

## The Seneca Falls Power Plant

The Seneca Power Corporation was formed in 1915 to build and operate a hydro-electric generating plant at the east end of Van Cleef Lake in Seneca Falls. Its story gives us insight into the change in industrial life in Seneca Falls as a result of the completion of the new Seneca-Cayuga Branch of the Barge Canal in 1915, as well as an understanding of how a small power plant company controls the water level of Seneca Lake.

### Creation of Van Cleef Lake

A decision had been made by New York State to upgrade water transportation on the Erie Canal and its connecting canals into a new Barge Canal system. On the Seneca-Cayuga Canal that connected Seneca Lake via the Seneca River and its canal with the Erie Canal, the five tiny locks in the Seneca Falls area would be replaced by two successive locks creating a raise of about 49 feet. The locks, which were capable of handling a boat 300 feet long and 45 feet wide, had a combined length of 745 feet.<sup>1</sup> The locks themselves were 400 feet in length and 42 feet in height.<sup>2</sup> To provide an adequate supply of water for these two successive locks an artificial body of water—to become known as Van Cleef Lake—would be created by a dam east of the Ovid Street Bridge. The extreme length of this new lake was 1.25 miles and a width of about .5 mile, with a depth varying between 50 and 12 feet.<sup>3</sup> The wall of the concrete dam at the east end of this Van Cleef Lake was over 80 feet high, extending 25 feet below the bottom of the river down to bed rock, with a width of over 300 feet.<sup>4</sup>

As a result of a raise in the water level throughout the village, several industries and private residences on islands known as The Flats were affected. Some houses were moved out of The Flats to other parts of the village. Some businesses were relocated, such as Goulds Manufacturing Company (to West Fall Street) and the Rumsey Pumps, Ltd (on Prospect Hill) and some buildings were simply sold for scrap or demolished to create more base fill for the new canal. The canal construction work inside the village of Seneca Falls cost approximately \$2 million. The artificial lake—eventually named Van Cleef Lake—was referred to as the “million dollar lake” because of the costs to create it.<sup>5</sup>

Several companies, including Goulds Manufacturing, that had been forced out of The Flats filed suit in 1914 against the State of New York for damages to their physical property and for their loss of water power. Their claims totaled about \$2,450,000, with the Rumsey Company claiming over \$751,000.<sup>6</sup> Seriously complicating these claims was the fact that many of the original water power rights “granted” to these companies had been conveyed in such old and obsolete terms that it was almost impossible for all the companies to agree on their proper proportion of whatever total settlement was to be reached. They agreed to submit their differences to arbitration by Mortimer G. Barnes, a consulting engineer in Albany.<sup>7</sup> While Barnes was resolving the proportionate share for these companies of whatever settlement would come out of the lawsuit in the Court of Claims, the lawsuit dragged on for almost three years. In 1917, a total of \$540,248.01, with interest since July 1, 1914, was awarded by the Court of Claims to these companies.<sup>8</sup> The settlement did not include water power. The State returned water power rights to the original owners for future use, to be developed by building an electric power house at the new dam of the barge canal.<sup>9</sup>

The efforts to achieve a settlement of these claims had been lengthy and costly. In a March 31, 1916, article the *Reveille* commented that “it was the end and the final culmination of

litigation that had extended over a period of more than three years, at an expenditure of many thoughts of dollars and almost endless days of anxiety, expense and effort on the part of the claimants.” Despite numerous efforts at compromise, that same *Reveille* article reported that “The State finally compelled them (the claimants) to accept a stipulated sum far below their combined claims as a tender to settlement, or a sum far below that which they verily believed was just and proper....But the end had to come, even without satisfactory results, and the claimants accepted forced conditions, because they could no longer afford to litigate with the State.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Formation of the Seneca Power Corporation**

There were twelve firms or individuals who had power rights which were destroyed by the state’s work. These included the Rumsey Pump Company, M.J. Fritz and H.W. Douglas as trustees, Chester A. Braman, Roberts Milling Company, Ivory Button Manufacturing Company, Cast Thread Fittings & Foundry Company, Empire Gas & Electric Company, National Advertising Company, Fred Maier & Sons, Seneca Falls Manufacturing Company, Edward H. Palmer, Seneca Falls Paper Company, Josiah T. Miller, Sarah F. Allen, and the trustees and bondholders of the Seneca Falls Woolen Company.<sup>11</sup> They agreed among themselves as to what share each was entitled to in the developing of the new hydro-electric power plant.<sup>12</sup> These water power owners organized and incorporated, thus turning over their respective rights to the new corporation in 1915.

