

## Know Your City Parks:

### The Rand Tract

The Rand Tract, popularly known for its Webster Pond, is a fascinating 97-acre natural area located just off the west side of the 2000 block of Valley Drive in Syracuse, just north of St. Paul's Methodist Church. It is owned by the City of Syracuse, and administered by the Department of Parks, Recreation and Youth Programs. However, it is run as a wildlife sanctuary by the Anglers Association of Onondaga, who signed a long-term agreement with the city in 1960 to manage the property.

The Rand Tract is located on Onondaga Valley's west slope, one-third of a mile south of Seneca Turnpike. At the foot of the valley slope lies Webster Pond, while the valley wall is steep and wooded. In fact, most of the area of the Rand Tract is wooded upland

Webster Pond is open to the public year round from sun up to sundown daily. Visitors can park in a gravel lot next to the barn that the Anglers rent as their headquarters. Webster Pond is home to hundreds of ducks and geese, which are wild but are fed daily by human visitors. Members of the public who wish to feed the birds can purchase corn from the Anglers Association (for a donation). People are asked not to feed the birds any crackers or bread.

### Ephraim Webster

When the Anglers Association of Onondaga took over management of the property, they named the pond Webster Pond after Ephraim Webster, who came to the Syracuse area in 1786. He is credited with being Onondaga County's first permanent white settler. Webster's homestead is believed to have been located just to the west of the current pond, which had been a marsh in Webster's time.

Ephraim Webster was born in 1752 in New Hampshire. He fought in the American Revolution, and later got into the business of establishing trading posts. He learned the language and gained the trust of the Onondagas, who invited him to set up a trading post in their territory. Webster established his trading post on the east bank of Onondaga Creek near Onondaga Lake. For a number of years, he lived in marriage relations with a Native woman, but in 1796 he married Hanna Danks and had children with her. He served during the War of 1812, earning the rank of Captain. After the war, he became an Indian Agent and interpreter for the Onondagas. Webster died in 1824.



*This is one of the freshwater springs that can be seen from the trail in the upland wooded portion of the rand tract.*

## History

In 1795, the New York State state legislature granted Ephraim Webster a square mile of land. Webster's "Square Mile" was subdivided over the years until Herbert and Elaine Rand purchased 97 acres in 1925. The Rands farmed the land until 1944, then deeded the property to the City of Syracuse, except for the site of their house, 1942 Valley Drive. This land is still referred to as the Rand Tract.

Over the years, there have been many proposals to develop parts of the Rand Tract for various purposes. In 1927, a plan was created but never carried out to build 66 houses on the eastern part of the Rand property. In 1953, after the land had become City property, City Engineer Potter Kelly recommended building a large storm sewer to drain the pond. In the mid-Fifties, the Rand Tract was considered a possible site for a school, and Webster Pond for use as an auxiliary water source. In 1955, the Rand Tract was designated by the City Department of Public Works as suitable for a landfill.

In 1970, the United Task Force Development Corporation, a group of African-American professionals, sought to buy 22 acres of the Rand Tract to create a cluster development of 216 garden apartments for low or middle income families. This was to be built off outer Valley Drive near Chaffee Ave. The extremely controversial proposal, backed by the NAACP among other groups, was opposed by the Onondaga Valley Citizens League, who collected several thousand petition signatures in opposition.

Reports by the Onondaga County Soil and Water Conservation District and the state Department of Environmental Conservation, prepared in response to the development proposal, stated that development would increase trash and silt the inlet stream; unstable soils would cause erosion of the hillside; and development would disrupt songbird, rabbit and pheasant habitat. The Soil and Water Conservation District Report stated that the "entire area has excellent potential for use as an outdoor environmental conservation area ... Such an area ... could be used ... by families, school groups and the entire community ... There are no such areas in the city or in close proximity."



*This portion of the Rand Tract is one of the few remaining wetlands in the City of Syracuse.*

In 1971, the City designated the Rand Tract as a conservation education area under the supervision of the Department of Parks and Recreation. In 1973, Mayor Lee Alexander accepted a recommendation from the city's Commission on the Environment to keep the Rand Tract "forever wild."

In 1974, a report prepared for the City of Syracuse by Onondaga Nature Centers, predecessor to Centers For Nature Education, recommended developing the Rand Tract as a nature interpretive complex. This would include an environmental studies center, improved parking, trail system, exhibits and teaching stations.

In 1977, Syracuse Common Councilor Vincent O'Neil proposed that a system of hiking paths and signage be developed on the Rand Tract.

### **The Pond**

When the Rands bought their land in 1925, it was farmland and meadow; there was no pond. Stories differ widely on when and how the pond was formed. One theory of its creation is that somehow the straightening and channelization of Onondaga Creek disturbed the runoff and subsurface drainage of water in this area. The water, unable to drain away, collected in a wet meadow to form a pond. Another version is that Kimber Brook had long deposited silt in the meadow, and Mr. Rand had it removed annually. When he stopped this practice because he could no longer afford it, the pond developed. Another story has children damming the outlet, allowing water to back up into a boggy lowland meadow. Still another story has the pond developing because the "bottom dropped out of the meadow."

