

Salt Industry in Watkins Glen

[Taken from US Salt's website at <http://www.ussaltllc.com/salthome.htm>. US Salt and Cargill are the main salt plants on Seneca Lake.]

The Watkins Glen Refinery of US Salt is located on the shore of Seneca Lake in the heart of New York State's Finger Lakes region and has been in business over 100 years. The area is widely known for its beautiful mountains and valleys, streams and lakes, gorges and waterfalls. The refinery has been built over one of the area's unseen natural assets - a rich underground supply of salt. Water needed for the plant's operations comes from Seneca Lake, a 40-mile long body of fresh water.

Wells at the Watkins Glen Refinery extend into the earth's crust more than a half mile to tap a sprawling deposit of underground salt. In New York State, the deposit extends from Madison County in the east to Erie County in the west. The same deposit spreads into Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio, Michigan, and Ontario. It was created by the evaporation of sea water more than 300 million years ago - a time when the seas were inhabited only by primitive fish and shelled ocean life.

Movement in the earth's crust has tilted the bed to the south. This is evident from the records of wells drilled for oil, gas, salt, and other minerals. At Geneva, N.Y. the salt occurs 200 feet below sea level, and at Pittsburgh, PA., it is 6,500 feet below sea level. Fifteen to 20 individual layers of salt varying in thickness from two feet to 150 feet lie under the Watkins Glen plant. The total thickness of salt formed by these layers varies from 350 feet to 450 feet.

Salt was discovered in Watkins Glen in 1882. During that year the Watkins Oil Well Company was organized to drill for petroleum, gas, salt or other minerals. The company drilled a well on the hillside west of Watkins Glen, on the site of a spring which the Indians knew had medicinal properties. In September 1882 the Watkins Oil Well Company reported that, at 1,513 feet below the surface, it had reached a sufficient flow of brine to make salt.

This discovery was the basis for today's huge Watkins Glen Refinery. Even though the salt deposit at Watkins Glen had been discovered in 1882, it wasn't until eight years later that the first brine-producing well was put to actual use. Impurities in the brine had made it difficult to dry the salt. Successful commercial production of salt from the huge underground beds was slow to develop. The first real producer of salt in Schuyler County, N.Y., was the Glen Salt Company. It drilled wells on property at Watkins Glen, now owned by US Salt.

The Glen Salt Company drilled its first well in 1893, struck salt at 1,841 feet from the surface, and stopped drilling at 1,902 feet without reaching the bottom of the salt bed. In 1894 a second well was dug through 102 feet of solid salt without hitting the bottom of the bed. A third well was dug two years later. This well stopped at 1,927 feet, still in solid salt.

There was no question now. Salt was available in what appeared to be in unlimited quantities - just for the drilling.