

# Before the Cambridge Skating Club

The Cambridge Skating Club's 125th anniversary – coming up next season – is sure to be marked with fanfare. What led to the founding of the club in December 1897, and then its quick success?



Skating on Fresh Pond, January 24, 1892, 1:15 pm

A confluence of factors caused the stars to align over the new club:

- A proposal by a Chicagoan, new to Cambridge and recently married to an accomplished figure skater, that the field at the corner of Willard and Mt. Auburn be transformed into a rink;
- The very availability of the field – more than an acre – saved from development by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, when he acquired it in 1859;
- The willingness of the poet's youngest daughter, Anne Longfellow Thorp, who inherited the field, to give it over to a new winter use;
- And a ready-made clubhouse – a bowling-alley – that had been moved to Mrs. Thorp's field from the nearby

riverbank in 1895 when the City embarked on its landscape-making river-front reclamation project.

But just as important, the Cambridge Water Department was seeking to ban skating on the city's premier skating venue – Fresh Pond. Had it not been for an impending skating prohibition on the wonderful lake, there would have been no need for a skating club.

Fresh Pond's role in the club's history is encapsulated in one photograph that hangs at the top of the clubhouse balcony stairs. It shows three skaters on black ice at Fresh Pond. Here is its story:

## **Fresh Pond: A Skater's Mecca**

From colonial times, ice skating had been enjoyed in Cambridge. With its glacial landscape, the city had many small ponds

for skaters, and on occasion, it was even possible to skate in the streets. But the premier destination for skaters was the 155-acre Fresh Pond, a refuge that afforded recreational opportunities in all seasons, and was not too distant.

By the mid-1800s, skating had become quite popular, and Fresh Pond, with a hotel and restaurants, attracted skaters in large numbers. Engravings of merry skating scenes at Jamaica Pond allow us to imagine Fresh Pond covered with skaters on a good weekend ice day. Despite the absence of images, there are newspaper accounts of skating. For example, one in the *Cambridge Chronicle* of January 31, 1859, reported that on Christmas Day, Fresh Pond was frozen hard, and at any one time three to six thousand skaters were on the ice.

The ice industry, which grew up in the early 1800s, seems to have added interest to the skaters' visits. As the sport of figure skating grew, the ice industry at Fresh Pond served figure skaters because, in a cold winter, ice-harvesting could produce fresh black ice throughout the season. (Black ice is marvelous for practicing skating figures.) Of course, the New England climate with its mid-winter thaws also helped to create new black ice.

### The Water Department Bans Skating

After the Civil War, Cambridge moved to establish a municipal water supply system, acquiring the private Cambridge Water Works and its infrastructure at Fresh Pond. By 1880, the City determined to take all the land around the pond, including land annexed from Belmont and Arlington. And in 1888, the city petitioned the Commonwealth to cede its interests in the great pond, in order to bring an end to swimming, boating, skating, and fishing, as well as ice harvesting – all said to be sources of pollution.

The ban on skating was opposed by a number of influential Cambridge skaters – the president of Harvard, the chair of the board of health, a future Episcopal bishop, a governor-to-be, and prominent lawyers and professors. (Several of these leading citizens later served on the board of the Cambridge Skating Club.) A petition to exempt skating – to secure the “privilege” and “pleasure” of skating – was put to the Board of Aldermen and the City Council. Initially, the skaters were successful. In 1889, despite the opposition of the water board, a new ordinance permitted skating “during the daytime on those parts of Fresh Pond where the ice is of sufficient thickness for safety, under such regulations as the water board may prescribe to prevent loss of life.” However, the water board was determined to have its way, and so began a 10-year contest of wills between the water officials and the skaters. The skaters alleged police intimidation, and so heated was the matter, that several (one being a future president of the Cambridge Skating Club) even sought to be arrested. Board meetings running late in the night caused tempers to flare and made for good newspaper copy. Finally, the debate came down to the dueling testimony of scientists on the question of pollution caused by

skaters. The skaters put up a good fight, but by 1897, the handwriting was on the wall, and in October 1899, skating on Fresh Pond was prohibited. Provision for skating elsewhere was promised, but was only acted upon some years later – at the insistence of the city's high school hockey players. (That, however, is another story.)

### The Photograph

Taken by an amateur photographer named Henry Lathrop Rand (1862–1945), the image, according to Rand's notes, was taken near Hemlock Point, on January 24, 1892, at 1:15 pm on a cloudy day. (Hemlock Point was later renamed Kingsley Park in honor of the city water board director who oversaw the transformation of Fresh Pond as a reservation.) Although Rand was a Cantabrigian, this photo was not in any local archive, and it only came back to the city by chance.

