CUTTING ICE - BIG BUSINESS IN BETHLEHEM

Ice harvesting is an important, yet little appreciated, episode in American history. Harvesting ice for consumption and food storage has been known for centuries. Practiced on a small scale by the early settlers and colonists, it grew to an enormous, multi-million dollar industry in the mid to late 1800’s. Yet, by the 1920’s it was on its way out, and today is just a memory.

The shores of the Hudson River in Bethlehem were lined with icehouses. Some, like George Best’s Cedar Hill Ice House were locally owned and shipped their ice to New York City. Others were owned by large companies like the Knickerbocker Ice Company out of NYC. Wilbur’s Ice House on the Normans Kill served the Albany market. In 1855 Hunts Merchant magazine reports that NYC required 285,000 tons of ice, Albany stored up 20,000 tons. These figures were only to grow, before a steady decline in the 1920s.

The Pappalau Ice House on the Normans Kill can be seen in the top right corner. The photo is in the Town Archives and dates to c.1900. In the upper left is one of the 15 district schools houses that were in Bethlehem at the time.

A group of photos taken by Henry Myer in the winter of 1914-15, showing ice harvesting for Baker’s
Ice House. Baker’s was located in the Cedar Hill section Bethlehem.

Photo courtesy of the Bethlehem Historical Association.