

A History of Covenant Harbor

(This document is an unofficial history, containing anecdotal historical snapshots as recorded by Karen Hinz. Updated 5/23)

- Early history: The property was an estate called “Snug Harbor” and owned by George and Mary Sturgis. Construction of the main residence started in 1881. The Sturgis family owned it until 1911. The property was next owned by John Borden until 1919. Mr. Borden was unrelated to the family that owned the famous Borden Dairy Company. Mr. and Mrs. Borden’s daughter married Adlai Stevenson. A family by the name of Macintosh owned the property next. Then C.B. Smith owned it from 1923-31. A Chicago real estate firm owned the property for a brief time during the depression. The final private owners were Charles H. and Rose Dodge. Mr. Dodge was a manufacturer of meat packing house machinery.
- 1948-1954: Victor Person (Uncle Vic) became the first full time camp manager responsible for maintaining the facilities and grounds.
- Summer 1948: The first Bible camps were offered at Covenant Harbor. Counselors and program staff were volunteers serving week-by-week. From 1952 to 1956: Summer attendance grew to approximately 1,000 campers. The Central Conference Sunday School Association offered three weeks of camp for “juniors” in the 9 to 11 age group. The Hi League Committee also offered three weeks of camp for teens. These included a boys’ camp, a girls’ camp and a Senior Hi League camp. Cost for a week of camp was between \$13.50 and \$17.00.
- July 4, 1948: First Sunday morning worship service at camp.
- 1948-1949: the Lodge dining facility was built by volunteers, who donated 349 workdays of manpower. (It was joked that it was “the building that coffee built.”) It was first used for the summer 1949 season.
- 1951-1952: The “Triplet” cabins were built with volunteer labor and donations to pay for materials.
- 1952-1956: The original Sturgis mansion, nicknamed the “Big House,” was used for administration as well as lodging. During the school year many Covenant churches used this facility for weekend retreats. The Big House was three stories high and had 26 rooms and 11 bathrooms. It provided sleeping accommodations for ninety. On January 17, 1957: The Big House burned down following a winter weekend retreat. Covenant Harbor lost its major winterized retreat facility along with two thirds of its summer capacity. Among the items lost in the fire were two grand pianos and twelve original Warner Sallman paintings. The cause of the fire was undetermined, but electrical problems were suspected.

- Summer 1957: No summer camps were conducted at Covenant Harbor due to the loss of the Big House. The property was locked. For the summer of 1958 a limited summer camp schedule was offered.
- 1959: Two wings were added to the dining room to add sleeping space for 60. The dining room was now called the "Lodge". Two summer cabins were joined together to become the "Twins".
- 1961: The Evangelical Covenant Church's Central Conference merged with the Great Lakes Conference. Covenant Point Bible Camp in Iron River, Michigan, became a sister camp to Covenant Harbor.
- 1965: through a fund drive and a mortgage on Covenant Harbor, improvements were made at both camps. At Covenant Harbor these included: The director's residence, called "Harbor House," currently used as the administrative office; Four lower and four upper compounds were constructed, with one bathhouse in each area; The maintenance shop; The lakefront bathhouse/sauna; The Lodge winterized; The Twins winterized (Eventually this building became known as Hilltop House).
- February 20, 1977: The (old) "Hilltop House", one of the original estate buildings, burned down. With the destruction of this building, Covenant Harbor lost 35 beds and one of its four winterized facilities. Remodeling of Carriage House was completed with the insurance money received from the Hilltop House.
- 1979-2001: Pete Heintzelman was executive director of Covenant Harbor. At the time he began, the staff consisted of Pete, a full time maintenance/grounds person, a part-time cook, and a part-time bookkeeper. During this period there was significant growth in physical plant, staff, programmed events, and rental use.
- Spring of 1986: The ropes course building and original ropes course were built. The cost to build the ropes course was paid for through a donation from the American Diabetes Association, who were initially primary users of it.
- Spring of 1987: The Lower Compound area was enlarged. Four new cabins and one new bathhouse were built.
- May 14, 1988: Ground was broken for the construction of the Geneva Bay Centre. The first group to use GBC was booked for February 10-11, 1989. The building was finished on time and within budget. Cost for the new conference center was \$2.1 million.
- Summer 1989-present: Covenant Harbor offers "Camp Kishwauketoe" in the upper compound area. The program was created to provide a small "first time" camp experience for children in grades 2-4.

