

Introducing Benson Lake

by Christina Cameron and Barb Fraser-Stiff

Benson Lake, located within the Cataraqui River watershed, is part of the Rideau Canal waterway. It drains through Mosquito Lake into Indian Lake. Part of the Township of Rideau Lakes, Benson Lake has a maximum depth of 12 metres and a shore length of almost 25 kilometres.



Figure 1. Benson Lake drainage pattern marked by red arrows. Part of Plan of Newboro, Clear and Indian Lakes in the Townships of Crosby South and Crosby North, 1925. Courtesy of Ken Watson.

History

Before the building of the Rideau Canal, Benson Lake had one small lake surrounded by open meadows and woodlands used for

summer hunting and fishing camps by the Algonquin people. The small lake drained west from Mosquito Lake past what is now Benson Point and through Benson Creek to reach Indian Lake. All that changed when Colonel By opted for a slackwater canal – a system that backed water upstream to a navigable depth in order to avoid the need for extensive excavation in hard granite rock. Backing the Cataraqui River upstream at Chaffey’s Lock raised the water level of the six lakes between Chaffey’s and Newboro Locks. It also transformed the area by creating new waterfront properties.

Our lake is named for Samuel Benson (1801-1876) a land surveyor who was involved in surveying the nearby Bedford Township in the 1820s. According to Neil Patterson’s account of the development of Indian and Benson Lakes (2002), Samuel Benson witnessed the flooding of the lake that bears his name. With the building of Chaffey’s

Lock (1827-1831), Benson Lake was raised by about 2.0 metres and the lake size was doubled, creating shallow marshlands and leaving hand-hewn tree stumps still visible today.

The enlarged Benson Lake was accessible on the south side by Taggart Lane, a path linking the lake to Massassauga Road that branched off the Perth Road (Highway 10) at Bedford Mills near Westport. By the middle of the 19th-century, the Taggart name was well known in the region through Alba Taggart, a councillor and eventually reeve of the North Crosby District Council in Westport in the 1850s. Settlement on the south shore began with one cottage that juts into Benson Lake near the end of Taggart Lane, seen in a map of 1925, with a second building visible nearby in 1927 and 1949 map.

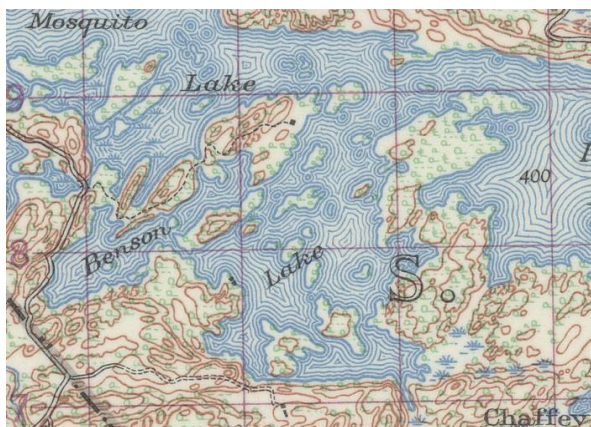


Figure 2. Extract from the 1949 National Topographic System map shows two buildings at the end of Taggart Lane and no development on Dunn Farm that later became Two Doctors development. Courtesy of Ken Watson.

It is only in the years after 1950 that a handful of cottages appear in the nearby bay.

There was no settlement on the north side of Benson Lake until James Dunn created the Two Doctors development starting at Ball's Hill on Indian Lake Road. Until then, this area served as pasture for cattle driven overland each summer from Elgin. James Dunn, a Peterborough lawyer and grandson of the original owner of Dunn Farm, purchased the land from his family estate in 1963 and began to slowly extend the road to the end of the peninsula. He named the new development Two Doctors in honour of his father John Francis Dunn and his uncle James Moses Dunn, both of whom had practiced medicine in Elgin. For Benson Lake, it was only in 1971 that cottages and a few permanent residences sprang up on the north side along what are now Maplecroft Lane, Benson Lake Lane, Dr. John's Road and the northwest side of Indian Lake Road. In the early years, cattle continued to roam freely in the sparsely settled Two Doctors development but two decades later buildings dotted the entire waterfront and the cattle had disappeared long before.



Figure 3. Extract from the 1994 National Topographic System map shows a cluster of buildings in the southwest bay of Benson Lake and full development of the Two Doctors project along Indian Lake Road to the northeast. Courtesy of Ken Watson.

