

ECHO LAKE

A Place to Meet, A Sense of Community



Echo Lake was formed in the mid-19th century from Meredith Branch, a 3.5-mile stream between Broad Street and the Chickahominy Swamp. During the late 1800s, the lake powered a flour mill. Echo Lake earned its name because you could hear your voice echo when you called out across the water.

In 1909, Jacob E. Lewis, an African-American farmer and preacher, bought Echo Lake and established it as a recreation area for African-Americans. After his death, there were unsuccessful attempts by commercial organizations to continue Lewis' vision. In 1930, a group of area residents joined to create Echo Lake, Inc., and bought the property. Throughout the decade, the lake and grounds became a popular destination for dances, picnics, boat rides, sporting activities and camping for the Black community. Church congregations including Mt. Olive Baptist, Mount Vernon Baptist, and Abner Baptist gathered for baptisms on Sunday mornings.

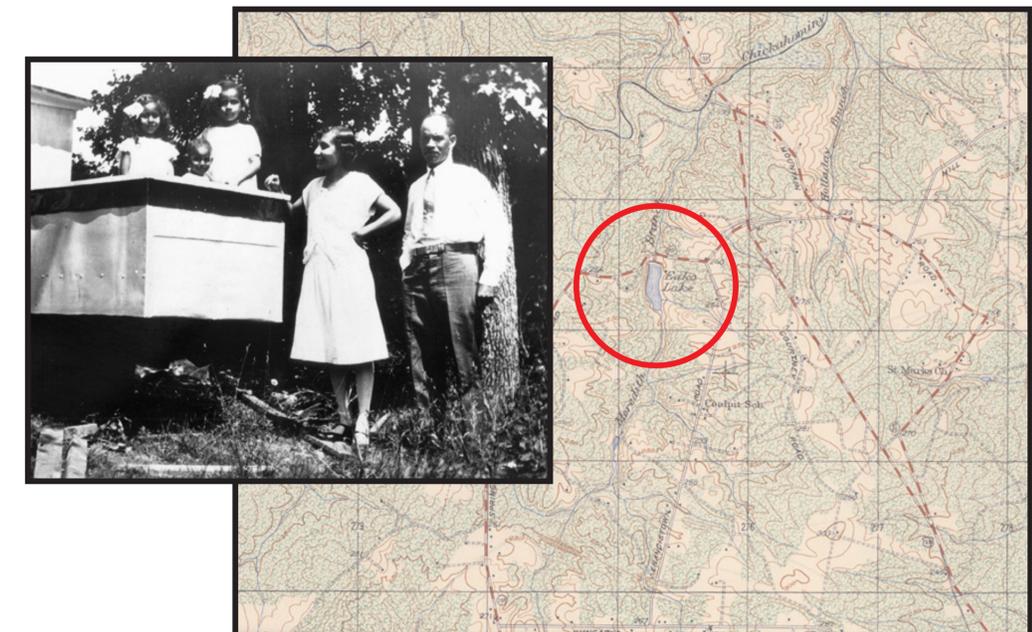
During a period of strict racial segregation, Echo Lake provided a place for African-Americans to meet, recreate and relax. Many locals remember the "tightness of the community" that was the result of having a place to congregate and discuss the news. Others remember the music and dancing that abounded with the talents of the Johnson's Happy Pals Orchestra. This ten-member group of black Richmond musicians, formed in 1927, was a regular attraction at the lake's pavilion. In 1929, the band won a contest in New York City winning over orchestras directed by Count Basie, Cab Calloway and Duke Ellington.

By 1940, much of the activity had subsided except for fishing, picnics and an occasional baptism. The County of Henrico purchased the property in 1981 and developed the site as a public park with a 1.5-mile hiking trail, pedestrian bridge, playground and picnic shelter.



Baptism of Mt. Olive Baptist Church members at Echo Lake, Sunday, Sept. 25th, 1938.

Photo by A.D. Price, Jr., courtesy of Esther Winston



Echo Lake Pleasure Boat, ca. 1935.

Left to right: Julia Melton Thornton, Herman D. Melton, Jr. and Camilla Melton Miller, Julia Melton and Herman D. Melton, Sr.

Courtesy of Julia Melton Thornton