This new corporation was the Seneca Power Corporation. The officers of this new corporation were: President, Henry R. Micks (who was also the president of the Rumsey Pump Company); vice president, Paul B. Kendig (who was the vice president of the Seneca Falls Manufacturing Company); secretary, Henry B. Cutter; treasurer, C.W. Maier. The directors of the Seneca Power Corporation were the four officers and Frederick G. Colley of New York City, Michael J. Fritz of Ann Arbor, and Edward H. Palmer of Syracuse.<sup>13</sup>

Engineers had figured that the water flow through the Seneca-Cayuga Canal would be 342 to 1,000 cubic feet per second, depending upon the season and weather conditions. To operate the locks in Seneca Falls would require at least 167 cubic feet per second. This would leave approximately 675 cubic feet per second for hydro-electric power generation. With proper arrangements made for use of the potential water power 24/7, it was projected that as much as 7,500 horsepower equivalent in hydro-electric power could be generated. This compared with the theoretical development of 2,098 horsepower in actual water power in 14 different units along the Cayuga and Seneca Canal prior to the completed renovation in 1915.<sup>14</sup>

### **Construction of the Seneca Falls Power Plant**

The new power plant was expected to generate twenty million kilowatts a year.<sup>15</sup> It was the largest power plant on the entire Barge Canal.<sup>16</sup> Plans for this new power plant were prepared by Mortimer G. Barnes. He designed the recently completed electric power plant of the Tracy Development Company of Waterloo and the Panama lock. Contractor for the building itself was Day & Zimmerman of Philadelphia. The electrical machinery was supplied by the Westinghouse Company of Pittsburgh. There were four generators, each having a capacity of 2.500 kilowatts. The S. Morgan Smith Company of York, PA, furnished the hydraulic machinery. The total cost was about \$300,000.<sup>17</sup> The leases were let in March 1917, and construction started in May with completion in October.<sup>18</sup>

The power plant building was to be of the same architectural style as the locks' power house which had been constructed by the State. The dimensions of the power plant building were 50 by 100 feet.<sup>19</sup>

To finance this building expense and other outstanding expenses, the Seneca Power Corporation got permission from the State to raise its capital stock from \$5,000 to \$1,350,000 and to sell bonds in the amount of \$423,000. Outstanding expenses included the huge costs of the litigation of the claims by Seneca Falls companies for their loss of water power rights, organizational expenses such as mortgage and internal revenue service taxes.<sup>20</sup>

The Seneca Power Commission leased the operation of the power plant to the Central New York Gas & Electric Company, which acquired \$150,000 of the Seneca Power stock. This acquired stock was passed on to the Empire Coke Company. The Central New York Gas & Electric Company guaranteed the principal and interest of the of the Seneca Power bonds and the Empire Coke Company in turn guaranteed the payment of the Central New York Gas & Electric Company's rental to the Seneca Power Corporation.<sup>21</sup> This leasing to the Central New York Gas & Electric Company had been prompted by the growing demands for electricity that the Central New York Company was finding it increasingly difficult to meet even with its existing power stations and the purchase of Niagara Falls power. Power generated in Seneca Falls was to be distributed throughout the Central New York's territory along the Auburn Road and as far east as the great Remington plants at Illion.<sup>22</sup>

The completed power plant was assessed at \$100,000 in 1917.<sup>23</sup>

In 1916 a foot bridge was constructed across the canal and river at the new locks and dam. Assemblyman Maier had secured an appropriation of \$5,000 for this foot bridge. The Reville portrayed this new foot bridge as a "great convenience" for men living in the Fourth Ward who were employed at the new Rumsey Pump Company on Johnston Street.<sup>24</sup>

