

The Ashokan Reservoir
Year Completed: 1915
Capacity: 123 billion gallons
Watershed size: 253 square miles

Introduction

The **Ashokan Reservoir** (Native American for **place of fish**) is a reservoir in Ulster County, New York, USA. The reservoir is in the eastern end of the Catskill Park, and is one of several reservoirs created to provide the City of New York with water. It is also New York City's deepest reservoir, being over 190 feet deep at its deepest point. This site is near the dam at the former site of Bishop Falls.

History

New York City turned to the Catskills for water in the early 20th century after discovering a group of speculators calling itself the Ramapo Water Company had bought up water rights to many water sources further south in Rockland, Orange and Ulster counties. The Catskills were more desirable as state-owned Forest Preserve land in the region could not, under the state constitution, be sold to any other party. The state constitution also allowed up to 3% of the total Forest Preserve land to be flooded for reservoirs.

Residents of the area to be flooded did not take kindly to the idea, and fought eminent domain proceedings bitterly. They were aided by local lawyers familiar with the checkered history of Catskill land claims. It would be 1940 until the last were settled.

Local opponents of the reservoir also cast doubt on its soundness, saying it could never hold enough water (it would be the largest reservoir in the world at the time), but when it was filled from 1912 to 1914, they were silenced. It covered several communities located in a valley where farming, logging, and quarrying was the most important industry. Approximately one thousand residents along with roads, homes, shops, farms, churches, and mills were either moved or abandoned, but most of them were torn down. Several of these communities were re-established in nearby locations. 12.45 miles (20 km) of a local railroad line (the Ulster and Delaware Railroad) was moved and cemeteries were relocated.

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The dam was constructed mainly by local laborers, as well as African-Americans and Italian immigrants, who also did the job of razing most of the trees and buildings in the area. Fights would often break out in the labor camps where the crews would eat and sleep, so a police force, which would later become the New York City Department of Environmental Protection (NYCDEP) Police, was established to keep peace in the camps. The dam was constructed with Rosendale cement, which at the time was the world's strongest cement. When the dam was completed, giant steam whistles blew for one hour, signaling to people in the valley to evacuate immediately.

Some relocated communities survive along the reservoir's banks, such as West Shokan, Olivebridge, Ashokan and Shokan. Most, however, such as Brown's Station, are remembered by historical markers and signs along routes.

The resulting body of water is the oldest New York City–owned reservoir in the Catskill Mountains, being placed into service as long ago as 1915. It is located at the eastern end of Ulster County and approximately 93 miles north of New York City. The reservoir is one of NYC's largest according to its surface area and volume. At full capacity, the reservoir can hold 122.9 billion US gallons of water, has a 255-square-mile drainage basin, and is over 180 feet deep at its deepest point, making it the city's deepest reservoir.

Activities:

Due to the need to ensure the safety of the water system, and to make sure the nearly century-old dams stay intact, only limited activities are permitted around the reservoir property, including fishing and logging. One needs a special license to do such activities. For instance, if one is to go boating or fishing, which the reservoir is well known to the locals for, one would need a public access permit. Otherwise, it is no longer valid.

Also, such activities as swimming and diving are strictly prohibited. This is in order to make sure the water stays as clean as possible. It is also illegal to bring gasoline-powered boats into the reservoir. This is in case gasoline leaks into the water and pollutes it.