



Chenango Canal Review, by Diane Van Slyke

“Chenango” was the Indian word for bull-thistle. When the Chenango Valley was first settled, pioneers came from the east and were not prepared to face the rolling dense forest of hemlock, oak and pine and bull-thistles that covered the Southern Tier of New York State. The local Native Americans showed them how to chop and burn the tree stumps to clear the land and plant corn, beans and squash.

Water was a means of transportation and survival. The fastest way to travel south was by raft and pole by Indian guide along the streams to the Susquehanna River. Traveling back east was by a narrow Indian path, which is today’s Rte. 20.

The Erie Canal was built by 1825 and provided a super water-highway to the vast west, (Buffalo!). It connected the Great Lakes to the Hudson River to the port of New York City, making New York State known as the great Empire State. This developed New York City as an international trade center, and grew Buffalo from 200 settlers to 18,000 people by 1840.

While all this was developing, it took 19 years for 9 leaders of the “Chenango Canal Committee” to get NYS legislature to pass a \$1 million bill approving construction of the Chenango Canal. This was important to the Chenango Valley, which included all of Madison County, to link the newly discovered coal mines in Pennsylvania to the Erie Canal.

Construction started in 1834. Immigrant workers from Ireland and Scotland were lured here by a pay scale that was three times a common laborer’s wages: \$11 per month. Skilled workers from the Erie Canal brought new inventions, such as an ingenious stump-puller, using oxen or mules for animal power. As many as 500 men stayed in each area, hand-digging the 97-mile canal through quicksand, swamp and rock, using pick axes and shovels. At a time where there was no engineering school in the country, John Jarvis was appointed Chief Engineer of the project and helped design 116 locks, 19 aqueducts, 52 culverts, 162 bridges and a reservoir system to feed enough water without taking it from natural creeks already in the area. This project had to succeed by getting almost 100 miles of water uphill with a 706’ incline, to the summit in Bouckville, and back down a catastrophic decline of 303’ to the Erie Canal in Utica.

Today, we jump ahead 128 years since the closing of the Chenango Canal and find that there is still a long section of the canal located in Bouckville that has water in it. This section is spring-fed and has a year-round NYS fishing designation since the creek-fed waters support trophy-sized trout in consistent 52-degree water. Wildlife thrives in and around the canal: ducks, geese, blue heron, brook & brown trout, muskrat, ermine, beaver, chipmunk, squirrel, deer and songbirds. The water level is protected by the NYS Canal Authority, along with the 7 lakes

that feed it, because it still flows into Oriskany Creek and the much-used Barge Canal today.

The Chenango Canal Association, with (ironically) 9 board members, recognized that this is a historic and recreational treasure, and started the Chenango Canal Project to develop and protect the summit area for the public's use. The CCA has cleared 5 miles of a 12-foot wide towpath trail to allow hiking, biking, picnicking and horseback riding. Cross-country skiing, canoeing and kayaking , as well as wheelchair accessibility for fishing will soon be improved.

The rustic trail was accomplished with the efforts of Camp Georgetown Correctional Facility, many area non-profit organizations including Madison Central School and Colgate groups and with the volunteerism of local citizens. The trail stretches over 5 miles, from Elm Street, north of Bouckville, going south to Woodman's Pond, toward Hamilton. Entrances to the trail are at the Elm Street and Canal Road intersection, a stairway leading to the trail across from the Bouckville Antique Center near Rt. 20, another stairway south of the Bouckville Mill, an entrance halfway down Canal Rd. to Rt. 46, at the intersection of Canal Rd. and Rt. 46, and another entrance on Woodman's Road.

Madison County Historical Society wrote a grant to hire a contractor to complete a survey of the location of the Chenango and its remaining structures with the purpose of nominating it to be on the NYS and National Registry of Historic Places. They hosted a preservation day in 2003 and presented the results to the public and state officials. Ron Neff, who spearheaded this effort, was notified in July 2005 that the 5-mile summit of the Chenango Canal is now on the National and NYS Registry of Historic Places. Who would have thought in 1877, when the canal was closed due to excessive repair expenses, that it would be considered a historic site in 2005?

In 2004, the NYS Canal Society toured the Chenango Canal and presented the CCA with a historical marker, the first one dedicated in the Town of Madison.

Other CCA projects include the development of the Canal Cottage Museum, located on Rt. 20 in Bouckville that showcases area historic pictures. The CCA supported the Rt. 20 Scenic Byway. Along with knowledge and skills from the Madison County Soil & Water Conservation, the Department of Environmental Conservation and NYS Canal Authority, the CCA recently used a donation from Motts, Inc. and Konosioni, of Colgate University, to build a fishing/observation deck across from the Landmark Tavern that is handicapped-accessible.

From the early 1800's, before Abraham Lincoln became President, to early in 2004, the Indian name for "bull-thistle" has become part of a legacy to our future. The Chenango Canal, originally intended for transportation and economic development for our area, will once again lead to area recognition. The name, Chenango Canal, will not only become known as the "bull thistle", but as an important local recreational and historical place to visit.

The Canal Project On the Summit