

A Short History of Lake Conway

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The community of Lake Conway was originally the David Webb farm. Born in Dutchess County, NY, in 1772, David Webb married Ruama Mead and they emigrated to Vernon around 1805. They were part of a large westward migration of young settlers from counties in the Hudson Valley as people sought new farms in the years after the American Revolution. He purchased his 200 acre farm in two parcels in 1813 and 1816.

David Webb died in 1852 and the farm passed to his son Moses Webb and later to his grandson James Webb. The original Webb homestead stood on Route 515 south of present-day Alsike Lane. The house, then over a century old, burned down around 1915 and was replaced by the white two-story house in the same spot at 399 Route 515. Around 1910 the farm was purchased by Lewis W. Rhodes, who in 1925 sold it to Charles and Agnes Conway.

Charles Conway started out as a quarryman at the Bethlehem Steel limestone quarry in McAfee. Having saved enough to buy a farm, he and his wife raised a family of five there: Dick, Jack, Harvey, Clyde, and Lois Conway. The Conways lived in the farmhouse at 399 Route 515, and operated the property as a dairy farm. The big dairy barn, now long gone, was located near the house, on Route 515 on the north side of present-day Alsike Lane.

The five Conway siblings all had fond memories of growing up on the farm. Lois Conway Scordato recalled that one of their favorite winter pastimes was tobogganing. Vernon had almost no traffic in those days, and they would toboggan down snow-covered Route 515, down Sisco Hill right into Vernon Village. Lois recalled that on one particularly good run they made it all the way to Vernon Crossing Road.

By the mid-1920s, summer lake communities like Lake Wanda had started to spring up, and with the arrival of Highland Lakes in 1936, there was a new summer tourist trade in Vernon. Charles and Agnes Conway took advantage of this and built a general store right at the intersection of Route 515 and Highland Lakes Road, still standing with its distinctive front overhanging section. The area was soon known as “Conway’s Corners.”

In 1948, Charles and Agnes Conway sold the farm to their son Dick Conway and his wife Estelle, who continued to dairy farm. In 1951 they likewise sold their general store, which passed through several owners, typically used as a residence, until it was bought by the Macherone family in 1971. For some years in the 1970s and 80s it was a luncheonette, “The Perch.”

Dairy farming became more difficult for area farmers when, in 1961, the Price's Switch Creamery in Vernon closed, which was where many local farmers took their milk. At the same time, the State Department of Transportation announced a plan to convert Route 23 into a divided freeway from Wayne all the way to Port Jervis, which would greatly expand the potential for residential development. Vernon was already in the early stages of becoming a commuter suburb, and this would accelerate the trend.

Dick Conway made the decision to give up farming and develop the property as a lake community. Plans for Section Number 1 of "Lake Conway" (the southern part) were first drawn up in July 1962 and submitted to the town two years later. By then, the lake itself was built. Section 2 (the northern part) was planned in 1967. Section 1 was mostly developed by 1970, and Section 2 mostly by 1980. The bulk of the lots were sold by Dick Conway between 1963 and 1977.

The fondness the Conways had for their old farm is reflected in the road names they chose--"Conway Drive" and "Meadow Lane," and three roads--Trefoil, Timothy, and Sudan--named after varieties of hay. The Conway farmhouse was sold as a private residence, and in more recent years was run as an antique store by George and Helen Cerrato.

In the early years of Lake Conway, Vernon Township did not yet have municipal land-use laws or zoning regulations, and so Dick Conway (like most developers of lake communities here at the time) imposed an array of deed restrictions on early purchasers to ensure standards were upheld. Deeds specified that houses had to be built within six months of purchase; no trailers, shacks, or standalone garages; minimum square footage of houses to be 650; minimum cost \$7,500; only attached garages permitted; only residential use permitted; all properties to be kept neat and clean; no advertising signage allowed; no livestock allowed; no motor boats allowed; and all properties had to have a septic system--no outhouses. After Vernon Township instituted land-use regulations, these deed restrictions were mostly dropped.

Dick and Estelle Conway retired to Mesa, Arizona, where Dick passed away in 2008. But at least three members of the extended Conway family still reside in the neighborhood as of 2021, keeping the Conway connection alive.