History and Chronology of
Lake Draining Episodes
Leon and Jefferson Counties, Florida

Compiled from Historical Records and Aerial Photos
by Jonathan Lammers

Updated June 2021
Introduction
The four major lakes of Leon and Jefferson counties—Jackson, Iamonia, Lafayette, and Miccosukee, are famed as “disappearing” lakes which periodically drain through sinkholes. Indeed, they have been the subject of numerous geological publications, as well as ongoing research geared to understanding their relationships to the sinks and springs further south.

Perhaps the earliest and best known work on the subject was Elias Howard Sellards’ “Some Florida Lakes and Lake Basins,” published in the Florida State Geological Survey’s *Third Annual Report, 1909-1910*. Sellards was the original organizer of the Geological Survey in 1907, and served as its head until 1918. His timing was excellent. Between 1907 and 1909, all four of the major lakes drained, and he was able to provide descriptions and measurements for the principal sinks through which the lakes drained. He also pieced together the key role the sinks played in the evolution of the lake basins. Writing of Lake Iamonia he stated:

> The enlargement of the valley to its present size has proceeded through the formation and partial filling of successive sinks. As each sink forms, it carries down to or below the lake level, a certain small area of land. Moreover the water passing through the bottom of the sink carries with it more or less detrital material so that the surrounding area is somewhat lowered by wash through the sinks. In the course of time other sinks form, while the older sinks become clogged and usually partly fill up. The direction of active enlargement of each lake can be determined from the location of the recent sinks.¹

Unfortunately, Sellards’ work does not include any descriptions of earlier draining episodes. Likewise, it does not appear that any systematic attempt has previously been made to determine how often the lakes drained prior to Sellards’ publication. Thus, out of personal curiosity, I began to conduct research in historic newspapers stretching back to the territorial days of Florida. This proved to be a thoroughly interesting venture, as the novelty of a disappearing lake drew coverage from papers across the country.

Far and away, Lake Jackson received the bulk of coverage during the 19th century. This was likely due to its proximity to Tallahassee, as well as the fact that Lake Jackson historically had more open water than the other lakes, and thus any draining episode was more visually dramatic. Indeed, Upper Lake Lafayette was likely periodically dry far more often than is noted in the chronology below. Even more than a century ago, Sellards noted that the area around the sink was usually a prairie during the dry season. For these reasons, it’s important to note that the following chronology should not be considered comprehensive, but it does provide at least a good overview of historic lake activity.

This study also attempts to correlate early 20th century lake draining episodes with annual rainfall. Here, rainfall tables provided by T. S. Olds in his 1961 Master’s thesis: *Occasional Rapid*
Decline and Draining of Lake Bradford, Tallahassee, Florida, proved especially useful. Covering the years 1905 through 1960, the rainfall tables are quite revealing when compared to newspaper coverage of lake drainage activity. They leave little doubt that sinkhole activity in the lakes is inexorably tied to the amount of rainfall, and that any year where rainfall falls below 45 inches is more likely than not to correlate with a sinkhole opening in one of the lakes. This was especially true during two periods of extended drought in the region: 1907-1909, and 1930-1938. In 1954, when rainfall was barely above 30 inches, three of the four lakes drained.

Overall, there does not appear to be any clear pattern as to the relationships between the lakes themselves. In other words, just because Lake Jackson drains, it does not mean that any of the other lakes will do likewise. However, drainage episodes appear more likely to occur individually or in pairs, versus the majority of the lakes draining at once because of low rainfall. For example, Lake Jackson and Lake Iamonia drained within a year of each other during 1829-1830, and 1861-1862. Likewise, Lake Iamonia and Lake Miccosukee drained within a year of each other (or the same year) in 1891, and 1949-1950.

The final portion of this report includes aerial photos of the lakes as available. Most came from the online offerings available through Leon County’s “Then and Now” GIS website, while aerial photos of Lake Miccosukee came from the collections of the Florida Department of Transportation.

This report was originally written in April 2021, but was updated in June due to Lake Jackson draining into Porter Hole Sink.

**Known Lake Draining Episodes**

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<td>2019</td>
<td>Lafayette</td>
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<td>2021</td>
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Rainfall and lake drainage episodes 1905-1944, based on rainfall charts by T. S. Olds in *Occasional Rapid Decline and Draining of Lake Bradford, Tallahassee, Florida*, 1961

Newspaper Chronology

Litchfield Connecticut *Enquirer*, February 12, 1829.