What is certain is that sometime in the 1950's, perhaps 1954 or 1955, a pond appeared on the Rand Tract. The exact date of its appearance is a mystery. The pond does not appear on aerial photographs taken in 1951, but it can be seen on 1959 aerial photographs.

Kimber Brook, which flows into the Webster Pond from the south, provides the pond with a steady supply of clean, fresh spring water. The pond itself is approximately 4.2 acres in size and varies in depth from 7 to 20 feet. Water flows north out of the pond and drains into Onondaga Creek.

Webster Pond was mostly wetland before 1961, when the Anglers Association brought in heavy equipment to clear out debris. The Anglers spent thousands of hours and dollars removing tires, cans, bottles, and trash from the pond and filling in the boggy eastern and northern shores of the pond with gravel and silt. They cleared brush, built a sea wall next to the parking lot, and mowed the grass along the shorelines. The Anglers also built stone islands in the middle of the pond so that young birds could be raised out of harm of predators. The result of their work is the Webster Pond that we see today.

### **Teaching Children To Be Good Stewards**

Webster Pond is used by a number of local schools as a destination for nature education field trips. Students (and other visitors) can observe the ducks and geese that live on the pond, and feed the birds and fish. Teachers or parents who bring their children to the pond are asked to



follow these guidelines:

1. Call the Anglers Association to inform them of your plans.
2. Do not plan to fish. Fishing is limited to Saturday mornings.
3. Cracked corn is available at the pond for a small donation. Do not feed the ducks crackers or bread. It causes mold on the scales of the fish.
4. Take all trash back to school or home.
5. Keep out of the wooded swamp west of the pond.
6. Do not disturb the nesting birds during Spring and Summer.

## **Birds, Fish and Wildlife**

In the spring of 1962, Onondaga Anglers member Roy Glahn, who owned a game farm, donated a dozen mallards to the pond. Winter feeding encouraged some birds to stay over the winter, and now a fairly large population over-winters at Webster Pond. Although best known for its domestic ducks and geese, Webster Pond hosts some 80 varieties of migratory birds. Many of the Canada geese, mallards and swans that now populate the pond were left off by owners who no longer wanted the birds.

*Hundreds of ducks, geese and other waterfowl make Webster Pond their home.*

The Anglers first stocked Webster Pond with fish - brown and rainbow trout, and bass - in 1969. Webster Pond is still home to a large population of bass, and the thousand trout that are released into the pond each year by the Anglers Association. A large muskie was once caught at Webster Pond. Snapping turtles have been commonly found at the pond.

The Rand Tract features one of the few remaining wetlands located within the City of Syracuse. The wooded swamp and cattail marsh to the west of Webster Pond are important wildlife habitats. These areas are not readily accessible to visitors, but they provide food, shelter, and nesting sites to birds such as the osprey and great blue heron, and mammals such as deer and squirrels. Other wildlife commonly found on the Rand Tract include fox, mink, raccoon, woodchuck and opossum.

The property is nearly two-thirds wooded, supporting a variety of tree species including oaks, maples, hickory, hemlock, basswood, tuliptree and black cherry. If you drive west on Chaffee Ave., which is just north of the Rand Tract, and take a left onto Hopper Rd., you will come to a dead end. A trail head that begins here leads into the woods of the Rand Tract. Most of the trees that you will see along the trail are relatively young, because most of the land was farmed prior to the 1960s. If you follow the trail for a distance into the forest, you will see a number of freshwater springs bubbling up out of the ground near the trail.

A large, majestic willow growing next to Webster Pond cannot be missed when driving into the parking lot.

## **Anglers Association of Onondaga**

The Anglers Association of Onondaga was established in 1890 and incorporated in 1903. It is the oldest continually active sportman's club in New York State. Early in its history, the Anglers helped lobby in Albany for the formation of the Fish, Forest and Game Commission, predecessor

to the state Department of Environmental Conservation. Well-known members of the Anglers Association of Onondaga have included former Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan.

The Anglers Association holds a Youth Fishing Program at Webster Pond on Saturday mornings from 8 a.m. to noon during trout season. Youth between the ages of 7 and 16 can fish every Saturday during the season for a \$10 one-time fee. Children between the ages of 7 and 11 must be accompanied by an adult. The Anglers stock the pond with several varieties of trout, and some 500 - 700 of these fish are caught by youth fishers each year.

### **The Onondaga Historical Association**

There is a great deal of fascinating information available about Syracuse parks and the historical figures associated with them at the Onondaga Historical Association Research Center, 311 Montgomery St., Syracuse, phone 428-1862. The center is open Wednesday through Saturday from 1 to 4:30 p.m.. There is a \$5 charge per visit to the Research Center, or a one-year Individual membership in the Onondaga Historical Association is available for \$30 that allows unlimited free visits. The Onondaga Historical Association is a wonderful resource for original sources of information on a wide variety of Onondaga County topics