

The Cayuga and Seneca Canal

Prior to the completion of the famous Erie Canal in 1825, there was a flourishing canal connecting Seneca and Cayuga Lakes. Elisha Williams of Hudson, NY was among the first to improve the Seneca River by constructing an hydraulic lock for water power purposes at Waterloo. In 1812 the proprietors of the mills and water way rights in Seneca Falls and Skoy-yase (Waterloo) applied to the legislature for aid in rendering the falls and rapids navigable for boats. These visionary businessmen saw that a canal connecting the two lakes would promote commercial and agricultural interests in the counties of Tioga, Steuben, Ontario and Seneca. The main products to be transported on the canal would be flour, salt, plaster of Paris, and all kinds of grains. Surveyor General Simeon DeWitt surveyed the Schauyees rapids and Seneca falls and reported to the state legislature on February 1, 1813. By Chapter 144 of the laws of the State of New York, passed April 6, 1813, the Seneca Lock Navigation was incorporated. Capital stock would be sold at \$25 each. Apparently the state legislature realized just how much such a canal would benefit the economy of the entire state that the state act of incorporation for this company included a provision that the state would purchase half of the initial 1000 shares in the company.

Construction work started in 1813. The state legislation mandated that the canal locks “be not less than twelve feet broad at the bottom or base, nor any lock less than seventy feet long between the gates.” The canal was to be 40 feet wide and from three to four feet deep. Although originally the canal was to be completed in five years, extensions were granted. The first boat, however, passed the newly constructed locks at Seneca Falls on June 14, 1818. The entire nine miles long canal was completed in 1821. Its minimum depth was three feet. The largest boats were twenty tons and were propelled by pike pole. Along the canal there were eight locks made of stone. Three of these locks were inside Seneca Falls village, each with a ten-foot lift, one was at the hamlet of Kingdom, and three were inside Waterloo Village.

Construction of the Erie Canal began in 1817 and was completed in October 1825. The Canal was 363 miles long, four feet deep, and passed through the northeast corner of Seneca county. The state then wasted little time in connecting the Seneca River with the Erie Canal. The NYS Legislature authorized on April 20, 1825 the construction of the Cayuga and Seneca Canal from Geneva to a junction with the Erie canal at Montezuma, a distance of twenty-one miles. Almost all of this route was in Seneca County. The cost of construction was \$160,396.78 plus \$53,603.53 paid to the Seneca Lock Navigation Company for its rights. The state opened the Cayuga and Seneca Canal to the public on November 15, 1828. There were eleven locks with a total of 83.5 feet of total lifting or lowering between Seneca Lake and the Erie Canal at Montezuma.

The Cayuga and Seneca Canal would have momentous economic impact upon the county. The Waterloo and Seneca Falls areas were now connected with the outside world by a very practical and improved transportation system. The towpath constructed along the canal route meant that now boats were by towed by mules and horses rather than polled by man power. Fleets of canal boats bearing farm produce and merchant goods floated to and through the villages of Waterloo and Seneca Falls. Rates on the Erie Canal (five mills per ton per mile) were much less than the nearby competing Cayuga Bridge (30 cents per ton-mile). Packet boats carrying citizens for business or pleasure were competing with the stage coach.

Two other canals were soon built nearby, enhancing the economic use of the Cayuga and Seneca Canal. In 1833 the completed Chenango Canal extended from Elmira to Watkins with 53 locks and a rise of 516 feet.. This meant that much produce from the southern tier could now be brought to Seneca Lake and then to the Erie Canal by the Cayuga and Seneca Canal. The Crooked Lake Canal from Penn Yan to Dresden was completed that same year, consisting of 28 locks in seven miles. Prior to its abandonment in 1870 this canal gave much impetus to the prosperity of the Keuka Lake region.

