

LAKE

EFFECT

The old Connecticut lakefronts, like the one in Old Lyme *at left*, are being transformed by big houses and equally big prices.

By Margaret Farley Steele



BOB O'CONNOR/GETTY

In terms of real estate speculation, Connie Trolle's timing was impeccable. In 2000, looking to relocate back East from California, she saw opportunities galore on Bantam Lake, where she had summered as a child.

She and her partner had already renovated four homes in costly Malibu Colony, and prices on Connecticut's largest natural lake seemed reasonable by comparison. After paying \$450,000 for an 1880 waterfront house on Deer Island, they sold it for \$960,000 two years later, having spent some \$300,000 on renovations. "That sort of started the ball rolling," Trolle says. The following year they redid a lakefront fixer-upper, turning it around in about three months for an \$80,000 profit, and in 2003 they tackled a \$340,000 hillside cottage, winterizing it and remodeling it with top-of-the-line amenities; it has three bedrooms, a new three-bay garage with

an office/guest suite above plus a boat shed and dock on the water. Asking price: \$1.575 million.

Trolle says, "It was like a secret here. Everybody knew about Lake Waramaug, and the prices went very high there, but not too many people knew about Bantam." Word is out now, though, and the once-sleepy lakeside community, bordered by Morris and Litchfield, is rousing from its slumber.

At the turn of the 20th century, Bantam was a popular summer destination, and rustic cabins and communities of platform tents dotted the lake's perimeter. Today, there's a new look to the lakefront. Massive homes are rising on East Shore Road, Bantam's Gold Coast, where buyers have snapped up and demolished two and three adjacent cabins, building in their place large shingle-style homes like those in Westport or Fenwick on Long Island Sound. One of the more eye-catching residences contains a movie theater and substantial wine cellar, Trolle says, a sea change from the 600-square-foot cottages of yesteryear.

Defying a sluggish real estate market statewide, prices around Bantam and around Connecticut's other lakes remain strong. "Waterfront in general in America is hot," says Carolyn Klemm, who runs Klemm Real Estate in Litchfield County. "There are a lot of lakes in Litchfield County, but never a lot for sale on any one of them."

Seasonal homes on Bantam Lake start at \$700,000, says Trolle, who runs a real estate business, Litchfield Hills Properties. "There used to be bargains, but not any longer," she says. In January, a Mediterranean-style home with lake views was listed for \$2 million, which would be the top sale price for a single-family house on Bantam to date. Most of the newcomers are second-home buyers.

According to Michele McLaughlin, tax assessor for the town of Morris, Bantam Lake prices increased an average of 52 percent from 2000 to 2004, when the town did its most recent revaluation. Summing up the law of supply and demand that drives waterfront real-estate transactions, Trolle says, "They just don't make any more water."

It didn't hurt that the tony resort Winvian opened recently in Morris, bringing to this semirural Litchfield County community well-heeled visitors willing to part with about \$1,500 a night. "It's a great addition," says Trolle of the 113-acre resort and spa. "It's exquisite."

Blonde and casually but smartly attired, Trolle drives a Range Rover that appears to suit Bantam's new upwardly mobile image. "People are putting money and taste into things here," she says.

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SEAN AIKMAN/SOTHEBY'S INTERNATIONAL REALTY

With spectacular views and 6,000 square feet, this Candlewood Lake beauty is on the market for \$2.75 million.



One of Bantam Lake's big new mansions dwarfs the refurbished cottage next door, which itself sold in March for \$900,000.



Old-style cottages can still be found. This one on Oxoboxo Lake in Oakdale is listed at \$169,900.

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Not everyone applauds the new construction on the lake, though. Longtime residents like Louis Belloisy, who owns a two-room cabin on 55 feet of waterfront, detest some of the big new homes. "They are ugly," the semi-retired corporate pilot says. "Most of them look like they were designed by a committee."

Rising taxes are another sore point. "A lot of people are leaving because the taxes are killing us," says Belloisy, noting that he receives few public services, but has seen his taxes rise over the decades from \$1,600 to \$7,000 for his home of less than 1,000 square feet.

