

History of Onondaga Lake

The early history of the Lake can be traced back to the Native Americans of the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, and Mohawk Nations. Onondaga Lake is a sacred place for Native Americans in this region. For centuries, the five nations worked together as stewards and protectors of the Lake.

European settlers migrated to the area during the late 17th and early 18th centuries. The Lake and its tributaries served as major transportation routes during this period. The Erie Canal was built in the early 1800s and opened the interior of New York State to new settlement.

Onondaga Lake's outlet was dredged in the early 19th century. This action lowered the Lake's water level and drained the swampy area that is now the northern end of downtown Syracuse. The elimination of this swamp effectively eliminated malaria in the growing City.



By 1900, the shoreline of Onondaga Lake was dotted with major tourist attractions including hotels, restaurants, and amusement parks. One of the largest amusement areas was the Iron Pier resort. This attraction was sited near present-day Destiny USA. However, pollution from the growing City of Syracuse and from the variety of rapidly expanding industries began to negatively impact the Lake in the following decades. The City recognized the problem and created an Interceptor Sewer Board (as early as 1907) to address sewage problems in Onondaga Creek and Harbor Brook. Nevertheless, by 1940 the Lake was declared unsafe for swimming.

By the 1970s, fishing in the Lake was banned and the Lake's bottom was listed as a [Superfund site](#) in 1994. This designation was a result of mercury contamination. Additional areas of contamination were identified around the Lake's shore. New York State and the Federal Government continue to pursue remediation of these sites through the responsible parties.

In 1989, a Consent Judgement was reached to settle litigation between New York State, the Atlantic States Legal Foundation and Onondaga County in conjunction with alleged violations of State and Federal water pollution control laws. Its conditions required the County to perform a series of engineering and scientific studies to evaluate the need for upgrading the Metropolitan Wastewater Treatment Plant (Metro) and to reduce the volume of [combined sewer overflows](#) in the Metro service area. Follow this [link](#) for more information about the Consent Judgement and its subsequent Amendments.