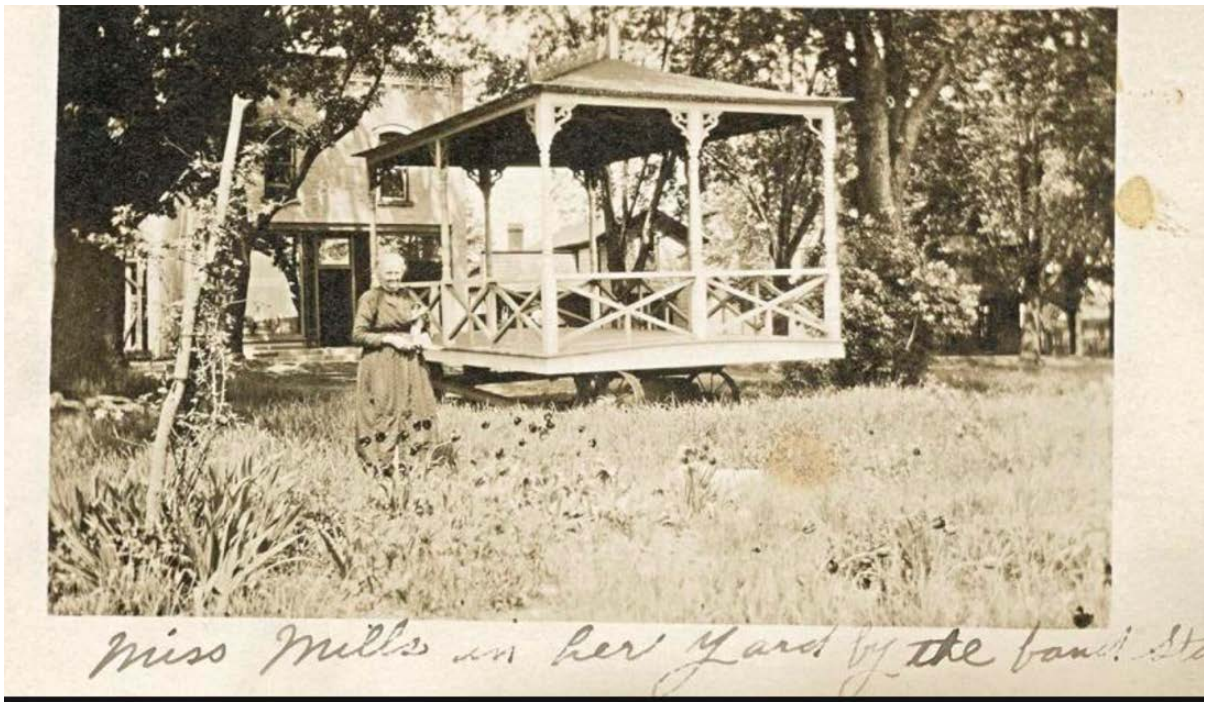
The History of Deacon Mills Park and Starlight Stage Celebrates 75 Years

James C. Mills, known as Deacon Mills, arrived in Dartford in 1848 and operated the Lake House, a three-story framed hotel at the corner of Hill and Mill Streets - now the site of the present-day gas station. He later renamed it Deacon's Hotel, and in 1890, it became the Mills Hotel. Mills had one child, a daughter Harriet (Hattie) Mills, born in 1848.

During the Civil War, the hotel served as a site for the Sanitary Commission of the War Department. Community members gathered there to prepare food for soldiers, including horseradish, believed to help combat scurvy. They also scraped lint from linens to be used as surgical dressings.

Hattie Mills was raised in the hotel and worked there until her parents' passing. By 1907, she no longer managed the hotel but lived quietly in a single corner room on the first floor until her death in 1933. A significant landowner in Green Lake, she deeded a valuable lakeshore property for a public park named **Deacon Mills Park** in honor of her father.