Geography

Cottages along the lake are nestled amongst a mix of coniferous and deciduous woodland, trimmed horizontally at the shoreline by the wintering deer. Benson Lake is home to many small islands, with a mix of privately owned properties, crown land and protected areas. Thirteen islands in Benson Lake are protected by the Nature Conservancy of Canada and the Rideau Waterway Lands Trust; three islands have been gifted to Queen's University Biological Station for research purposes.

Boaters are encouraged to check navigational maps before touring the area, as there are several shallow areas with shoals, marshes, visible tree stumps and those just below the lake surface. Many are marked, but not all. In

particular, a massive boulder lurks just below lake level and more than one boater has unfortunately required a new prop!

Climate change has made its mark along the shores and islands of Benson Lake. The intensity of thunderstorms and gusting winds have resulted in uprooted trees, exposing the rock base, and slowly transforming islands into shoals.

Wildlife

Being in Benson Lake is like living in a national park where you will be treated to the many different calls of the loons including yodels, wailing and their haunting laughter. You will also enjoy the melodious ascending whistle of the ospreys, Great Blue Herons, hummingbirds and Barred Owls who call "who cooks for you, who cooks for you all".



Figure 4. Barred owl in the winter waterfront on Benson Lake. Photo © Barb Fraser-Stiff.

More recent arrivals are the honking Canada geese and the trumpeter swans whose bugle-like calls resound across the lake.



Figure 5. Like ships of the line, this group of five swans glides past an island on Benson Lake. Photo © Christina Cameron.

If you sit quietly by the water you will spot turtles, beavers, water snakes, frogs, muskrats and on occasion, a raft of otters. Historically, Benson Lake was a renowned fishing destination served by Opinicon Hotel Fishing Guides where largemouth and smallmouth bass as well as pike and perch were plentiful at that time. Today, the situation has changed. According to biologist Dr. Steven Cook of Carleton University – closely associated with Queen’s University Biological Station – “preseason bass fishing is the biggest threat to their survival. The bass need the opportunity to reproduce without disturbance.”

Deer are frequent visitors to the lake, making some of the islands their summer home. On

occasion, you can spot deer swimming from island to island, and feasting on luscious vegetation. Eagle-eyed water-skiers have been known to come upon deer!

Water Activities

On any given summer day on Benson Lake, you will see people of all ages swimming, canoeing, kayaking, paddle boarding, boating, water-skiing and on occasion, sailing.



Figure 6. Kayaking at sunset on Benson Lake. Photo © Barb Fraser-Stiff.

Keep your eyes open for children and dogs jumping in off the end of docks.



Figure 7. Golden retriever dives off a dock in Benson Lake. Photo © Christina Cameron.

Our Community

With a mix of seasonal cottagers and year-round residents, community members come together often for many wonderful events, from fish fries and sporting events, to community potlucks and cocktail hours on the dock.



Figure 8. Benson Lake at sunset. Photo © Christina Cameron.

But, the most memorable experience on Benson Lake is sitting quietly after a wonderful day, enjoying the beauty and stillness of a glorious sunset.

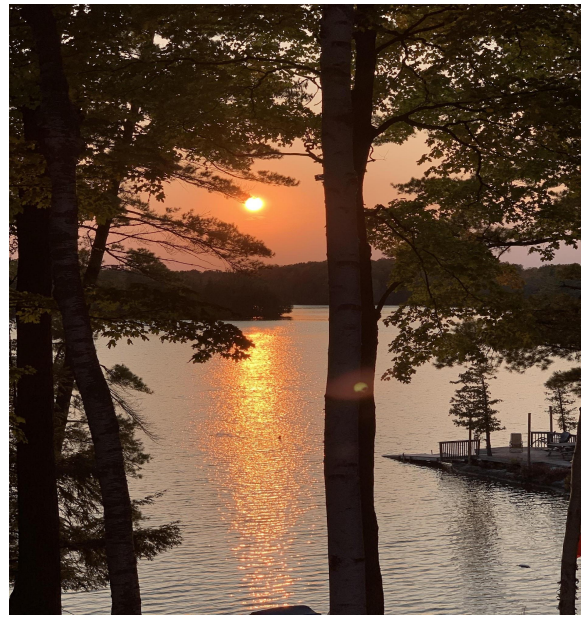


Figure 9. Benson Lake at sunset. Photo © Barb Fraser-Stiff.