

PRINCETON: Rowing team coxswain convinced Andrew Carnegie that university needed its own lake

- By Lea Kahn, Staff Writer
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Industrialist Andrew Carnegie was well known for donating money for free public libraries and for funding educational institutions.

Lakes, however, were not on the list for the Scottish-born steel magnate and philanthropist.

At least, not until Mr. Carnegie sat down for a portrait by painter Howard Russell Butler, who was the coxswain on Princeton University's rowing team as a student. He was a member of the Class of 1876.

The two men met when Mr. Carnegie sat to have his portrait painted by Mr. Butler in 1902. As Mr. Butler worked on the portrait, he spoke to his subject about the need for a lake for the rowing team, according to Robert von Zumbusch, who outlined the history of Carnegie Lake. He spoke at the Kingston Historical Society's spring lecture Tuesday night.

Princeton University's rowing team, which was organized in 1870, used the Delaware and Raritan Canal. But the canal was narrow, and there was competition from the commercial boats that traveled on the canal, Mr. von Zumbusch said. The team ceased to exist in the 1880s.

Fast forward to 1902, when Mr. Carnegie had his portrait painted by Mr. Butler. The two men chatted about lakes — Mr. Carnegie had built several in his home country of Scotland — and Mr. Butler indicated there was a need for one at Princeton, said Mr. von Zumbusch, the president of the Kingston Historical Society.

Mr. Carnegie visited Princeton, Mr. von Zumbusch said, and agreed that the present site of Carnegie Lake “would be a wonderful place for a lake.” The estimated cost to build the lake was \$118,000, which Mr. Carnegie agreed to donate to Princeton University.

But Princeton University was not interested in a lake, he said. Princeton University President Woodrow Wilson was more interested in funding for other projects, such as the university's Graduate College.

That's when the Carnegie Lake Association was formed, Mr. von Zumbusch said. The private group quietly bought the land that was to become Carnegie Lake “before anyone realized what was happening,” and that's what kept down the purchase price of the land, he said.

The land that became Carnegie Lake was a swampland at the confluence of the Millstone River and Stony Brook, Mr. von Zumbusch said. Construction of the dam to form the lake began in 1905 and it was completed in 1906. The work was all done by hand, he said.

Mr. Carnegie attended the dedication of Carnegie Lake in December 1906, traveling to the university by train from New York City. The train stopped at the steps at the bottom of Blair Arch. One student hung a banner from his room in Blair Hall, welcoming Mr. Carnegie.

Meanwhile, to get across Carnegie Lake, two bridges were built — the Washington Road bridge and the Harrison Street bridge. The Washington Road bridge was concrete, faced with stone. The narrow bridge was later widened. The original Harrison Street bridge was replaced in the 1980s, Mr. von Zumbusch said.

And although Princeton University initially did not want the lake, it recognized the value of the lake and accepted ownership of it when the Carnegie Lake Association donated the lake to the college in 1934, Mr. von Zumbusch said. ▣