Almost immediately after the filling of the artificial lake on August 20, 1915, there were some problems with leaks and erosion of the dirt banks near the dam. *Reville* The *Syracuse Journal* reported on September 7, 1915, that the force of the water had "worked its way through solid rock and had formed a passage 150 feet long and high enough for a man to walk through it. With the pressure of millions of cubic feet of water, which it (the dam in Seneca Falls) holds back clear to Waterloo, rocks weighing thousands of pounds had been forced out of the passage." This passage had opened on the north bank about 20 feet below the water line. This prompted an immediate draining of the artificial lake, creating a disturbing sight. This is indicated by the comments, "Instead of a handsome body of water, all that could be seen today was an ugly, muddy bottom and the foundation of the buildings that stand in rude testimony of the many thousands of dollars that it cost the State of New York to build the canal."<sup>25</sup> The dam wall was constructed further into the north bank and a system of drainage channels to handle the expected ordinary seepage.<sup>26</sup> That did not entirely stop the leak and it was watched closely for over two years. In March 1921, the State Engineer's Department had the canal drained so that work could be done to stop the leak at the north end of the dam. The repair work consisted of applying a thick coat of clay over the entire side of bluff west of the dam. The clay was plastered on the bank and forced into every nook and cranny in the bank, beginning at a point above the normal level of the lake and continuing down to the bottom of the basin.<sup>27</sup>

It was not the only leak that had to be addressed.

By July 20, 1917, the new plant was "running along nicely and efficiently," according to *The Reville*. The water in the barge canal was offering an ample supply for the new power plant which "is recognized as one of the best of its kind in all this region of the State. It is supplied

with all the latest and best electric equipment.”<sup>28</sup> When running 21 hours per day, the water turbines could generate 2,100 horsepower daily. During dry weather, when the water level of the canal would be lower, the plant was run only ten hours a day, generating 7, 500 horsepower daily.<sup>29</sup>

The new power plant created great potential for the Seneca Falls community to become a thriving economic center. This had been envisioned in the following *Reveille* editorial in 1915:

The State in converting the stream into a barge canal has destroyed our old methods of water power. In their stead it has by the erection of new locks and a dam, vastly increased our natural water power. The utilities of the stream have been concentrated and localized. The State has reconveyed this power for the benefit of its original owners, and the village itself and all the indications point to its future great utility and usefulness. The building and equipment of an electric power plant at the new State dam will give us three times the power in another form we had under the old order of things. It will be an incentive to local growth and prosperity. Everyone will share in the renewed impulse of the village.

In 1921 the Empire Gas and Electric Company of Geneva, purchased the Seneca Power Corporation.<sup>30</sup> This company had held a 50 year lease on the Seneca Power Plant’s electricity since March 1, 1918. In spring 1922, the State assumed the entire dominion and control of the waters of Seneca Lake and the flow of the water in the Seneca River. The State superintendent of public works served notice that the Empire Gas and Electric Company could not draw down the water of Seneca Lake for power purposes below the so-called high water line which has an elevation of 447 feet above sea level. Heretofore, operating under the rights that were inherited from the Tracy Development Company (for the Waterloo power plant) and the Seneca Power Corporation, the Empire Gas and Electric Company had drawn down the level of the lake to the low water line of 445 feet above sea level. By its recent order, the State had taken the position that the amount of water in Seneca Lake between the high and low levels was needed for public use and the operation of the canal. On the other hand, the Empire Gas and Electric Company felt that the State had deeded back to old power owners at Waterloo and Seneca Falls all of the power rights accruing from the flow of the Seneca River, save only that the exercise of these rights should not interfere with the use of the river for navigation purposes. The State order prompted the Empire Gas and Electric Company to file a claim in the State Court of Claims in the amount of \$3,752,485. This amount included the \$1,002,707 claim for loss of electric power that would otherwise be generated at the Tracy Development Company power plant in Waterloo and \$2,749,779 at the Seneca Falls power plant over the course of the 50 year leases held by the company for both power plants.<sup>31</sup>

### **Recent History**

In the early 1930s the Empire Gas and Electric Company was taken over by the Associated Gas Company. In the early 1940s the ownership of the Seneca Falls power plant went over to NYSEG (New York State Electric and Gas)

Approximately 1997, NYSEG sold the Seneca Falls power plant and the power plant in Waterloo to Patrick Ott and Todd Nash. These two gentlemen named the power plant in Seneca Falls as the Seneca Falls Power Company.

In 2001, Ott and Nash sold their Seneca Falls Power Company to American Energy Company in California. Scott Goodwin is the head of the American Energy Company.

