

Along the Outlet of Keuka Lake

by

[Frances Dumas](#)

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The Crooked Lake Canal

Part One

The era that saw the Erie Canal system built was one of great engineering accomplishment and romance. The rapid settlement of western New York forced the government to open up new markets through improved transportation. Roads and canals were constructed all over the state.

By 1830 Yates County's population had reached modern levels in a truly explosive manner. The slopes of the Keuka Lake watershed were cleared and planted to grain and fruit, but the trip to larger markets was slow and expensive.

The very first attempt to survey a water route out of the Keuka Lake basin was made as early as 1814. Because the route between Keuka and Seneca lakes was thought impractical, the plan was to cut a canal through to the Cohocton River, a navigable branch of the Susquehanna. The idea came to nothing at the time, but it wasn't forgotten and finally in 1827 petitions were presented to the legislature in Albany demanding that the state make a serious effort to connect the Keuka watershed with the outside world.

The following year the legislature finally acted (after yet another petition was submitted) and directed that two routes be surveyed: the old one to the Cohocton at Bath and the startlingly steep drop to Seneca Lake. David Thomas, an engineer trained on the Erie Canal, surveyed both and turned in his report.

Thomas estimated that a canal between Penn Yan and Dresden would cost about \$120,000, including a dam and guardlock at Penn Yan to raise the level of Keuka Lake—known in those days from its odd shape as the Crooked Lake—and provide a more adequate water supply.

Thomas noted the large number of mills already using the Outlet's water and reported that a canal would ruin their power supply, especially in times of drought, unless the additional dam were built at the upper end. A number of lift locks would be needed to lower boats the 270 feet to Seneca Lake and Thomas recommended these be built with wooden chambers to save money.

The legislature approved building the Crooked Lake Canal in 1829 and appointed engineer Holmes Hutchinson to make the final survey. Hutchinson agreed with most of Thomas' preliminary findings.

Below the guardlock the Canal would be routed on the north side of the Outlet so as to make an aqueduct unnecessary. Excavation had to be made through some of the

millponds, a sawmill and a gristmill would have to be moved, as well as two dwelling houses. In the narrow valley below Lawrence's Mill, Hutchinson almost casually remarked in his report, "the tow path of the Canal may be formed partially from the excavation of the new channel" for the Outlet.

Wherever the Outlet's natural course ran along the valley's north side, a new bed had to be dug for it. New bridges would have to be built, at least one new mill dam, embankments and culverts to protect the existing millponds and raceways, and an astonishing total of 27 lift locks, some to be carved from the limestone bedrock, plus the guardlock and dam in Penn Yan. In the whole 360-mile length of the Erie Canal only 90 locks were constructed; this small spur canal had almost a third as many in less than eight miles!

Construction was begun in April 1831 with the contracts specifying that it be finished by September the following year. However, at the same time several other states were building great public works projects and many of the workers were deliberately drawn off by higher wages elsewhere. In October 1832, a contractor—already past the deadline—failed to pay his men, who were so exasperated they stole everything they could move and then set fire to their shanties; they were foreigners, an account written some years later primly reports, and so was their boss; all of them subsequently left for parts unknown. This and other labor disputes delayed completion of the canal for another full year. The cost was finally tallied at nearly \$157,000.

The Canal was built to handle the same size boats as the rest of the Erie system. It was 42 feet wide at the water line, 26 feet wide at the bottom and four feet deep. The locks were 90 feet long and 15 feet wide. Passage through all of them from lake to lake took about six hours.

It only took a single year of operation for the mill owners to begin complaining about insufficient water flow. The upper level of the Canal was deepened by 2 feet 6 inches, the first of many expensive alterations made during the next 40 years.

The new waterway was heavily used but the state never made back the cost of operation—let alone the enormous cost of construction.

The original locks were made of wood by local contractors, among whom was Samuel Bigelow, who at the time owned the old Friend's Mill site. He erected a sawmill just above the dam (so he could use the pond to float logs to the mill) and built 10 of the locks.

Some fifteen years later the wooden locks were so dilapidated they needed rebuilding. The legislature appropriated \$25,000 in 1845 to make new stone locks. The total cost of this work, completed in 1848, was just over \$107,000.

The Canal and the access it provided to larger markets—no matter how much it cost the state—created a boom economy. Penn Yan was incorporated in 1833, the same year the Canal opened for business, and the lower end of town near the waterfront quickly grew in importance at the expense of the previous commercial center along Head Street (now

North Avenue). Large merchant gristmills were built downstream along the Outlet and the profitable distilling business, a byproduct of grain and fruit production, increased enormously.

The crash in wheat production after 1855, the panic of 1857 and finally the Civil War's drastic drain on available farm labor all combined to ruin the merchant milling business. After the war many of the Outlet mills turned to small manufacture of such articles as farm implements, barrel hoops and staves, handles, shingles, wheel spokes and edged tools. These were much lower in bulk and higher in price than the farm produce formerly shipped out along the Canal, and public sentiment for faster transportation reached clamorous proportions.

Meanwhile the Canal continued to cost enormous amounts of money to maintain. The harbors at the lower and upper ends were dredged in the 1850s, eight of the locks needed new foundations in 1865 and then in 1872 other locks needed extensive repairs. In this same year a severe drought left so little water in the Canal that for half the season it could handle boats of only two foot draft. The legislature felt that though the state's constitution forbade actually selling the Canal, nothing said money had to be appropriated for its repair or operation.

The constitution was amended in 1874 to allow the sale of some of the state's more unprofitable canals and this was the Crooked Lake Canal's death knell. The state officially abandoned the Canal, having never had a single profitable year, in 1877. The Canal commissioners admitted that some 300 square miles of prime farmland had been opened to the eastern markets; that some dozen or 14 warehouses had been built to accommodate the traffic; and that a railroad if built would probably divert this traffic to Pennsylvania. The Canal was unnecessary as a feeder to the Erie system, it was damaging the Outlet mills and it cost too much to maintain. The assets were sold off in 1878.

The lovely carved stone blocks that had gone into construction of the locks were largely reused in rebuilding the mills during the 1880s. A group of local businessmen, merchants and millowners bought the real estate including the towpath and the Canal prism itself, formed the Penn Yan and New York Railroad Company and laid tracks along the old right of way. A new faster era was about to begin.

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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!