When all the branch canals of the Erie were completed, boats traveled from the Pennsylvania coal regions—a major fuel source—via canals, the Chemung River, Seneca Lake, and the Cayuga and Seneca Canal and the Erie Canal. An aqueduct was built in 1848 to carry the Canal waters over the lower summer-waters of the Seneca River. Named the Richmond Aqueduct in honor of its designer and builder, it was the second largest aqueduct on the Canal. Brought into use by 1856, it was 894 feet long, 50 feet wide inside, and seven feet deep. Thirty piers and two abutments of Onondaga limestone supported a heavy timber flume which carried the canal over the river. Thirty-one stone arches supported the towpath.

In 1907 a total of 127,500 tons of freight had passed through Waterloo on the Cayuga and Seneca Canal, the value of which was \$2,263,809. In 1914 a total of 105,079 tons were shipped.

The economic marvel of the Erie Canal was seriously threatened with the advent of railroads. In 1883, in order to be more competitive with privately owned railroads, canal tolls were abolished. Decreased use and neglect deteriorated the physical structures of the waterway. A 1903 referendum was presented to voters to authorize the issuance of state bonds for construction of an enlarged 12-foot deep canal, with walls of concrete and locks with steel gates powered by electricity. The proposed expansion of the Erie Canal into a Barge Canal would enable passage of barges with more than 33 times the capacity of the first canal vessels in 1825, reducing transportation costs by almost 25 percent. It was estimated that one of the newer, larger barges could handle cargo equivalent to a train of 50 cars at the same cost of a locomotive hauling 5 cars.

A second referendum approved in 1909 provided for inclusion of the Cayuga-Seneca Canal as a branch of the Barge Canal. The improvement of the canal branch with barge canal capacity was expected not only to attract industry but, by drainage of the Montezuma marshes, to also make thousands of acres of tillable land available. Both commercial interests and farmers would be served and 80 miles of canal and lakes would be added to the deep Barge Canal waterway. The new canal would substantially follow the existing Cayuga and Seneca Canal but changing to five locks, with lifts of between 7 and 28 feet.

Work began on Lock and Dam #1 (northeast of the village of Seneca Falls, at Mud Lock) in January 1911. During August, excavation of more than 533,500 cubic yards on the Cayuga-Seneca branch set a new record for work of suction dredge in Barge Canal construction. The hydraulic dredge, "Clyde," had a 20-inch suction pipe and a 600 pound revolving cutter. During October and early November, the lock walls took shape. On November 16, while working near

the Free Bridge, north of Mud Lock, a tube in the boiler of the dredge exploded at 2:00 a.m., fatally scalding and burning four men.

In late 1911, the State began to modify its plans for the Canal through the Seneca Falls village. Of the three options considered, the selected one called for one lock or a flight of two near an existing lock in the village with a rise of 49 feet. Several properties, both residences and businesses—including Goulds Manufacturing Company which was the world's largest manufacturer of pumps for every use--in the so-called Flats would be flooded out with the creation of Van Cleef Lake nearly a mile long and 1000 feet wide. Opposition to the destruction of these properties—and their loss from the tax rolls—was intense. In late April 1913, Goulds settled its claim filed against the State in the Court of Claims for \$164,602. Plans to build a 25-foot high concrete wall in the rear of businesses on Fall Street led 135 Fall Street owners to sue the State for \$400,000 in damages.

Much of the physical labor work was being done by Italian immigrants. Interestingly, a new State law requiring the layoff of alien workers on government contracts in March 1915 stimulated over 100 applications for naturalization filed with the County Clerk in Waterloo. One quarter of the population of Seneca Falls was then of foreign birth.