Thirty years ago, Charles Sullivan, Executive Director of the Cambridge Historical Commission, received a call from the Southwest Harbor Public Library on Mount Desert Island where a librarian was going through a recently donated collection of photographs and recognized Fresh Pond as a Cambridge landmark.<sup>1</sup> Alerted to the existence of the heretofore-unknown source of Cambridge photographs, Mr. Sullivan went up to Mount Desert and made copy slides (the technology before scanning).

### Observations on the Scene

- First it shows ideal conditions for natural ice – cold weather with no snow. The black ice is impressive. According to historical weather records, Cambridge experienced the proverbial January thaw

<sup>1</sup> The Southwest Harbor librarian was processing 1,600 5x7 photographic prints (archivally preserved in 16 volumes) that the photographer Henry Rand (who had retired to Southwest Harbor in the 1930s) had stored away after the death of his first wife in 1915. Although Rand died in 1945, his second wife lived into the 1970s. The Southwest Harbor library received the photos in 1974.

Many of Rand's photographs recorded scenes on Mount Desert, but many others showed Boston, the North Shore of Massachusetts, and Cambridge, home of the photographer's family. The photos are in pristine condition thanks to archival storage. The original glass negatives had been dumped in Somes Sound, so there was very little duplication of Mr. Rand's work.

in 1892. On January 14, the temperature had reached the mid-60s. Hence, the late-season black ice 10 days later.

- At the time the photo was taken the days of figure skating on Fresh Pond were numbered. The water department had succeeded in taking all the property around the pond and was in the process of removing all the buildings. The hotel-turned-school (run by the Sisters of Mount Saint Joseph) that once stood on Hemlock Point had been moved in 1891 to Lake View Avenue and converted to apartments (still in existence). The ice buildings in the background of the photograph would be gone before the year was out.
- In the 1880s and 1890s, figure skating was being organized as a competitive sport based on ability to cut fine figures, and the skater in the photo is absorbed in his work. Some tracings are visible in the foreground.
- A study in contrast is the boy who is enjoying the beautiful ice. He is demonstrating the more popular appeal of skating – to zoom around and have fun.
- Another skater, also a boy, perhaps somewhat older, is studying the older skater. Had the skaters come to the pond together or did they meet on the ice by chance?
- Why aren't there more people on the ice? Perhaps the ice had just thickened sufficiently for skating, which may explain the absence of other skaters. Judging from the markings on the ice, January 24 may have been the first ice day after the thaw. The word of new ice may not have spread.
- Who are the figures? Rand did not identify them, which is unusual because most of his subjects were identified in his notes. The photographer was perhaps being discrete by not naming his subjects given the potential for running afoul of the water board and police.

### Identity Solved

Over 100 years after the photograph was taken (while working on the club's centennial history), I learned that the man absorbed in making figures on the ice was none other than George H. Browne (1857–1931), co-founder of Browne and



Photograph of George Browne at Fresh Pond  
(Courtesy of Mr. Browne's grandson, Jim Townsend)

Nichols School, an avid skater, and one of the most ardent advocates for skating on Fresh Pond. In 1892, he was working on a figure skating manual, and he certainly knew Henry Rand, a Kirkland Street neighbor of his school colleague, Edgar Nichols. Always eager to take advantage of black ice, Browne must have asked Rand to accompany him to Fresh Pond on that cold Sunday.<sup>2</sup> Browne, who was an amateur photographer himself, likely was interested in photographs that might serve as illustrations for his soon-to-be-published book.

How can we know it was Mr. Browne? The answer is that James Townsend, a grandson of Mr. Browne, provided me with a companion closeup photograph of the same scene. Mr. Rand must have given the print to Brown for the skating manual that Brown was writing. It may be one of the only Rand photos that is not in the collection at Southwest Harbor Public Library!

George Browne went on to write at least a half dozen different instructional booklets on the sport of figure skating. In addition to his instructional writing, Mr. Browne served as a judge, referee, and amateur coach, and also held a patent on an improved skate blade. As for the Cambridge Skating Club, Mr. Browne joined its ice committee at the beginning of the club's second season, and then introduced skating instruction, skating competitions, and skating carnivals. It was George Browne's love of skating – transferred from Fresh Pond to Willard Street – that set the foundation for the club we love.

*A postscript by the author (as a private citizen, not in her role as club historian):*

It would be wonderful to see our city join the Boston metropolitan water system and return the Fresh Pond Reservation to swimmers, rowers, small-boat sailors, and skaters.

<sup>2</sup> According to a published remembrance, Mr. Browne was “a remarkable skater and never was a group of boys more stimulated to outdo themselves in intellectual effort than on a Saturday morning, when engaged in making up back work, the news was circulated that Fresh Pond was black ice. No one was so eager to be away as Mr. Browne, and under the pressure of the skating urge he could whip boys into a mental activity that was astonishing.” (W. Rodman Peabody, “The Browne and Nichols School,” *Proceedings of the Cambridge Historical Society*, Volume 22, 1932–1933)