

Why is it called *Bills* Lake?

- **John A. Brooks** cut and floated the first logs down the Big Muskegon River to Muskegon Lake in 1839. His pine cutting operation took place about 10 miles up the river from Crere Waoton (Hardy Dam?) He became a state legislator who secured money for a dam to power a saw mill. **Hence, we have Brooks Lake.**
- **Martin Ryerson** was a poor Dutch kid from New Jersey who worked his way to Michigan through the unbroken wilderness between the Grand and Muskegon rivers. By age 27, he had acquired his first sawmill and was on his way to become the first millionaire lumber baron in the Muskegon River Valley. **Hence, we have Ryerson Lake.**
- **Henry Penoyer** reached the banks of the Muskegon River in 1836, the same year as Ryerson. He, his brother Augustus, and business partner Jack McBride settled 35 miles upstream of Muskegon. They opened the first Muskegon River sawmill at the mouth **of what is now known as Penoyer Creek.**
- In 1866, a shingle mill was built by **George Hess** in Brooks Township. As with many of them, it burned in 1869. **Nevertheless the body of water where it was situated is Hess Lake.**
- In 1887. **Henry Pettit** of Ensley was working for Ryerson, Hills, and Co., the group that started cutting the last pine forest in Bridgeton. He is also listed in the 1870 census along with Isaac Pettit. He had substantial farmland near Bills Lake **but just to the north, our neighbor is Pettit Lake.**

In my research thus far, I have found very few references to the Bills family. To be sure, Abel and his son James were farmers who had property near the lake, but not on the shorelines. I have found no information about him being in the logging business or in a leadership position in local government.

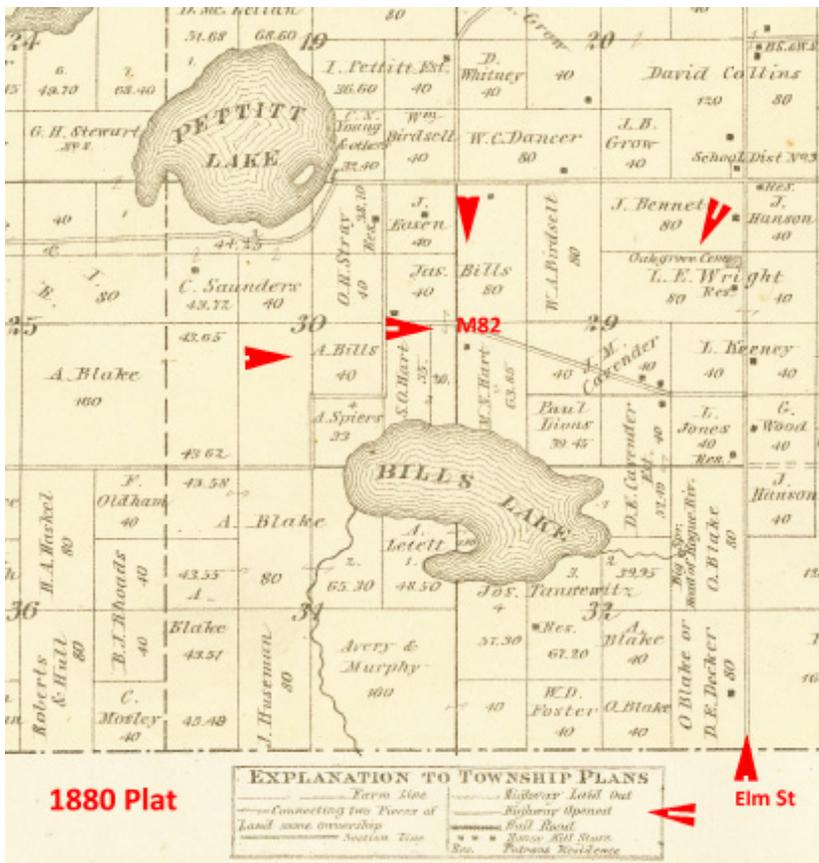
But Abel and wife Almira must have been two of the early pioneers in the area. The Treaty of Washington opened the area up for settlement in 1836. Abel Bills resided in Owego Tioga NY at that time and one census shows that his son, Charles W., was born in New York in 1834 and his daughter, Mary Elizabeth, was born there in 1840. Son James was born in 1844 but where: New York or Croton? The answer to that question would help establish when the Bills family lived near our lake.