"It's the New Yorkers with the very deep pockets who have discovered us," says the 25-year resident. "Most people up here resent them. They want to change everything."

The Bantam Lake "discovery" story is being repeated at other lakes around the state. In Middlesex County, newcomers are putting their stamp on the shore of Lake Pocopotaug. "Some things on the lake look like they should be in Versailles," says Gem Marshall, office leader of Prudential Connecticut Realty in East Hampton.

Where tiny cottages sat side by side for generations, large year-round homes now stand, infuriating some, delighting others. Chuck Haller, a real estate agent and former developer who grew up on Lake Pocopotaug, is one of the latter. "There's nothing like walking through a beautiful big new home that's taken the place of three little shacks," he says.

Pocopotaug buyers tend to be middle-aged or older, and their lake house is probably a second or future retirement home, according to Marshall. There aren't too many young families moving in, she notes.

"Houses here are not inexpensive, but they are less expensive than the [Connecticut] river or the shore," says Marshall. And they are appreciating. A house with 200 feet of waterfront that sold for \$490,000 in 2000 went on the market for \$985,000 this winter. "That's high for us," she says. Nevertheless, a buyer stepped forward quickly. Still, for \$500,000 or \$600,000 it's possible to buy a year-round lake house with a dock. In January, a three-bedroom, two-bath home of 1,200 square feet was priced at \$625,000.

Despite escalating prices, homes on Pocopotaug must be priced fairly for them to sell, "not whatever is put on the market at any price," Marshall says.

Some believe the exorbitant cost of ocean-front has pushed buyers toward lakes, but others say lake lovers are of a different mindset altogether. "A lot of people have a dream of *On Golden Pond*. It's a different kind of living on a lake," says Trolle. "They want quiet."

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The fast pace of life today accounts for some of lakes' popularity, believes Linda Fercodini, a real estate broker living near Hitchcock Lake in Wolcott. "When people get home, they want to relax. Looking at water is very peaceful," she says.

In Fercodini's area, homes along Hitchcock and Cedar lakes have morphed from rustic into regal, and she doubts either lake has more than a half-dozen of its original cabins left. The trend to tear down and rebuild was evident 15 years ago, but really took off in the last 5 or 10 years, she says.

Further attesting to water's popularity, new condominiums at Arrowhead in Wolcott sold out prior to completion, mostly to local empty nesters who coveted the view of Chestnut Hill Reservoir, where they can swim, sail and paddle on the water.

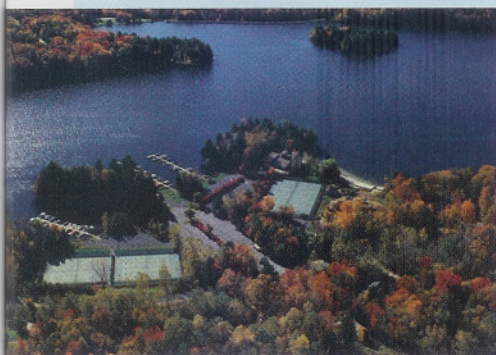
Realtors who specialize in waterfront—lake or Sound—have many more customers than homes for sale. "We have hundreds of customers we cannot satisfy with the current inventory," says Brian Corson, owner of Advanced Real Estate, which operates in Newtown, at Candlewood Lake and on the Connecticut River. Views and a slope to the water command the best prices, says Corson. If "they present themselves well," lakefront homes will be exposed to 30, 40 or 50 buyers the first few weeks and sell quickly, he adds.

Until recently, lesser-known lakes like Lake Zoar in Newtown and Highland Lake in Winchester were "local-market lakes," says Corson. "Now New Yorkers and others looking for second homes are routinely buying there," he says. For \$500,000 or \$600,000 on Highland Lake, you can buy a home that would cost you \$1 million on Candlewood, where the core market is \$750,000 to \$1.5 million, he notes.

Lake buyers fall into two camps, according to Corson. Some want to pursue their boating activities and care far less about the house than the water. "The other group thinks, 'I'll enjoy it now and five or 10 years from now this will be my retirement house, so I will buy as big as I can afford,'" he says.