Current manager of the Seneca Falls Power Company operation is Jack Finnigan III. Current manager of the Waterloo power plant operation is Mike Jesmer. Charlie Baker, who worked at the Seneca Falls power plant from 1949 until his retirement in 1990, continues to provide his expertise as a consultant to maintain the smooth operation of the Seneca Falls power plant.

The Seneca Falls plant produces as much as 8 megawatts of electricity per hour when all four generators are operating. The Waterloo plant produces normally about one-fourth of that amount. The electricity produced is sold to NYSEG.

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- <sup>1</sup> "Barge Canal Section Opening Has Stirred Up Seneca Falls," *The Syracuse Journal*, August 24, 1915.
  - <sup>2</sup> "Contract C When Finished Will Lift Boats Twenty Feet," *The Syracuse Journal*, date of article unknown.
  - <sup>3</sup> "Barge Canal Section Opening Has Stirred Up Seneca Falls," *The Syracuse Journal*, August 24, 1915.
  - <sup>4</sup> "Seneca Falls Factorings Reaping Great Benefits Because of Barge Canal," *The Syracuse Journal*, a 1920 article.
  - <sup>5</sup> "Barge Canal Section Opening Has Stirred Up Seneca Falls," *The Syracuse Journal*, August 24, 1915.
  - <sup>6</sup> "To Consolidate All Seneca Falls Claims on State," *The Syracuse Journal*, May 5, 1915.
  - <sup>7</sup> "Barge Canal Made This Power Plant Possible," *The Auburn Citizen*, June 22, 1917
  - <sup>8</sup> "Claims Against State Settled," *The Syracuse Post-Standard*, November 25, 1915.
  - <sup>9</sup> "Barge Canal Claims Adjusted," *The Reveille*, a 1915 article.
  - <sup>10</sup> *The Reveille*, March 31, 1916 article
  - <sup>11</sup> "Proposed Power Plan at Seneca Falls," *The Newark Union Gazette*, February 19, 1916.
  - <sup>12</sup> "For Development of Power," *The Auburn Citizen*, January 10, 1916.
  - <sup>13</sup> "For Development of Power," *The Auburn Citizen*, January 10, 1916.
  - <sup>14</sup> "Barge Canal Section Opening Has Stirred Up Seneca Falls," *The Syracuse Journal*, August 24, 1915.
  - <sup>15</sup> "For Monster Power Plant at Seneca Falls," *The Auburn Citizen*, May 2, 1916.
  - <sup>16</sup> "Seneca Falls Factorings Reaping Great Benefits Because of Barge Canal," *The Syracuse Journal*, a 1920 article.
  - <sup>17</sup> "The New Power House Completed," *The Reveille*, a 1917 article
  - <sup>18</sup> "Barge Canal Made This Power Plant Possible," *The Auburn Citizen*, June 22, 1917
  - <sup>19</sup> "For Power Plant," *The Auburn Citizen*, February 24, 1916.
  - <sup>20</sup> "State Board Approves Power Company Plans," *The Syracuse Post-Standard*, May 3, 1916
  - <sup>21</sup> "For Monster Power Plant at Seneca Falls," *The Auburn Citizen*, May 2, 1916.
  - <sup>22</sup> "State Board Approves Power Company Plans," *The Syracuse Post-Standard*, May 3, 1916
  - <sup>23</sup> "Assessment Is Complete," *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, May 29, 1917.
  - <sup>24</sup> "The New Foot Bridge," *The Reveille*, a 1916 article.
  - <sup>25</sup> "Force of Water Forms Big Tunnel on Barge Canal," *The Syracuse Journal*, September 7, 1915.
  - <sup>26</sup> "Leak Was Found in Barge Canal Dam at Seneca Falls," *The Auburn Citizen*, August 17, 1918.
  - <sup>27</sup> "Stopping Leak in Barge Canal Dam at Falls," *The Auburn Citizen*, March 3, 1921.
  - <sup>28</sup> *The Reveille*, July 20, 1917 article.
  - <sup>29</sup> "Seneca Falls Factorings Reaping Great Benefits Because of Barge Canal," *The Syracuse Journal*, a 1920 article.
  - <sup>30</sup> "Power Measure Is Introduced," *The Oswego Daily Palladium*, March 20, 1921.
  - <sup>31</sup> "Empire Gas Co. Files A Claim Against State," *The Auburn Citizen*, May 9, 1922.