

At its height in the mid-19th century, ice harvesting was done across the cold climate regions of the United States including New England. Ice that was cut from ponds in January and February would reach their furthest destinations a few months later, in smaller amounts. Ice was a luxury in the pre-industrialized world. Without refrigeration or ice, food spoiled rapidly, and bacterial infections were more common.

Ice harvesting was done on many lakes and ponds in the Valley. Greenwich Lake alone yielded 100,000 tons of ice in a good year.



Photo and text courtesy of the Swift River Valley Historical Society



Painting by Jean Gattenby

These pictures show the work in progress. The ice is first marked into large cakes, then cut with a long ice saw, pushed away with pike poles, loaded onto horse-drawn sledges, packed in straw or sawdust, and hauled to icehouses or loaded onto the train to be shipped to cities.

It was cold, dangerous work, and tragic accidents sometimes occurred. A saw, like the ones seen here, is on display at the Swift River Valley Historical Society.

Ice Harvesting in the Swift River Valley: A Seasonal Industry

Before electricity, every household had an icebox or ice chest. The top section opened upward and was lined with zinc. The ice cake was placed here. Below was a door opening outward. Food was kept in this section. The iceman supplied cakes of ice with frequent deliveries.

He wore a rubber apron over his shoulders and would pick up the cake of ice with ice tongs, swing it onto his back, deliver it to the house, and place it into the chest. The horse waited patiently.



Photo and text courtesy of the Swift River Valley Historical Society



Photo courtesy of the DCR archives

The Boston & Albany (B&A) Railroad, north of Smith's Station, had a siding track which led to a large icehouse at the southern end of Greenwich Lake. In February of 1912, it was reported that 866 carloads of ice had been shipped over the branch from here.

Locomotives hauling the ice-filled freight cars from here came up from Springfield and had to turn around in Athol before backing into the siding. The ice was then shipped to the four-story icehouse at the West Springfield railyard.



Photo courtesy of the DCR archives

The ice harvesting industry began to experience decline in the early 1900s when refrigeration was introduced, making ice houses unnecessary. Also, climate change like we are experiencing today would have eventually ended the ice trade. Lakes and ponds don't stay frozen for as long as they used to, and the ice is usually thinner.