Power boaters favor Candlewood Lake, Highland Lake, Twin Lakes in Salisbury and the Bridgewater-Roxbury side of Lake Lillinonah, real estate agents say. Those for whom motor boating holds little appeal pine for homes on Lake Quassapaug in Middlebury and Green Pond in Sherman, among others, but few homes ever turn over there. "A lot give up and buy someplace else," notes Corson.

The lakes in which Corson specializes lie in western Connecticut, and his "core buyers" come from New York City, Long Island, lower Fairfield County and New Jersey. They like



LAKES: AN APPRECIATION

Nearly 40 years ago, the Boise Cascade Co. bought over 1,000 acres in Goshen from five landowners, created a deepwater lake they called Woodridge, and began building roads and sewers and clearing 770 building lots. Within a year or so, they began selling the lots, most of which went for under \$20,000.

In the years since, Woodridge Lake has become a much-coveted place to live, either full-time or as a vacation spot. Aside from the crystal clear, 35-foot-deep lake (stocked with muskies—a rarity in Connecticut—along with other fish), there are beaches, tennis courts, parks, pools and a central clubhouse. The lake these days is home to successful bankers, writers, politicians and musicians. It's rare that a house directly on the water there comes on the market for less than \$1 million.

Indeed, in January Dr. Bernard Zuckerman, who had bought a .8-acre waterfront lot back in 1970 for just under \$20,000, sold it for the record sum of \$850,000. The buyer plans to build an 8,700-square-foot spec house that he hopes to sell for around \$3.7 million, according to a report in the *Litchfield County Times*.

It's hard to imagine even property fronting Long Island Sound increasing in value more than that.

being reasonably close to metro New York and are paying from \$800,000 to \$2 million for the privilege.

By far the hottest lake is Lake Waramaug, says Peter Klemm, senior vice president of the family real estate business. "A million dollars is the bottom of the barrel at Lake Wara-

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maug," he says. "The prices have gone crazy." To wit: A house on the lake's "50-yard line" with a converted boathouse was listed for \$12.5 million this winter. Waramaug's strict regulations regarding power boating and the clubby atmosphere appeal to high-end buyers seeking a low-key lifestyle.

Although buyers are less likely to get into the bidding wars of a few years ago, waterfront is "relatively unaffected by the rest of the market," Corson says. "Exceptionally nice properties are extremely hot. The 'also-ran' properties that would have sold a couple of years ago have to be realistically priced or they won't sell," he adds.

Lake prices will keep rising, he believes, because of the scarcity of waterfront and the financial wherewithal of potential buyers. Investment-banker types want drop-dead views and "will pay whatever they have to for their dream house," he says. "They're thinking, 'This is my hideaway, my retreat, and on Sunday morning I want a view that blows me away. And I want to get in my Bass boat and go for a ride.'"

As our lakes witness the transition from humble cottages to look-at-me mansions, some of the flashiest are found on Candlewood. A 17-acre spread was listed for \$5.5 million this winter, a figure Corson thought was the highest ever on the man-made lake. Located in New Fairfield, the 7,000-plus-square-foot home boasts seven bedrooms, a swimming pool and an expansive view. Another, this one on Candlewood's Brookfield shore, was listed for \$1.795 million and featured two family rooms, a home office and wine cellar, Belgium-block driveway and manicured grounds with dramatic western views. "This is Candlewood luxury living," says Corson.

With usage increasing, preservationists are working to preserve the quality and habitat of their lakes. Trolle, president of the Bantam Lake Protective Association, gets calls from representatives of other lake associations asking about controlling growth, keeping invasive weeds at bay and other issues related to the area's growing pains.

That's no surprise, since the newcomers share the same passion for vivid sunsets, waterskiing, fishing and ice-skating as the generations preceding them. Although Belloisy, the pilot, complains about development at Bantam Lake and his millionaire neighbors, he loves the lake too much to leave. "In summer, it's absolutely beautiful," he says, "and in winter, with the ice fishing, it's like a Currier and Ives painting. I'll hang out here as long as I can." ■