1829 February Lake Jackson sinks ten feet.²
1830 Lake Iamonia drains.³
1840 January Lake Jackson goes dry.⁴
1854 Lake Iamonia drains.⁵
1857 Lake Jackson. The U.S. Land Office rules that persons owning previously submerged land on the shores of Lake Jackson were entitled to own the now dry lands.⁶
1861 Lake Iamonia drains.⁷
1862 Lake Jackson reportedly drains around this time.⁸
1882 Lake Jackson drains.⁹
1886 August Lake Jackson reportedly drains following the Charleston Earthquake.¹⁰
1890 April Lake Miccosukee. The lake waters are reported “lower than they have been for years.”¹¹
Total rainfall at Tallahassee for 1890 is 55.57 inches.
1891 October Lake Iamonia is draining.¹²
November Lake Iamonia is dry.¹³
Lake Miccosukee drains.¹⁴ Farmers are reported hauling fish from the lake to fertilize their lands.¹⁵
Total rainfall at Tallahassee for 1891 is 44.85 inches.
1892 January Lake Iamonia is reported filling up again.16

June The Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund advertises for sale 5,626 acres of land formerly covered by Lake Iamonia. Adjacent landowners petition the Trustees not to sell the land.17

August Lake Miccosukee is full again. It overflows after two days of torrential rains on August 15th and 16th.18

1904 Lake Miccosukee drains.19

Annual precipitation for 1904 at Tallahassee is 38.14 inches.

1905 Annual precipitation for 1905 at Tallahassee is 58.54 inches.

1906 Annual precipitation for 1906 at Tallahassee is 57.20 inches.

1907 April Lake Jackson drains through Lime Sink.20 Rainfall at Tallahassee from November 1906 through March 1907 (5 months) had been 7.72 inches.

June Lake Jackson. A new sinkhole opens approximately one mile south of Lime Sink.21

Summer Lake Jackson. Partially refills with summer rains.22

1908 January The Ocklochonee River is reported as having backed up into Lake Iamonia.23 This is after 12.78 inches of rain in December 1907.
1909 July  Lake Jackson dries again during the summer.24

September Lake Miccosukee is draining into sink at a rate of 2000 gallons a minute.25 Lake reported dried up.26

September Lake Lafayette.

Annual precipitation for 1909 at Tallahassee is 42.17 inches.

1910 May  Lake Iamonia drains. Sink practically dry.27

1911 Lake Miccosukee drains.28

1916 Lake Iamonia drains.29

1917 Annual precipitation for 1917 at Tallahassee is 40.83 inches.

1918 November Lake Jackson drains.30 Remains dry at least until July 1918.

1918 Lake Miccosukee drains.31
1921   Annual precipitation for 1921 at Tallahassee is 39.20 inches.

1926   Annual precipitation for 1926 at Tallahassee is 52.17 inches.

1927   Lake Miccosukee drains.\textsuperscript{32}

Annual precipitation for 1927 at Tallahassee is 46.11 inches.

1930   Annual precipitation at Tallahassee is 61.03 inches.

1931 July   The “absence of rainfall for months past” leads a local game warden to predict that Lake Jackson, Lake Lafayette, and Lake Miccosukee would likely soon drain. Fish kills from low water have already occurred.\textsuperscript{33}

September Lake Lafayette described “as low as it ever falls in dry years.”\textsuperscript{34}

November Lake Lafayette reported as “already dry.” Lake Jackson reported “breaking up into small pools.” Lake Iamonia “threatening to go entirely dry and a large number of small lakes and ponds in Leon county disappearing.”\textsuperscript{35} Game wardens seining lakes to relocate fish to other locations.

Annual precipitation for 1931 at Tallahassee is 38.02 inches.
Sportsmen who have up to now been depending upon the waters of Lake Jackson, Lafayette and Iamonia for their bream and bass fishing are watching the August rains with more than casual interest. Both Lakes Jackson and LaFayette have been dry so long that weeds have grown up in their beds, and Iamonia, perhaps the best of the three fishing lakes, still is running out at the rate of about four inches daily. Nimrods also are wondering about the prospects for duck shooting next winter if summer rains fail to meet the emergency.
1932 January  Lake Jackson drains. It was reported low for several years prior.36

August  Lake Jackson and Lake Lafayette are described as having been “dry so long that weeds have grown up in their beds, and Iamonia … is still running out at the rate of about four inches daily.”37

September  Lake Iamonia is filling after very nearly going dry.38

Annual precipitation for 1932 at Tallahassee is 64.6 inches.

