  
Wildwood Dr.  
Park Rd.  
Cove Rd.  
Sunset Dr., paved  
Lakeview Heights, paved