

Along the Outlet of Keuka Lake

by

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Index to Frances Dumas's series about mills along the Outlet

The Penn Yan Waterfront

Part Three

The short stretch of waterfront south of Water Street illustrates perfectly the change from the self-sufficient economy of the early nineteenth century to the import-export system that developed with the building of the railroads.

When Abraham Wagener built the Mansion House in 1816 and moved into it from his earlier home further up Main Street, he regarded himself primarily as a farmer, though he owned the mills nearby. He planted an orchard and lived the life of a country squire.

He did however sell off a fair number of lots. The village originally centered around the intersection of Main Street and the stage route to Canandaigua then known as Head Street, now as North Avenue. Gradually business and residential development moved down Main Street toward the mills. By 1836, when Wagener sold his last remaining property in Penn Yan, his farm was surrounded by house lots and small industries.

The village was incorporated in 1833, the same year the Crooked Lake Canal was opened for navigation. Also in 1833, Wagener sold a lot south of Water Street to J. W. Squires, who built docks along the Outlet where boats could tie up. This lot already contained a brewery when Wagener sold it, which operated, apparently with some success, until 1848 when Joel Crane opened a tannery there.

By this time a number of big warehouses had been built along the Canal's banks to handle the bulky agricultural produce that made up the waterway's main freight. One of these stood a short distance east of Crane's tannery. Crane also had an interest in an iron foundry known as the Keuka Furnace that was built on the Outlet's bank behind his tannery.

Most of Wagener's property had been sold in 1836 to a syndicate of local businessmen who were convinced that lots near the mills, the Canal and the Outlet waterfront would increase dramatically in value. In 1843 the executors of Aaron Remer, the man who put up the money for the purchase (some \$25,000) sold his interest to John C. Scheetz, like Wagener a Pennsylvanian of German stock. His partner for most of the time he owned the mill was Wagener's nephew Ezekiel Casner.

Both men built substantial homes nearby. Casner built a brick house at the intersection of Water and Wagener Streets that still stands; Scheetz erected an elaborate Italianate confection south of Water Street

In 1856, another syndicate bought up the lots between Scheetz' house and Crane's tannery—including the Keuka Furnace—and erected the county's first malthouse. Farmers brought in their barley to be malted and dried; the product was then exported (much of it to Rochester) for beermaking and other uses. The company, which included D. W. Streeter, George R. Youngs and Daniel Foster, was known first as D. W. Streeter & Co., then as G. R. Youngs & Co. after Streeter failed, then as Youngs & Foster. The business was bought after the Civil War by Henry Tuthill and run under his name until 1890.

Meanwhile the Crooked Lake Canal's brief and noisy career ran its course. In 1884, a few years after the Canal's abandonment and the purchase of its right of way by yet another group of local businessmen, the Penn Yan & New York Rail Road was built. Eventually this was acquired by the Fall Brook Coal Company. Sidings were built to serve the various businesses along the Outlet waterfront. One such was run across the Outlet near the site of the old "state dam" that controlled the Canal, in order to serve the row of buildings on the Outlet's north bank west of Main Street.

During the 1880s several new structures were built between the Outlet and Water Street, including a large brick warehouse on the site of the old tannery, and Conkling & Ellsworth's coal and wood yard behind it. Both buildings were on land owned by local entrepreneur John Conklin, who sold—among other things—coal, wood, masons' supplies, sewer pipe, agricultural implements, fruits, beans, potatoes and fertilizers.

The railroad siding that lay behind the buildings carried material in and out. So did the steamboats that docked around the bend upstream. Docks along the Outlet accommodated barges that were towed up the channel to the lake.

John Conklin & Sons went into bankruptcy in 1916. Much of the property had by then been sold off, part of it to the fledgling Penn Yan Gas Light Co., which in 1899 built a small Normanesque stone castle on the site of the old malthouse (that structure having burned in 1894). Another parcel went to Wolcott Cole, who soon after the turn of the century built a brick bean house on the Outlet's bank.

The brick warehouse on Water Street housed another brief venture during the years before World War I. The Commercial Vending Corp. manufactured here four-section vending machines that for a penny would perform the feat of dispensing a stick of chewing gum.

Much of the surrounding countryside's prosperity depended on the shipping and sale of fresh fruit. The Lake Keuka Fruit Sales Co. bought up several of the buildings and warehouse on Water Street and thereby enjoyed ready access to the railroad and to the water.

However, in 1928 the company went out of business and its buildings went to various buyers. The old Scheetz homestead was sold to the Custom Milling Corp., who erected a small grain cleaning mill on the premises. When the mill was sold again in 1934 the property included an attrition mill, burrs, motors, mixers, five grain elevators, a conveyor, cleaning machine, two platform scales, a corn sheller and a corn crusher.

Virginia Dare Vineyardists bought part of the property in 1919 and tore down the old barn on Liberty Street (certainly the oldest remaining structure in the neighborhood; it was just about 100 years old when it was razed) and erected a big new concrete winery. Seneca Grape Juice and the Penn Yan Winery were subsequent owners of this building and the little Norman castle built for the Penn Yan Gas Light Co.

The small parcel between Water Street and the Outlet was crammed with residential and industrial enterprises for more than 150 years. The old Scheetz homestead lasted through the middle of the 20th century; Cole's bean house and Conklin's coke shed were razed in the 1980s.

Remaining are the Randall & Eastman warehouse, the last large structure with a tie to the Crooked Lake Canal; John Conklin & Sons' brick warehouse; the Penn Yan Gas Light castle; and the Virginia Dare winery. The railroad sidings are gone, but the trestle that carried the cars across the main line still stands, marking the downstream limit for small boats on the channel.

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<http://keukaoutlettrail.org/>

Or you can also contact us at: Friends of the Outlet, Inc., PO Box 65, Dresden, NY 14441. Please support the Trail and give generously to maintain and develop this beautiful historic and recreational Trail!