George Williams College has a rich history dating back to 1884 when it was established to train young men for service in the YMCA. Named for Sir George Williams, who founded the YMCA in London in 1844, the college was conceived as a summer retreat for Y workers. Today, GWC operates as a campus of Aurora University, offering undergraduate and graduate programs.

George Williams College History
On a warm August afternoon in 1884, three men lit a dedicatory campfire on the shores of Geneva Lake to celebrate the founding of the summer training institute on this campus that would nurture the aspirations of the YMCA movement for decades to come. Months later, they executed contracts for a development of a kitchen, icehouse, dining room and administration building and secured 20 large tents for housing. Four years afterwards, the camp’s landmark structure, Lewis Auditorium, took up its iconic place on the lakefront.

Before century’s end, the institute merged with a Young Men’s Christian Association school in Chicago to create the organization known eventually as George Williams College (GWC). Subsequent decades saw members of the GWC community dividing their time between an academic campus in the city and “College Camp” in Wisconsin. In these two distinctive settings, students prepared to assume positions of leadership in a wide range of “helping” professions.

In 1965, the college moved from its South Side location in Chicago to a new campus in the western suburbs. Unfortunately, the financial pressures associated with development of the facility eventually proved too heavy for the institution to continue, and in 1985, Illinois operations ceased. Several of the college’s signature academic programs found new homes at Aurora University (AU). GWC trustees, meanwhile, embarked on a search to identify a new higher education partner to operate College Camp.

Their efforts culminated in a 1992 affiliation with AU and the decision to merge the two organizations eight years later. Today, the GWC campus is operated by Aurora University, an independent institution of higher learning offering bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral degrees. An estimated 1,000 students annually attend the George Williams College campus.

Geneva Lake History
The Geneva Lake area was populated by Native Americans as far back as 3,000 years ago. Approximately 2,000 years ago, Hopewell Indians left effigy mounds — earthen structures in the shapes of animals — behind as they moved on. A few are still visible today (one is located on the grounds of Lake Lawn Resort along Delavan Lake). Potawatomi Indians originally named Geneva Lake “Kishawauketoe,” meaning “clear water.” Early settlers renamed it Big Foot Lake, a name that stuck even after the Potawatomi chief. John Kinzie, a federal Indian agent, was the first recorded European to see Geneva Lake in 1831. Later, the land was sold to settlers for $2.50 an acre in 1836, and they turned to timber, wheat and dairy farming. In 1839, the land was purchased by John Brink, a government surveyor, who claimed the waterfall and adjacent land at the White River outlet to the lake in 1835. He named the body of water after the lake in his home in Geneva, New York.

There are several factors that prompted growth of Geneva Lake in the early 1900s. Many men from the Chicago area visited to hunt and fish in the 1870s. After spending time at the lake, they found it to be an ideal setting to build summer residences. In the summer of 1871 the Chicago and North Western Railroad opened a spur line from Chicago to Lake Geneva, thus making it easy for Chicagoans to make the trip to Wisconsin. In October of 1871 the Great Chicago Fire began and numerous families who were displaced by the tragedy spent the fall and winter of 1871–1872 in Lake Geneva awaiting the reconstruction of their homes in the city. After returning to Chicago, many relocates what to Geneva Lake to spend summers in the area.

Walking Tour
350 Constance Blvd | P.O. Box 210
Williams Bay, WI 53191

gwc.aurora.edu
The Lakefront Buildings are constructed in the 1950s and are used for public lodging during the year. The Lakefront Building to the west was renovated in 2018.

As you continue toward the lakefront, you come to the Weedn Administration Building. This building was designed by Emery Stanford, and is named after Robert Weedn, one of the three founders of this campus. It was a former telephone company and now serves as a conference center.

Continuing along Cloister Drive, at the top of the hill is the Conference Center. Originally built in 1926, it was renovated in 1996 and dedicated in 2007. It is home to the “Women’s Discovery Center,” which includes meeting and conference space, and the landscapes built in honor of the YMCA. It is the first building in New York City designed by the American Institute of Architects. Today, the building is home to the conference center.

As you turn right on Lewis Road, the two adjacent buildings on your left are the Winston Paul Educational Center and the Seabury Room, which includes meeting and activity spaces, and the Seabury Room, which includes meeting and activity spaces.

As you continue along Constance Boulevard, the building is the Lakefront Buildings, which were built in 1982. When the local health department outlawed public smoking, the building was converted into a resident hall. The building is home to students and staff.

As you approach the lakefront, you will see the Petro Pavillion. This pavilion was built in 2000 as a portable summer performance venue. The pavilion features a stage, seating, and a giant screen for outdoor movies.

The building on your right is Brandenburg Hall, designed by Emery Stanford, and was completed in 1986, and opened after Carl Brandenburg, a former GWC trustee and former associate president of the YMCA National Council. Today, it is home to several classrooms and meeting spaces.

As you continue along South Lake Shore Drive, you come to the Brandenburg Hall. This building was designed by Emery Stanford, and was completed in 1986, and opened after Carl Brandenburg, a former GWC trustee and former associate president of the YMCA National Council. Today, it is home to several classrooms and meeting spaces.

On your right, you will see the Original Campus Gateway, which was built in 1912 when the local health department outlawed public smoking. The building is now home to a conference center and a simulation laboratory and several meeting rooms.

As you continue along Constance Boulevard, the lakefront is on your left. As you approach the lakefront, you will see the Petro Pavillion, which was built in 2000 as a portable summer performance venue. The pavilion features a stage, seating, and a giant screen for outdoor movies.

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