1933  

Annual precipitation for 1933 at Tallahassee is 46.25 inches.

1934 February  Lake Lafayette is dry except for the sinkhole at the northern end, which is visited by scores of fishermen daily.39

October  Lake Iamonia is nearly dry.40

November  Lake Iamonia drains.41 Leon County constructs a dam and gates across Iamonia Slough that allows flood waters from the Ocklocknee River to enter the lake, but prevents the flood waters from going out.42

1935 September  Newspaper reports Lake Lafayette is full; Lake Jackson rising rapidly; Lake Iamonia “almost back to normal”; Lake Bradford coming up; Lake Miccosukee “running over.”43

Lake Lafayette, viewed from sinkhole at low water stage, 1932. (Florida Memory Image GE1291)
1936 July  Little Lake Jackson is nearly dry. Main lake is low.44

October  Lake Jackson is rapidly draining.45

Annual precipitation for 1936 at Tallahassee is 47.29 inches.

1939 January  Lake Iamonia is draining. Work begins on a dam to prevent it from going dry.46

1940  Lake Iamonia. Leon County, in consultation with the Game and Fish Commission, completes an earthen dam 1,150 feet long and 150 feet broad at the base.47 The dam is designed to cordon off the sinkhole near Strickland Arm on the north shore of the lake.48
1941 Aerial photos indicate Lake Lafayette is dry and the level of Lake Jackson is very low.

1945 February Lake Lafayette. Griscom Bettle, owner of Rose Hill Plantation, recommends placing a dam around the Lake Lafayette sinkhole.

1946 Lake Iamonia drains.

1947 September The sinkhole at Lake Iamonia drains, but the dam prevents the rest of the lake from draining.\(^{49}\)

1948 January Lake Lafayette is determined to be entirely in private ownership owing to its inclusion in the Lafayette land grant.\(^{50}\)

1949 October Lake Iamonia drains below dam.\(^{51}\)
1950 September Lake Miccosukee is going dry.\textsuperscript{52} Rainfall at Tallahassee during June to August 1950 measured 22.73 inches.

Piney Z Lake is created in the middle section of Lake Lafayette when a dam is built by Ralph “Hutch” Gibson, owner of Piney Z Farms.\textsuperscript{53}

1951 May Lake Lafayette reported falling.\textsuperscript{54}

1953 Annual precipitation at Tallahassee for 1953 is 60.01 inches.

1954 Rainfall at Tallahassee during January-May 1954 is 8.84 inches.

Lake Bradford nearly drains completely and the sinkhole is filled.\textsuperscript{55} The sinkhole was reportedly 18 feet deep and 30 feet in diameter, but the lake continued to lose water.\textsuperscript{56}

May Lake Miccosukee is nearly drained.\textsuperscript{57}

August Lake Jackson. A sinkhole opens in Megennis Arm.\textsuperscript{58} It is plugged by a county road crew approximately two weeks later.\textsuperscript{59}

Aerial photos indicate that Upper Lake Lafayette is dry.

September Lake Miccosukee. Leon County approves construction of a dam and culvert around the sinkhole.\textsuperscript{60}

Total rainfall for 1954 at Tallahassee is 30.98 inches.\textsuperscript{61}
County Votes To Plug Hole In Lake's Arm

At a special meeting this morning the Leon County Commission voted to plug the sinkhole through which the waters of Meginniss arm of Lake Jackson drained out.

Tallahassee Democrat, August 16, 1954.

Dry bed of Lake Bradford, March 24, 1955. (Florida Memory Image RCK00256)
1955

Lake Miccosukee drains. Lake Bradford reported nearly dry. Total rainfall for 1955 at Tallahassee is 44.14 inches.

1956 March

Lake Jackson. Lime Sink is reported as filling up.

October

Lake Jackson level is reported dropping a foot a day. However, rainfall at Tallahassee for January through September 1956 measured 46.9 inches, and total for the year is 53.94 inches.

1957 June

Lake Jackson remains dry.

July

Lake Bradford begins rising rapidly, from 26 feet to 30 feet. By October the lake was over the 36 foot level.