Actually, research shows a conflict in terms of the birthplaces of the first three children. One document shows all of them born in Croton. But one item is clear: daughter Sylvia was born in Croton in 1850. That puts the Bills family in the area at least prior to 1850. I personally think that all of them were born in Croton from 1838 - 1850.

In the 1864 Enumeration of Croton Twp residents, the name of Abel Bills, farmer, is there. He had a wife and four kids, two boys (one being James K. and the other Charles W) and two girls, Mary Elizabeth and Sylvia.

The A. Bills farm is found in the 1880 plat below. His son James had more land at that time but that may be because Abel was approaching the end of his life (he would die in 1885) and was handing over his holdings. As you can tell, father and son owned farmland to the north of the lake, the area across from M82. The opened road might be the early M82. See bottom of plat.

As reported by Betty Miller, Carrie Tannewitz, who later on lived in the 1970s on the property where the Hilltop General Store is located, says that the Bills family raised sheep on their farm and watered them at Bills Lake.



You may need to enlarge the print of this 1880 plat

The Bills family is buried nearby

Wandering Oak Grove Cemetery, located on Elm St a half mile from the intersection of M82 and Elm (the Ferguson/Hilltop corner) offers some insights. This is where Abel and Almira (spelled Elmira on some of the census material) are buried. Abel, born in 1807 in New York, died in Croton in 1885. Almira, born in the same town of Oswego, Tioga NY, died in Croton three years prior.

But there are several more inscriptions on the Bills monument and they involve James, not Abel. James married Martha Jane Surrarrae in 1871 at age 21. Sadly, she died 12 years later leaving a young family, ages 11, 8, 5, and 1.

Daughter Ora Anna, born in 1874 but died two years later is buried with her mother in the same area as Abel and Almira and her name is on the monument. James, left with a young family, must have sought help but with horrible luck. Subsequent wife Mary E Meek died just one year later. The next wife, Mercy Tift, died in the next year. They are also buried there.

James stayed in the area as indicated in the 1990 Plat but died in 1913. He is not buried in Croton but instead in Grand Rapids, Kent. The kids went on to live relatively long lives.



There is one other member of the Bills family buried in Oak Grove Cemetery but under a married name. Mary Elizabeth, daughter of Abel and Almira, was born in 1840. She married

Orson Stray on Aug. 9, 1857 and the two of them cleared land near Bills Lake where they raised two sons. Plats show that they owned far more land than Bills folks.

Both Orson (spelled Orison on his tombstone) and Mary Elizabeth Bills-Stray rest near the Bills monument. Their farms were inherited by son Charles Orson Stray.

All of this reveals that the Bills family were early settlers in our area but history doesn't reveal why our gem-like waters were named after them. Unlike Ryerson, Brooks, Hess, or Pettit, I find that Abel and

James Bills did nothing very extraordinary except farm and raise families.

Thus, my previous theory was that they were simply the earliest settlers, earlier than the Stray or Tannenwitz groups who actually had over time more influence of the development of our lake. I thought that Bills Lake was named after them because they were the earliest of the early birds.

Thanks to Pam Miller, local geneologist at the White Cloud Library, I got the correct answer.

Conclusion

In an article which appeared in a publication entitled *Grant Area -- 1979*, Pauline Morrison Bull (a significant maiden name to be explored later) writes: "A few individuals were granted patents for land in 1854, most of them engaged in the lumber business though some came to live on their property and became citizens of this or other neighboring townships....."