Among the 124 buildings to be torn down were the American Fire Engine Works and Gould's Number 1 plant, as well as the Rumsey Company—the only factory still in operation. Removal of the commercial buildings was expected to salvage millions of bricks and two million feet of timber. Razing of the Cowing building provided 30-inch timbers for shipment to Hoboken, New Jersey. Buildings were to be torn down to a height of three feet with scrap debris being used to fill in basements and otherwise level the surface. Some buildings were purchased and moved, while wooden buildings were to be moved with pontoons when the basin was eventually flooded. A two-story house, in order to be moved from the flats to its new site, necessitated a night-time move. After the trolley service was suspended at midnight, the trolley wires were taken down to permit passage of the house. Although new assessments were added to the tax rolls as new buildings were erected, the 1915 assessment roll was \$117, 582 less than in 1912. The Trinity Episcopal Church, with its beautiful Tiffany windows, had its basement filled with dredged rock and was paid \$25,000 by the State. This money was used to build a new heating plant and Sunday School rooms on the west side of the church. The new Ovid Street bridge was erected in May and June 1915. One span was 200 feet long—the largest span of bridge of its kinds in New York.

The filling of the water reservoir, forming the artificial lake named Van Cleef, began on August 19, 1915. The first water passed over the dam spillway on August 30, 1915. It was widely reported that even as hundreds of visitors moved in to witness the water rising, numerous permanent animal residents such as rats evacuated their river bank and basements homes in pursuit of other living quarters.

The newly-relocated Rumsey, Goulds, and Seneca Falls Manufacturing companies meant that Seneca Falls would have three of the most modern factories in Central New York—well-lighted and ventilated and in a location accessible to the railroad and trolley lines.

Altogether the construction of the Cayuga-Seneca branch had cost the State more than \$7,000,000 and had employed thousands of men.

The removal of the Richmond Aqueduct, begun in 1917 and completed a year later, facilitated navigation in the new Canal channel. In 1917 the Kingdom Road Bridge was completed, with the temporary bridges there and at Demont's removed. In midsummer 1918 the entire length of the Canal opened for travel. The Federal Control Act of 1918, passed because of U.S. entry into World War One, had authorized Federal authority over railroads and canals. The federal government contracted for the construction of 1000-ton barges.

Starting with the first month of operation, there were several instances of the need for repair of a leak in the dam at Seneca Falls.

The drainage of the marshland in the vicinity of the Canal near May's Point rapidly increased its value as large truck farm enterprises expanded, plowing more land each season. Carloads of vegetables—carrots-, onions, lettuce, and celery—from Meadowood Farms were shipped, ironically, via the New York Central Railroad to New York City. The drainage of the marshes also contributed to the decline of fish. Apparently the violent agitation of canal boars was destructive to spawning and canal traffic polluted the waters.

On July 4, 1930, more than 40,000 thronged the Canal banks for the first boat regatta on Van Cleef Lake. Recreational use of the Canal in Seneca County was highlighted by an Aqua Festival in August, 1961, which featured the first water ski show to be held in Seneca Falls. In 1967, as part of the waterway's Sesquicentennial, the Erie Maid made a four day stop.

Hurricane Agnes caused major concern when it swept through in June 1972. The extensive rainfall resulted in high flood waters. May's Point residents were evacuated. There was public concern that the locks at Waterloo would not hold back the run-off from Seneca Lake and that much of the lower areas of Seneca Falls and points east would be flooded out. Although the lock at Waterloo resembled Niagara Falls, the lock held.

Two purposes for the Cayuga-Seneca Canal continue: water control and recreation. Water control includes flood mitigation of the 5100 square miles of the Oswego River watershed. The power plants at Waterloo and Seneca Falls need water control to maintain levels suitable for power generation. Maintenance of the water level in the Canal is also vital to fire protection in Waterloo and Seneca Falls. Recreational cruising along the Canal remains the more evident use of the Cayuga-Seneca Canal today. Unequaled opportunities are found for scenic vistas, for wildlife observation, etc. It is not unusual to see more than "rental boat" docked in Seneca Falls overnight.

Today the canal is operated by The New York State Canal Corporation, a subsidiary of the New York State Thruway Authority, which is the proud steward of this great, historic 524-mile waterway.