December

Lake Lafayette, Lake Jackson and Lake Iamonia return to normal levels after 53.64 inches of rainfall from May through October, including 20.33 inches of rain in October. Lake Bradford reaches all-time high level. Lake Miccosukee remains below normal.

Tallahassee Democrat, April 5, 1956.
1958 December The “Cascades back of Lake Bradford” went out and only deep holes remain which are “abounding with fish.”

1966 June Lake Jackson reaches its all-time highest level of slightly more than 96 feet.

November Lake Lafayette is reported “low and all the fish seem to be congregated in one big sink hole.”

1967 June Lake Lafayette is dry. Lake Iamonia is falling rapidly. Lake Cascade is nearly dry. Lake Jackson and Lake Miccosukee are only modestly down.

1976 September Lake Iamonia. A channel is cut around the end of the dam in order to help drain the lake.

1979 Lake Lafayette is mostly dry.

Total rainfall for 1979 is 59.23 inches.

1980 Upper Lake Lafayette is reported as full “only during periods of heavy rain.”

1981 November Lake Jackson is dry in some areas. The water level had been slowly decreasing since the mid-1970s.
1982 October Lake Jackson. Residents report that Porter Hole Sink was visibly taking on water on October 24.78 Half the remaining lake, from Brill Point to Faulk Drive, drains over just a few days.79

Tallahassee Democrat, November 25, 1981.

1983 March Lake Jackson is reported refilling rapidly.80
July Lake Jackson is reported reaching 77 feet.81

1999 August Lake Miccosukee. A planned drawdown of the lake begins.82
September Lake Jackson. Porter Hole Sink opens and drains much of the northern half of the lake.83

2000 May Lake Jackson. Lime Sink opens and drains the lake.84

2006 June Lake Jackson. Porter Hole Sink drains for the fifth time since 1999.85

2007 October The southern end of Lake Jackson remains dry.86
2011   Total rainfall for 2011 is 34.81 inches.
2012 June  Lake Jackson. Porter Hole Sink completes draining. 87
2018 December  A record 15.77 inches of rainfall is recorded for the month.
2019 October  Upper Lake Lafayette drains.

Total rainfall for 2019 is 39.05 inches, including no rain in September.
2020 May  Lake Jackson. After no rain in March and early May, the saddle in Meginnis Arm becomes too shallow for boat traffic from the main body of the lake.

Lake Lafayette. The sinkhole in Upper Lake Lafayette begins filling again.

Total rainfall for 2020 is 60.8 inches.

2021 June  Lake Jackson drains into Porter Hole Sink during the weekend of June 5-6. At that point, year-to-date rainfall in Tallahassee had been 17.2 inches, or approximately 6 inches below normal.

View east from the Faulk Drive Landing, June 6, 2021. The lake began draining into Porter Sink approximately two days earlier. (Jonathan Lammers)
Lake Jackson Aerial Photographs

1937 aerial photo of Lake Jackson, partially drained.
1941 aerial photo of Lake Jackson, partially drained.
1949 aerial photo of Lake Jackson.
1954 aerial photo of Lake Jackson, partially drained.
1954 aerial photo showing Meginnis Arm drained into sinkhole.
1966 aerial photo of Lake Jackson.

1970 aerial photo of Lake Jackson. Note discoloration of Meginnis Arm from clay erosion due to construction of Tallahassee Mall & I-10.
1983 aerial photo of Lake Jackson showing somewhat lower lake level.

1990 aerial photo of Lake Jackson.
Lake Iamonia Aerial Photographs

1937 aerial photo of Lake Iamonia.

1941 aerial photo of Lake Iamonia.
1949 aerial photo of Lake Iamonia.

1954 aerial photo of Lake Iamonia.
1966 aerial photo of Lake Iamonia

1970 aerial photo of Lake Iamonia
1983 aerial photo of Lake Iamonia.
Lake Lafayette Aerial Photos

1937 aerial photo of Lake Lafayette, partially drained (portion of photo missing).

1941 aerial photo of Upper Lake Lafayette showing the sinkhole and dry lake bed.
1949 aerial photo of Lake Lafayette.

1954 aerial photo of Upper Lake Lafayette showing the sinkhole and dry lake bed.
1966 aerial of Upper Lake Lafayette
1966 aerial photo of Upper Lake Lafayette showing the sinkhole with breached dam. Note the many cars and boats of fishermen.
1970 aerial photo showing Upper Lake Lafayette dry.