"The Bills were of the family which gave its name to Bills Lake in Croton Township," she continues. "James K. was a minor at the time of issue of the land patent. He was the son of Abel Bills and lived his entire life on a farm on the north side of Bills Lake."

Pauline mentions Charles Bills, another son, as well. But Charles is not buried in Croton. Instead, he is interred in a grave in Alexandria Virginia That's because he died in the Civil War on Feb. 7, 1863.

I spend my winters in Bartow FL, named for Francis S. Bartow, the first Brigade Commander of the Confederate Army to die in combat at the beginning of the Civil War. He was killed at the First Battle of Manassas (Bull Run) on July 21st, 1861. Fort Blount FL was renamed Bartow FL in his honor even though this man was

actually from Georgia.

For a time, it was my guess that Bills Lake was similarly named in honor of one of its first settlers who perished in the war.

However, as it turns out, my guess is right. In an obituary regarding early Bills Lake pioneer Charles Orson Stray (see next few pages), it states:

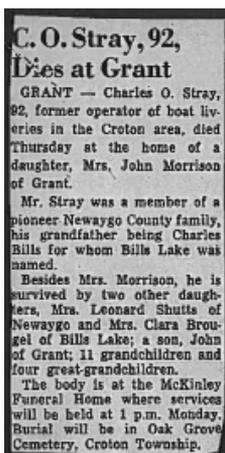
"He was a member of a pioneering Newwaygo County family, his grandfather being Charles Bills for whom Bills Lake was named."

Although Charles Bills was *not* Charles Stray's grandfather (he would have been Mr. Stray's uncle had he survived the Civil War), this reference confirms my conclusion.

As you will learn in the next few pages, Charles Stray's father married Mary Elizabeth Bills, Abel's daughter and Charles Bills'

sister. Mary Elizabeth and her husband owned land that reached the shores of the lake on the west side.

One more confirmation would exist if there were an 1860 plat of the area. Nobody has been able to find one, probably because it doesn't exist. The 1870 plat identifies our lake as Bills Lake. If an 1860 plat also called it Bills Lake, then my theory is wrong.



"He was a member of a pioneering Newwaygo County family, his grandfather being Charles Bills for whom Bills Lake was named."

---Newwaygo Republican

Charles W. Bills



Photo by Katie Sawyer Boyle

An item in the *Newaygo Republican* states that Bills Lake was named after Charles W. Bills, who died in the Civil War on Feb. 7, 1863. He was the first son of Abel and Almira Bills who arrived in the Croton area from Owego, Tioga New York sometime prior to 1838.

In those days, it was common practice to name or rename towns --and apparently lakes -- after soldiers who died in the war.

His remains are in Alexandria National Cemetery, Alexandria VA

Where Charles W. Bills is Buried

Alexandria National Cemetery Alexandria, Virginia



Civil War Dead

An estimated 700,000 Union and Confederate soldiers died in the Civil War between April 1861 and April 1865. As the death toll rose, the U.S. government struggled with the urgent but unplanned need to bury fallen Union troops. This propelled the creation of a national cemetery system.

On September 11, 1861, the War Department directed commanding officers to keep "accurate and permanent records of deceased soldiers." It also required the U.S. Army Quartermaster General, the office responsible for administering to the needs of troops in life and in death, to mark each grave with a headboard. A few months later, the department mandated interment of the dead in graves marked with numbered headboards, recorded in a register.



