

The Way West Through Northern Seneca County

For most of the years before the Civil War, the way to “the West” went through northern Seneca County. This began with the Great Genesee Road and continued with the Erie Canal, and then with the railroads. These routes were used by thousands of emigrants moving to someplace west of the east coast in search of new economic opportunities. Even many of those who would move to the Oregon country and California by wagon trains across the Great Plains came through Seneca County in the early part of their journey. Central and western New York had a natural geographic feature—basic flatness without mountains—that the rest of the eastern states did not have. As a result, it is this area that provided the main route west.

Our story begins with the Great Genesee Road soon after the end of the American Revolution. In 1789, the New York state legislature passed the Road Township Act to provide for the creation of the Genesee Road from Rome (Fort Schuyler) to Geneva. A swath 33-feet wide had to be cut through the woods for this road.¹ The route from Rome went south of Syracuse at Onondaga Valley to Skaneateles to Auburn to Cayuga Landing on the east side of Cayuga Lake.

In 1789, James Bennett and John Harris had started a Cayuga Ferry running diagonally across Cayuga Lake, with the west shore terminus being south of the east shore terminus at Cayuga Landing. In 1795, the west shore terminus was moved north to be at Bridgeport—due west across the lake from Cayuga Landing.² After making use of the Cayuga Ferry, the Genesee Road would continue on East Bayard Street to what is today the village of Seneca Falls. The Genesee Road would then take Seneca Street north to cross the Flats and then proceed west on Fall Street to Geneva, and Canandaigua to t Canawaugus where it would use a bridge to cross the Genesee River and continue on to Buffalo.³

On March 24, 1794, the New York state legislature authorized the laying out and improvement of this public road from Fort Schuyler on the Mohawk River to the settlement of Canawaugus on the Genesee River. This road was to be as straight west as possible. Intended to give better access to the Military Tract and lands west, this road was officially known as the “Great Genesee Road.” A 1797 state law provided for this road west from Utica to have a width of 84 feet.

On September 20, 1797, a weekly stagecoach began service between Utica and Geneva. It would take three days to make the trip in either direction.⁴ In 1800, the first Cayuga Lake Bridge was completed. For the many years that this bridge was in functioning order, it was a convenient alternative to the Cayuga Ferry.

In 1800, the Seneca Turnpike Company took control of the Genesee Road. The road had a 99-foot right-of-way with the road itself to be 25 feet wide with at least 15 inches of crushed stone surface so that the crown of the road was at least 20 inches higher than on each side. This better quality road was a turnpike, meaning that it had tollgates every 10 miles. The toll was 12.5 cents for a 2-horse vehicle, and 25 cents for a stagecoach, with local farmers and residents being allowed free use of the turnpike for their local travels.

Also in 1800, the first Cayuga Lake Bridge began operation. This wooden bridge was 5,412 feet long, making it the longest bridge in western hemisphere up to that time. Providing a convenient alternative to the Cayuga Ferry, the bridge was wide enough to allow three wagons abreast, crossing Cayuga Lake between Cayuga and Bridgeport. While it had to be replaced more than once, the many years of operation of this bridge greatly facilitated the movement of emigrants west as well as agricultural products to eastern markets.⁵

In 1806, a more northerly alternate route of the Seneca Turnpike was authorized. This went through Syracuse⁶ and became known as the North Branch of the Seneca Turnpike. It came into Seneca Falls on the new Cayuga Street, while the original branch continued to enter Seneca Falls via East Bayard Street.⁷ As Syracuse became more developed, the northern branch route became more heavily used than the original road.

It is probably difficult for us today to imagine how many farmers would be working together to “drive” their cattle, sheep, hogs, turkeys and/or geese to eastern markets while many people on foot, horseback, wagons and/or stagecoaches were heading west. It must have made for some very interesting crowded conditions on the road!

The Erie Canal which went through the northeastern corner of Seneca County was completed in 1825. In 1828, the canal linking Seneca Lake with Cayuga Lake was connected to the Erie Canal. Because water transportation was much cheaper than land transportation, the Erie Canal spurred tremendous economic growth all along its path. In its first full year of operation (1826), 19,000 vessels passed through the eastern part of the Erie Canal. Canal packet boats provided a much more comfortable alternative to the constant jostling and bouncing of a stagecoach ride. Although they were much slower than stagecoaches, these packet boats provided a low cost means for emigrants to go west.⁸

While the Erie Canal provided a huge economic stimulus to communities along its route, the Erie Canal was soon usurped in economic importance by the advent of railroads. Railroads could operate 24/7 all year and its tracks could be built almost anywhere. The first train came through Seneca Falls and Waterloo on July 4, 1841. In November of that year, the first train crossed Cayuga Lake via a newly-constructed train bridge and causeway. By 1849, the Auburn & Syracuse Railroad carried over 192,000 passengers, not counting those simply making some local connection. Starting in May 1843, one of the daily passenger trains became known as the “emigrant” train catering to the large numbers of people heading west and wanting a cheaper fare than first or second class.⁹ Until the consolidated New York Central Railroad in 1853 moved its main line north through Clyde and Lyons, virtually all of the passenger and freight service between Albany and Buffalo went through Seneca Falls and Waterloo.

While each of these various means of travel—stagecoach on the Great Genesee Road, packet boat on the Erie Canal and its branches, and railroad—provided its own kind of thrill and risk, the economic stimulus they provided to the Seneca Falls and Waterloo areas of northern Seneca County was enormous. Many people were drawn to the developing mills and industries in Seneca Falls and Waterloo. It is not surprising that these communities would become hotbeds of reforming zeal in terms of anti-slavery activism, the women’s rights movement, etc.

¹ David B. Hanna, *Seneca Falls; Rights, Railroads, Religion*, Montgomery, VT: Geourbs, 2009, p. 23

² *History of Seneca Co., New York With Illustrations Descriptive of Its Scenery, Palatial Residences, Public Buildings, Fine Blocks and Important Manufactories*, Philadelphia: Everts, Ensign & Everts, 1876, p. 11

³ <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~tqpeiffer/Documents/Ancestral%20M...>

⁴ Hanna, p. 24.

⁵ *History of Seneca Co., New York with Illustrations*, Philadelphia: Everts, Ensign & Everts, 1876 (W.E. Morrison & Co. reprint in 1976), p. 12.

⁶ <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb>

⁷ Hanna, p. 25.

⁸ Hanna, pp 55-61.

⁹ Hanna, pp 85-102.