1983 aerial photo showing Upper Lake Lafayette.
Lake Miccosukee Aerial Photos

Composite aerial photos with partial view of Lake Miccosukee in 1937.
Composite aerial photos with partial view of Lake Miccosukee in 1941.
Composite aerial photos with partial view of Lake Miccosukee in 1949.
Composite aerial photos with partial view of Lake Miccosukee in 1966.
Endnotes


2 “Something Strange,” Middlebury People’s Press (Vermont), February 11, 1829.

3 “In Thomas County, Ga,” Pittsburg Dispatch, December 3, 1891.

4 “A Lake Gone,” Baltimore Sun, January 23, 1840.

5 “Lake Iamonia Runs Out,” Savannah Morning News, November 24, 1891. See also: The Weekly Floridian, November 28, 1891.


7 “Hard Times for Georgia Alligators,” Mower County Transcript, October 21, 1891.


9 Andy Lindstrom, “By Next Fall, Lake Jackson May be Mud,” Tallahassee Democrat, September 27, 1981.

10 Ocala Banner, April 1, 1921.

11 The Savannah Morning News, April 26, 1890.

12 “Hard Times for Georgia Alligators,” Mower County Transcript, October 21, 1891.


14 “Drained a Lake by Boring Holes,” The Pacific Commercial Advertiser, March 6, 1894.

15 “Georgia and Florida, The Savannah Morning News, November 22, 1891.

16 Hillsboro, Ohio News-Herald, January 14, 1892.


18 “Heavy Rainstorms,” The Weekly Floridian, August 20, 1892.

19 “Miccosukie Lake Threatens to Depart from Tradition and Go Dry Again This Year,” Tallahassee Democrat, June 29, 1931.


23 *The Weekly True Democrat*, January 24, 1908.


28 “Miccosukie Lake Threatens to Depart from Tradition and Go Dry Again This Year,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, June 29, 1931.


30 “Historic Lake Jackson Now Practically Dry Fish Galore,” Tallahassee Democrat, November 20, 1918. See also: *Ocala Evening Star*, December 3, 1918.

31 “Miccosukie Lake Threatens to Depart from Tradition and Go Dry Again This Year,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, June 29, 1931.


33 “Predicts Three Lakes Will Go Dry if There is Continuance of Dry Weather for Two Weeks More; Many Fish Dying,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, July 1, 1931.


35 “Game Wardens Busy Saving Fish from Death in Rapidly Drying Pools; Three Lakes Near City Threaten to Go Dry,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, November 4, 1931.


40 “Lake Iamonia is Going Dry,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, October 24, 1934.

41 “Strange Phenomenon Drains Lake Near Tallahassee, Leaving Many Fish “Stranded” Along Bottom,” *The Palm Beach Post*, November 9, 1934.


44 “Move is Made to Save Fish,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, July 14, 1936.
45 “Lake Jackson Running Dry,” Tallahassee Democrat, October 11, 1936.
46 “Lake’s Waters are Held Back from Sink Hole,” Tallahassee Democrat, January 22, 1939.
47 “Erratic Disappearing Act of Iamonia Said Foiled,” Tallahassee Democrat, June 12, 1940.
54 “Whoppers,” Tallahassee Democrat, May 9, 1951.
57 “Fish Poisoned,” Tallahassee Democrat, May 21, 1954.
58 Tallahassee Democrat, August 12, 1954.
60 “County Okays Work at Lake Miccosukee,” Tallahassee Democrat, September 26, 1954.
62 “Lake’s Water Level is Gradually Rising,” Tallahassee Democrat, June 13, 1957.
64 Tallahassee Democrat, March 11, 1956.
65 Tallahassee Democrat, March 11, 1956.
66 “Lake’s Water Level is Gradually Rising,” Tallahassee Democrat, June 13, 1957.
70 Hallie Boyles, “Several Tallahassee Area Lakes are Falling Again,” Tallahassee Democrat, June 13, 1967.
72 Hallie Boyles, “Several Tallahassee Area Lakes are Falling Again,” Tallahassee Democrat, June 13, 1967.


77 Andy Lindstrom, “By Next Fall, Lake Jackson May be Mud,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, September 27, 1981.


