

Along the Outlet of Keuka Lake

by

[Frances Dumas](#)

[Index to Frances Dumas's series about mills along the Outlet](#)

The Fall Brook Railroad

Before the Crooked Lake Canal opened for business there was discussion about whether a railroad should replace it. The Canal Commission itself expressed doubt in February of 1830 whether the waterway would ever pay back the exorbitant costs of operation.

A few months later a correspondence appeared in the local newspapers arguing for the construction of a railroad instead. A long letter was printed in July, written by a visitor to the area, claiming that a railroad would be cheaper to build than a canal, since all the materials for construction lay at hand; cheaper to maintain, since fewer people would be needed to run it, much faster; and more healthful to the surrounding community. It should be noted that the letter-writer was speaking of a horse-drawn train that would run on wooden rails.

The Canal, however, had its own momentum; the idea of building a railroad along the Outlet wasn't forgotten, but it was shelved for the present.

It was 20 years before the first railroad was actually built into Yates County. This was the Corning and Canandaigua, later called the Northern Central. Tracks were laid along the west shore of Seneca Lake, briefly exciting residents of the brand-new village of Dundee, but it passed further east through the hamlet of Himrod's Corners, then cut northeast through the rich farmland of Milo, crossed the Outlet by a bridge that was such a startling feat of engineering it became known as "The High Bridge" since it was by far the highest on the road's entire route. Freight and passenger stations were built on Hamilton Street and a large stockyard sprang up behind them.

Meanwhile, canal boats moved slowly between the lakes, taking more than six hours to negotiate the 28 locks. The mills along the Outlet used the waterway to ship flour to city markets. Central New York was the nation's breadbasket through the middle 1850s and only the alien wheat weevil and then one of the era's devastating and periodic economic depressions could alter that.

It became more and more obvious through the 1860s and into the early '70s that the Canal was insufficient for the area's transportation needs. In 1865 the first paper mill was built along the Outlet, and others shortly followed. A huge wood-pulp mill was planned for the high falls where the Yates County Oil Mill had been pressing flaxseed for the past forty years. The owners needed cheap and relatively fast movement of huge amounts of raw materials and then the heavy rolls of finished paper.

The Canal was officially abandoned by the state in 1877, and within the year several of the millowners formed a syndicate and bought the right of way, including the prism and

banks—everything within the so-called "Blue Line" boundaries—for the purpose of building a railroad to link Penn Yan and Dresden.

The syndicate called itself The Penn Yan and New York Railway Company and consisted of Calvin Russel, William Fox, Oliver G. Shearman, Seneca L. Pratt, Perley Curtis and John T. Andrews 2nd. By 1883 they owned part or all of Seneca Mills, Milo Mills, Shutts' Mill, Fox's Mill and the two gristmills by the dam in Penn Yan.

A new bridge was needed to carry Main Street across the Outlet if the railroad was to be built, and work was commenced in the summer of 1883, breaking off during the winter and resuming the following year. Work was begun on the railroad in November of 1884, beginning at both ends and working toward the middle. The handsome new bridge in Penn Yan had an opening made especially for the railroad, passing between the gristmill on the south bank and the garden wall of the old house that Jeremiah Jillet had built so many years before.

The railroad eventually terminated out near the foot of Keuka Lake, running through the village along the Outlet's south and east bank. The passenger station was built at the end of a short driveway down from Canal Street, soon to be renamed Seneca Street; it was behind the huge new malthouse that Oliver Shearman was building in anticipation of new and cheaper transportation. The freightyards lay nearby, and sidings were run to the mills and other businesses along the Outlet. An ice house was built near the lake, where blocks of ice could be stored for refrigerator cars to ship fresh fruit out of the Keuka basin. Big warehouses sprang up along the waterfront where the rails lay next to the steamboat landings.

It was named the Fall Brook Railroad, though railroad men called it "The Corkscrew Railway" because of its countless twists and turns. The rails were laid largely on the old towpath, here and there descending into the dry prism of the canal itself. Near Seneca Mill it actually passed through the narrow bed of one of the stone locks that carried a town road overhead.

Several small stations were built along the route, and whistle stops elsewhere. The trains operated for almost a century, though traffic was much reduced as the mills failed and trucks and automobiles took over so much passenger and freight movement.

In 1972 the tracks were damaged beyond repair by Tropical Storm Agnes, actually washing into the Outlet in a couple of places. The road was officially abandoned two years later and the tracks taken up over the greater part of the route in 1981, the year the right-of-way was purchased by Yates County for the Outlet Trail.

Walkers along the Trail may see the concrete milestones set up indicating the mileage from the junction at Dresden; some of the signs marked with a "W" showing where the engineer was obliged to sound his whistle to warn traffic at the grade crossings; a pair of the familiar X-shaped crossing signs just west of Cascade Millsite; a few of the bridges over tributary streams; and the foundations of the passenger and freight depots in Penn Yan.

© 1989, [Frances Dumas](#)

[Index to Frances Dumas's series about mills along the Outlet](#)

These booklets are reprinted with the permission of the author Frances Dumas. But the work of developing and maintaining the Keuka Lake Outlet Trail is ongoing. We hope you will help in this effort and you are invited to become a member or a sponsor of the Trail. Details on becoming a member or a sponsor can be found on the Friends of the Outlet Trail website at:

<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!