

The History of Whitewater and Rice Lake

Located in the Southern Kettle Moraine State Forest in Walworth County, the Greater Whitewater Lake & Rice Lake area is known for its outstanding views, area lakes, and recreation opportunities.

The Whitewater & Rice Lake Landscape

Wisconsin is one of the best places in the world to see the impact of the Ice Age. The effects of the most recent period of the Ice Age are most visible in Wisconsin; therefore, the latest period of the Ice Age is known as the Wisconsin Glaciation.

Over 20,000 years ago, the Green Bay Lobe and the Lake Michigan Lobe met along a line extending from Walworth to Kewaunee County. The two massive lobes of glacial ice met and created a series of ridges that are 120 miles long ([Kettle Moraine State Forest: A Geologic and Cultural History 2011](#)). As the ice melted, kettles of all sizes were formed. These kettles, scattered throughout Wisconsin, gave rise to the name, the Kettle Moraine.

A smaller Whitewater Lake, an 80-acre Bass Lake, a Round Lake, and a pre-glacial valley was formed. The area between Whitewater Lake and Bass Lake was primarily marshy land with beautiful, forested hills divided by a high ridge.



The History of Whitewater and Rice Lake

The following history of Whitewater and Rice Lake is based on the publication, "A History of Greater Whitewater & Rice Lakes" written by Sarah De Lazzer with historians Marian and Charles Cruse and designed by Lynne Palombi. The publication was originally published in 1997.

The First Settlers

Native Americans were the first settlers in the area. By 1844, the first group of 37 Norwegian immigrants settled in the area on the wooded high grounds of Whitewater Lake. In the early 1840s, the first dam was built near the current Rice Lake area. The following decades brought more settlers to the area and the Town of Whitewater grew.

The Beginning of the Greater Whitewater Lake Vision

In 1926, two local promoters of Whitewater developed a plan to construct a dam where Whitewater Creek flowed into Whitewater Lake. Their vision was to create a spectacular body of water and a potential resort area. To connect the three smaller lakes, the surveyor indicated that the water level of Whitewater and Round Lake needed to be raised nine feet, Bass Lake seven feet, with a dam at 12 feet.

The Whitewater Realty Company was formed and powered the project. The company agreed in advance to make payments to property owners for land that would be covered as the water rose. In time, the dam was built, and it was estimated it would take 13 months before the lake would reach the expected height of 12 feet.

However, the water rose quicker than anticipated as the nation entered the Great Depression. The Whitewater Realty Company was undercapitalized and had counted on land sales to pay off flooded land options. Unfortunately, when they could not make payments, landowners wanted their land back. These landowners got organized and forced legal action to remove the water from the land of those who filed suit.

The Opening of the Dam

The dam was opened in 1930's and the beautiful 721 acres of clear blue waters with 11 miles of shoreline returned to its swampy state. The dream of the Greater Whitewater Lake lived on in the memories of citizens who were involved in the original project.

The Revival of the Greater Whitewater Lake Vision

In 1945, Whitewater attorney Ralph V. Brown who attended the original festivities of the first closing of the dam revisited the dream of a Greater Whitewater Lake. He found that the law allowed county park commissioners to request and invest county funds to improve water ways. With the ability to request funds, coupled with the power to condemn lands, he had the legal action to bring the Greater Whitewater Lake vision back to life. The political process to close the dam once again began.

The majority of the landowners favored the closing of the dam. To provide additional incentive, the Park Commission members began considering the idea of creating a park. Ken Hackett, who owned the dam site, gave the County Park Board the dam site and 13 acres of land for park purposes in April 1945.

The next step was for the Park Board to meet with the State of Wisconsin Public Service Commission to determine whether the public safety and health of the community would be harmed by the closing of the dam. Ultimately, it was determined that the public safety and health of the community would not be impaired.

In 1946, the land around the lake was zoned residential. Many of the area property owners sold their land in the interest of creating a state park. During the planning, August Meyer sold 148 acres of farmland, including 600 feet of shoreline frontage, in the interest of creating a beach within the park. This additional land, along with the support of neighboring farmers, made it possible to create a second lake which is now known as Rice Lake.

The Dam Finally Closes

In February 1947, the dam finally closes after years of hard work. The Greater Whitewater Lake and surrounding state park would become a source of health, beauty, and recreation for countless individuals and families to enjoy.

The Beginning of Rice Lake

The citizens push on to extend the Kettle Moraine State Forest with the creation of a second spring-fed lake on the other side of the dam. Additional acres of the Meyer farm were purchased and expanded the state park to 255 acres with 51,000 feet of shoreline. The State Park would include picnic areas, rest rooms, bathing facilities, etc.

Residential Development

The Whitewater Lake Realty Company was formed in 1947 and became the first realtors to sell land in the Moraine Park subdivision. During the early years, as the lake rose, more subdivisions developed, and local businesses/organizations settled on the lake.

The Greater Whitewater Lakes Property Owner Association

The [Greater Whitewater Lakes Property Owners Association](#) was formed September 2nd, 1948 to establish rules and regulations to keep the lake healthy. The association continues to represent the property owners of Whitewater and Rice Lake to “promote, protect, and preserve the environment and the quality of life which led to the initial investment of our resources in this area.”

The Creation of Rice Lake

With the land purchased, the next step was to acquire the right to flood the land to create Rice Lake. The eastern and northern side would be state owned, while the southern and western side of the lake would be privately owned and subdivided. Initial plans named this

body of water State Park Lake until it was officially dedicated as Rice Lake in honor of Dr. Ora Rice in 1961.

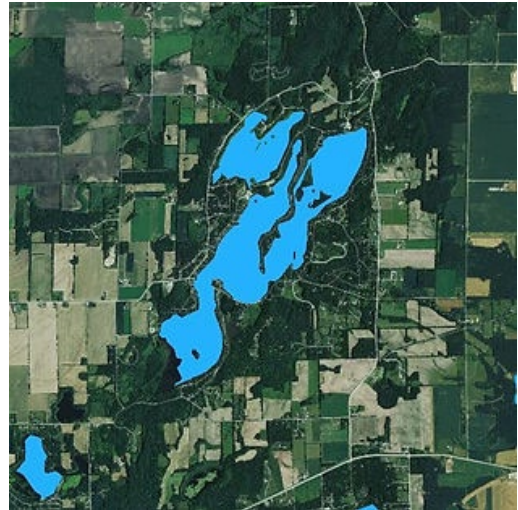
Whitewater and Rice Lake Today

Today, Whitewater Lake spans 705 acres and is the largest lake in the area with a depth of 40+ feet (Whitewater & Rice Lakes Management District). Whitewater Lake is a great place to fish for panfish, northern pike, largemouth bass, and walleye.

Rice Lake spans 167 acres with a depth of 11+ feet and is adjacent to Whitewater Lake (Whitewater & Rice Lakes Management District). Rice Lake is a great place to fish for panfish, northern pike, and largemouth bass.

The Kettle Moraine State Forest surrounding Whitewater Lake and Rice Lake continues to provide enjoyment and recreation for thousands of visitors each year. The Whitewater Lake Segment features the Ice Age Trail, wooded moraines and kettles, and breathtaking views of the lakes.

The area is well known for its recreation including biking, hiking, camping, cross-county skiing, water skiing, fishing, boating, and swimming. The State Park Round runs in-between the lakes and provides access to the Whitewater Lake Beach, Rice Lake Dry Prairie State Natural Area, various hiking trails, and picnic areas.



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