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— HISTORY —

## Pristine beauty of Coventry Lake leads to a tragedy

Long before Lake Wangumbaug, (or Coventry Lake), was known for Lakeside Park and as the terminus of the Willimantic-Coventry trolley line, its pristine beauty attracted writers, actors and artists from across the United States, who transformed this scenic spot into a private escape, and summertime resort in the years after the Civil War.

One such summer visitor was renowned America painter and sculptor Benoni Irwin (1840-96).

Benoni Irwin was born in Newmarket, Ontario, and removed to upstate New York as a child. He was a pupil of the National Academy of Design in New York, and trained in Paris with the famous French portraitist Emile Auguste Carolus-Duran (1838-1917), also known as Charles Durand.

Erwin's work was widely sought after by America's Gilded Age

elite, and he had studios in San Francisco, New York and Baltimore. Amongst other works, New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art holds an Irwin portrait of

Edward Messer, the head of Washington's Corcoran Art Gallery, and one of writer Charles H. Farnham.

Irwin participated in art exhibitions across America and Europe, and he exhibited in the Universal Exposition at Paris in 1889, and the Chicago World Fair in 1893.

Irwin married into a Coventry family, the Deans, and was introduced to the delights of Coventry Lake, and the beauty of northeast Connecticut.

Irwin and his wife lived at



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Yonkers, New York, but they built a home near to Coventry Lake, and spent more than 20 summers in the town. On the evening of Aug. 26, 1896,

Benoni Irwin loaded his camera onto a round bottom boat, and sailed out onto Lake Wangumbaug to take photographs of the lake at sunset. Irwin stood in the boat as he took pictures with the bulky camera and tripod, and was seen by many people on the shore. But as he was adjusting the focus, Irwin suddenly lost his balance, and fell into the lake.

Those on the lakeshore heard a splash, and then noted that the boat was empty. Ernest Woodworth jumped into a boat and rowed to Irwin's empty boat, but could see no sign of the unfortunate artist.

Woodworth's friend, Arthur Curtis, dived into the lake and quickly recovered Irwin's body. The artist's uncle through mar-

riage, Dr. Dean, and medical examiner Dr. Higgins were called to the scene, but Irwin could not be revived.

The local community was greatly shocked by the tragic loss of its prominent summer resident. Irwin was only 20 yards from the shore in an area where the water was only eight feet deep, and it was a surprise to many that he had drowned.

Some thought he may have collapsed from sunstroke or a heart attack, but the postmortem revealed that Irwin had drowned after being knocked unconscious by hitting his head on the edge of the boat as he fell.

The 56-year-old artist was buried in Coventry cemetery, and family and friends came from across the United States to attend his funeral.

His fellow artist, Julian Alden Weir, although not a native of the region, also chose to be buried at

nearby Windham. Such artists, other than enjoying the natural beauty of the landscape, believed that the light in northeastern Connecticut was just right.



Benoni Irwin's 'Portrait of a Lady,' 1890.