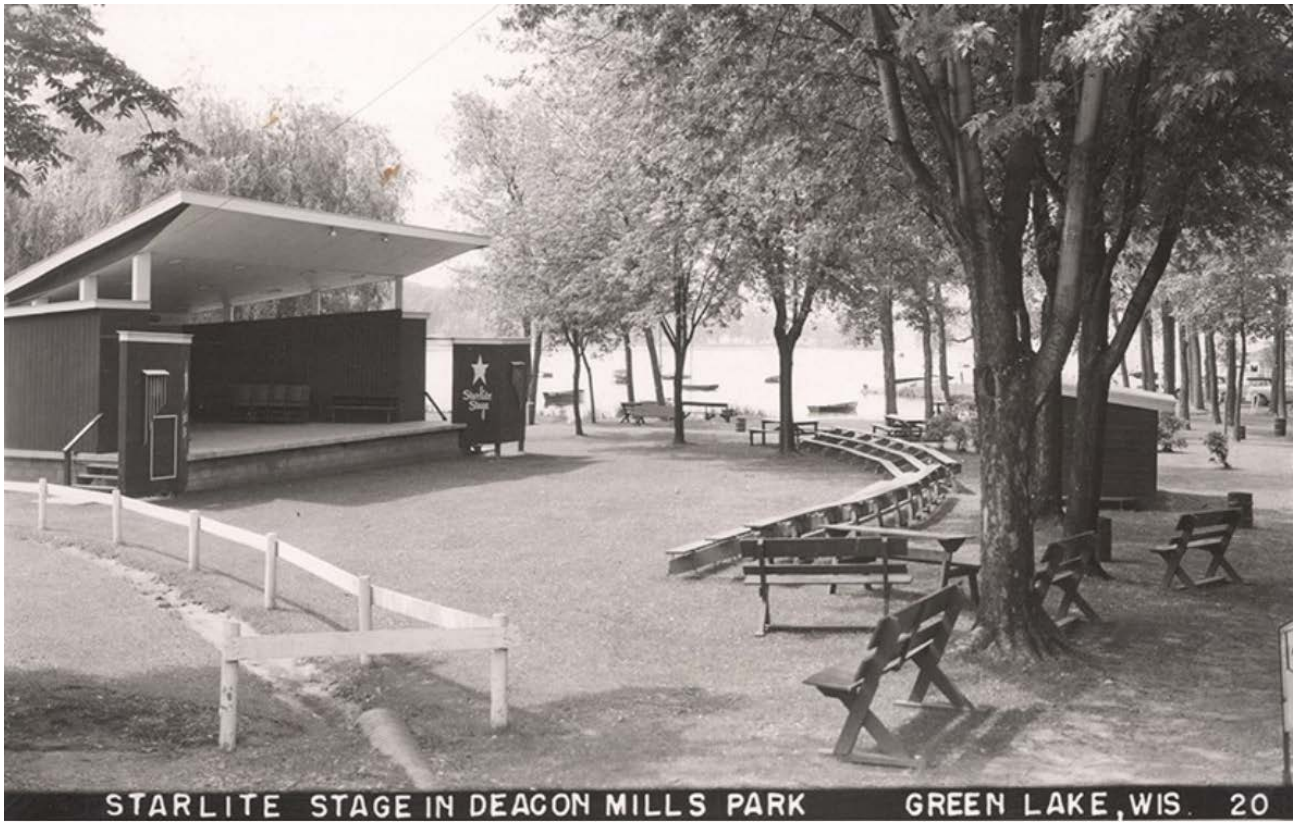


While Hattie lived alone in the old Mills Hotel, the village bandstand, a mobile structure, was moved around town and often positioned at the hotel's corner for summer concerts. Green Lake, a town with deep musical roots, regularly hosted band concerts on village streets and the courthouse lawn, attracting large crowds.