Photos by Katie Sawyer Boyle

Where Charles W. Bills is Buried

Alexandria National Cemetery Alexandria, Virginia



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GRAVE LOCATOR
4/15/2022

826 ALEXANDRIA NATIONAL CEMETERY, VA

Name	Columbaria		Birth Dt	Death Dt	Interment	Rank	Branch
	Section	Row					
BENTLEY, WILSON A	A	0 906		JUN 25 1863	JUN 25 1863	PVT	USA
BERGER, DOROTHY MARIAN GRACE	B	0 3262-1	JUL 10 1922	MAY 18 2003	MAY 10 2018	Dependent	
BERGER, JOSEPH	A	0 987		OCT 04 1863	OCT 04 1863	PVT	USA
BERGER, JUDO LOUIS	B	0 3262-1	JUL 14 1926	OCT 10 2017	MAY 10 2018	ETM3	USN
BERGMAN, NICHOLAS	A	0 1828		NOV 30 1862	NOV 30 1862	SGT	USA
BERTONUS, LEWIS	B	0 3108		JUL 15 1865	JUL 15 1865	PVT	USA
BERKEY, ABIAH	A	0 613		DEC 08 1862	DEC 08 1862	PVT	USA
BERNER, GOTLEIB	A	0 1319		JAN 17 1864	JAN 17 1864	PVT	USA
BERRY, JOHN	B	0 3226		DEC 12 1864	DEC 12 1864	PVT	USA
BERRYMAN, ROBERT LEE	B	0 33	JAN 11 1951	JAN 25 2013	FEB 07 2013	PV2	USA
BESCH, JOHN	A	0 981		OCT 01 1863	OCT 01 1863	PVT	USA
BESLEY, GEORGE	A	0 2562		APR 15 1864	APR 15 1864	PVT	USA
BESSY, ALEX	A	0 1652		SEP 28 1862	SEP 28 1862	PVT	USA
BETTIS, HELE LANGLEY	A	0 1327	APR 21 1895	NOV 27 1960	DEC 01 1960	Dependent	
BETZ, GEORGE	B	0 2612		OCT 15 1864	OCT 15 1864	PVT	USA
BETZ, REUBEN	B	0 3000		JUN 05 1865	JUN 05 1865	PVT	USA
BEUTNER, HARRY F	B	0 5030	APR 14 1895	FEB 19 1967	FEB 23 1967	ACM3	USN
BEYER, ALBERT	B	0 2911		APR 15 1865	APR 15 1865	PVT	USA
BEYER, GEORGE	A	0 424		NOV 05 1862	NOV 05 1862	PVT	USA
BEYERLEINE, MICHAEL	A	0 1184		MAR 15 1862	MAR 15 1862	PVT	USA
BEYTES, GEORGE D	A	0 904-5		SEP 30 1862	SEP 30 1862	PVT	USA
BIASE, ANTHONY J	B	0 5031	OCT 18 1897	MAR 25 1967	MAR 30 1967	Dependent	
BIASE, FLORENCE B	B	0 3446		JAN 20 1864	JAN 20 1864	PVT	USA
BIBB, RICHARD O	B	0 2065		JUN 08 1864	JUN 08 1864	CPL	USA
BICKFORD, JAMES H	A	0 22		MAY 23 1862	MAY 23 1862	PVT	USA
BICKFORD, KENDALL	D	0 23	APR 02 1915	APR 28 1967	MAY 02 1967	SGT	USA
BIDDLE, DEAN CHARLES	A	0 827		JUN 09 1863	JUN 09 1863	PVT	USA
BIRNALL, PAUL	A	0 335		SEP 22 1862	SEP 22 1862	PVT	USA
BIGLOW, JOSEPH H	A	0 642		JUL 25 1862	JUL 25 1862	PVT	USA
BIGLOW, W H	A	0 106		FEB 07 1863	FEB 07 1863	PVT	USA
BILLINGTON, GEORGE	A	0 2543		AUG 10 1864	AUG 10 1864	PVT	USA
BILLS, CHARLES	B	0 816-73		JUN 09 1864	JUN 09 1864	PVT	USA
BINGHAM, CARY E	A	0 730		JUL 03 1864	JUL 03 1864	PVT	USA
BIRCH, THOMAS C	B	0 2323		JAN 24 1945	FEB 24 1949	PPC	USA
BIRCH, WILLIAM F	B	0 3628	JUL 03 1917	FEB 19 1862	FEB 19 1862	PVT	USA
BIRCHER, GEORGE W SR	A	0 1371					
BIRNBAUM, GEORGE	B	0 1371					