- May 27, 1994: Covenant Harbor ran its first annual Golf for Kids tournament. This event raised money for scholarships to bring urban children and youth to Bible camp. In 1994, the summer camp program added a week of “Urban Camp” to specifically minister to inner-city kids who had not been to camp before. The Urban Camp continued as a separate week through 1999. After this time, urban campers signed up for any week of camp they could attend, and scholarships were awarded to individuals. In part, this was done to better integrate campers.
- July 24, 1995: The newly-created Foundation for Covenant Harbor was created. The foundation rallied around eliminating Covenant Harbor’s debt, and raising funds for capital improvements.
- Summer 1996, the summer program adds the junior high program called “Skill Camp,” in an effort to introduce kids to new skill areas – from sports to arts – vary the camp experience, and compete with “specialty camps.”
- 1996-1997 Covenant Harbor embarked on a major strategic planning process, resulting in the following guiding principles:
 - **Mission Statement:** Covenant Harbor draws people from their routines into opportunities to enjoy creation, recreation, and relationships, so that all will experience God through Jesus Christ.
 - **Vision Statement:** We envision Covenant Harbor as a sanctuary where diverse people meet God in a well-developed and enriching environment stewarded by a competent, responsive, well-cared-for team of God-honoring people.
 - **Core Values:** Hospitality, Heritage, Excellence, Stewardship, Personal Growth, Community, Integrity.
- Spring 1997: Covenant Harbor initiated capital projects totaling almost \$250,000, paid for with designated gifts for this purpose: Replacing the high ropes course; Replacing the roof of the Boat House; Renovating the beach areas and front lawn; Building a new bathhouse; Purchasing a large tent and appropriate furniture for worship and other meetings.
- June 14 -15, 1997: Covenant Harbor celebrated its fiftieth anniversary with a special worship service and reunion.
- June 1, 1998: The Foundation for Covenant Harbor paid off the entire debt of the camp to National Covenant Properties in the amount of \$2.7 million. (A loan of \$150,000 was taken with a bank for the portion un-pledged, later paid down in installments.) July 26, a service of Praise and Thanksgiving was held to celebrate. Debt elimination was thanks in large part to the churches and individuals who consistently made camp ministry a priority, and rallied to save the camp.
- Summer 1998-2003: a second Sunday worship service was offered. The 8 a.m. service in the Boathouse was an outreach to the community. Guest preachers, including staff, and an informal musical style ministered to about 40 “lake people.”

This service led to the birthing of a Covenant church, a dream many had fostered since the early days of Covenant Harbor. In 2002, Anchor Covenant Church helped administer the service, and in 2003 the church ran the services entirely. After that time, the church met in other facilities year-round, and the early services at camp were discontinued. The camp had no desire to compete with the church, and was grateful that an ongoing church ministry was finally available to residents, including many camp employees.

- Fall 2001: Rev. Dave Auker served as interim executive director, and May 2002 – present as executive director.
- March 11, 2003: Groundbreaking ceremony for Engebretson Lodge, next to Carriage House. This air-conditioned building added 48 beds and two meeting spaces. The building cost \$600,000 and was in use by July.
- Spring 2003: Guest House was gutted and remodeled.
- 2003-2005: Growth continues in summer camps, Elderhostel, Snake Road and rental programs. Guest House and Hilltop House are remodeled. The Nicholls Maintenance Center is built. Plans are developed for a new Activity Center.
- 2006: The old maintenance building is remodeled into The Knoll meeting room and Shadow Hill Amphitheatre is built.

A Current Snapshot of Covenant Harbor

Covenant Harbor currently operates year round with a full time staff of 20 and part time staff of 25. This does not include ropes course instructors or Elderhostel instructors. In addition, the summer staff is made up of 60+ high school and college age young people who carry out the resident and day Bible camp program. Covenant Harbor annually serves 27,000 campers and guests representing approximately 450 different groups, churches, and organizations. Covenant Harbor encompasses 1,151 feet of shore line and 51 acres of property. In 2000, Harbor hosted guests 309 days of the year.

Covenant Harbor operates with four program departments. **Youth Ministry** runs fall, winter, and spring retreats for children, youth, and families, and nine weeks of summer camp. Summer camp programs include resident camps for children from second grade through high school, plus family camp. Concurrent to resident camp, there is a day camp program for children first through sixth grade. In a given week of summer camp, the Youth Ministry department serves 200+ children. **Experiential Education** facilitates outdoor education programs for school groups, ropes challenge course experiences, and adventure trip camping for youth, families, and adults. The department of experiential education employs two full time staffers, three interns, and about 20 “on call” instructors. **Adult Education** runs many weeks of Elderhostel annually, on our site

and two other sites. In addition to events planned by our program staff, the Harbor **Guest Services** hosts groups leading their own retreats and camp experiences. These groups range from church family retreats to YMCA programs, to corporate team-building. **Operational Departments** of food service, housekeeping, and maintenance serve all of our guests.

Covenant Harbor's annual operating budget is over \$2.5 million. We serve 28,000 campers and guests representing approximately 500 different churches and organizations.