Starlight Stage

In the late 1940s, Green Lake High School band director Bob Malcolm and local artist Lester Williams envisioned a permanent outdoor performance space. They wanted to provide a venue for local talent and attract visiting musicians. Over two summers, concerts were held at different locations to determine the best spot for maximizing audience

capacity, reducing sun glare, and ensuring good acoustics. By the end of the second summer, the ideal location was chosen, and a concrete stage was constructed. Mabel Brooks and local women's organizations quickly raised the necessary funds to complete the project, and the band shell was built, and the new **Starlight Stage** was dedicated to Bob Malcolm. The first performance took place in June 1950 and followed by the Battle of the Bands, High School band and community band concerts, and summer theater productions by residents, and eventually weekly summer "Concerts in the Park."



Sadly, by 2006, the Starlight Stage had fallen into disrepair and was slated for demolition. However, community member Josie Sullivan stepped in to fund the necessary renovations, preserving this important piece of Green Lake's history. The restoration was completed in 2008, and a plaque honoring Sullivan remains on the stage.

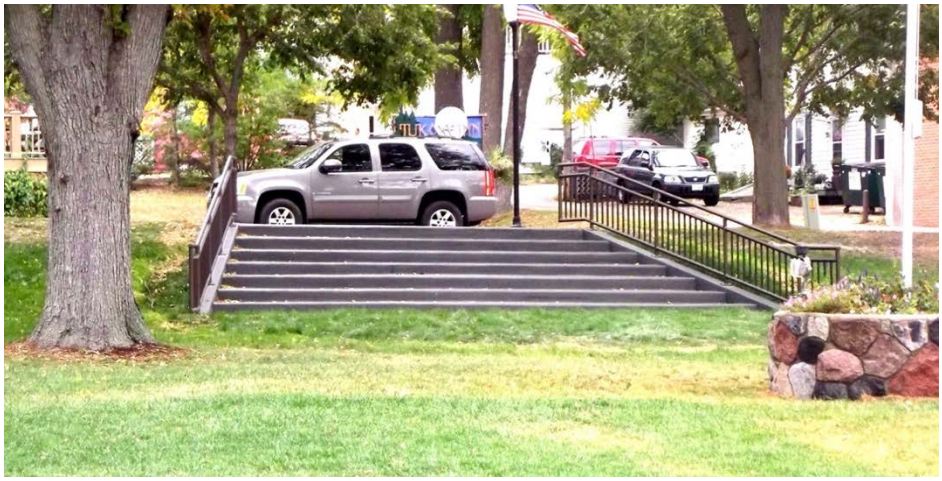
Deacon Mills Wharf Project

In spring 2009, a new non-profit organization, the Downtown Green Lake Renewal Project, was launched by Mary-Jo Johnson, Mary Rowley, and Jo Ellen Madden. One of its early major initiatives, with strong community support, was the dredging of Dartford Bay at Deacon Mills Park and the construction of a 270-foot wharf with a parallel memorial brick sidewalk. After two years of raising $250,000+ to fund the Deacon Mills Wharf Project, work began in the fall of 2011 and was completed in May 2012, culminating in a community wide celebration "Wingding on the Wharf" in July 2012.





Also that summer, Josie Sullivan further enhanced Deacon Mills Park by funding the wide staircase entrance from South Street, improving accessibility and providing additional seating for concerts.



Deacon Mills Park remains a central gathering place for the Green Lake community year-round. The Wharf offers boat parking and fishing opportunities. From June through August, concerts are held in the park every Wednesday evening, while various organizations host events throughout the summer. In the winter, an ice-skating rink is created by the Wharf on Dartford Bay. Signature events such as the Fourth of July celebration, Golden Days Harvest Festival, and Winter Fest also take place in the park.

Deacon Mills Park is truly a gem for the City of Green Lake.



Credits

A Heritage History of Beautiful Green Lake, Wisconsin – Robert W. and Emma B. Heiple
Dartford Historical Society