



# American Canals

The Bulletin of the American Canal Society

[www.americancanals.org](http://www.americancanals.org)

Dedicated to the Study of North American Canals and Waterways

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Our 53rd Year

Summer 2025

## Welcome to the Wonderful World of Canals and Inland Waterways



*The Great Falls Tavern and Lock 20 along the C&O Canal in Maryland are one of the thousands of historic canal sites that await you as you explore North America's network of canals.*

# President's Message

Whether you are an old-time canal enthusiast or just “canal-curious,” welcome to the World Canals Conference 2025 in Buffalo, NY. The study of canals can be a great hobby, or a passion, if you so choose.

It has been said that the canal is the one invention of man most in harmony with nature. A canal, whether it be passing through a city or cutting through the countryside, will be alive with life in ways that a train track or a highway never could. The canal can serve both the transportation needs of man while being a place that attracts countless forms of life, and this includes us humans. We find peace, green space, and history along the towpaths where the canal becomes a linear park connecting small and large settlements. In areas fortunate enough to have a active working canal, we might enjoy a walk or ride. In areas where the canal has been abandoned the canal might be a corridor for a trail while the canal itself becomes a valuable wetland. Along most canals, you will likely find interesting clues about the past in the locks, aqueducts, culverts, and bridges as the landscape rolls by.

The study of canals offers everyone a great reason to travel and explore because by their nature they connected regions. The Schuylkill Navigation will take you from the tidewater to the coal fields of Pennsylvania, while the Erie will connect the Atlantic to the Great Lakes. From Boston to Duluth, from Ottawa to St. Louis, you will find a canal or inland navigation nearby. Thirty-nine states and seven provinces had, or still have, some manner of internal navigation. Canals can be found in cities, villages, along rivers, through dry valleys or the middle of the woods. Many of the old canal routes are finding new life as linear parks offering thousands of miles of enjoyment. By foot, bike or car, you can seek your own adventure.

The American Canal Society was created in 1971 to expand the knowledge base of the old towpath canals at a time when many were threatened by neglect, apathy or development. Its mission was to help unite the various state canal organizations and help share information among them. In states where there was no organized groups, the ACS was ready to fill that role.

Now, in its 53rd year, the ACS continues to share information and offer researchers a platform to publish their findings. The American Canals newsletter is published quarterly. The American Canal Society website offers most of the 53-year run of American Canals, the 50

issues of Canadian Canals, canal guides, maps, and more. The Facebook page shares canal news and events. We invite you to take a look.

## **Metamora and the Whitewater Canal**

In this issue, we devote much of the content to the Whitewater Canal in Indiana. We get a report from Robert Schmidt, the past president of the Canal Society of Indiana, and then read a newspaper article from 1969 and an American Canals article from 1972. Harry Rinker's exploration was done in the the old fashioned way, with a paper map and some canal instinct.

The Whitewater was a short lived canal that many of you have likely never heard about. In the 1940s local folks saw the opportunity to preserve and restore sections of the canal to offer a “canal village” and a boat ride. It has been one of the nice success stories that people could point to as an example of what is possible. Now, it is threatened with closure or severe cutbacks. The boat has been destroyed and the mill museum closed. Whitewater and Metamora serve as a warning to all canal preservation movements that nothing is permanent. Priorities change, movers and leaders die, volunteers become hard to find, and government support dries up. Plus, the on-going story reminds us that advocacy and community involvement can change outcomes.

## **Want to Learn More?**

Canal history, preservation and advocacy can be found in many forms, from small local efforts to larger state societies. Some of these groups date back to the 1940s, when folks began to realize that a way of life was passing as old canal workers passed away and old canals were being filled in. Most groups have websites and some social media presence. And many of the societies have used newsletters to document what was being lost or to advocate for preservation and reuse. These decades of local coverage and scholarship cannot be found in other sources. If you are seeking in-depth research and local knowledge, be sure to check these hidden resources. Some of these newsletters, such as the Middlesex Canal Association, the C&O Canal Association, and American Canals, can be found online as digitized files. Others sit waiting in archives. The story of the society newsletter can be found on American Canal Society website, along with a listing of who is offering what and how to find them.



# Future of Whitewater Canal Park in Question

In June, the State of Indiana announced that the Whitewater Canal State Historic Site would be closed at the end of the 2025 season. They said, "After exhausting all avenues to raise the funds to make essential repairs, it is no longer economically or environmentally feasible to continue to operate and manage the site." The Facebook post did not specifically mention what this will mean long-term for the Metamora Grist Mill, the aqueduct or other sites associated with the state designation. The good folks from the Canal Society of Indiana (CSI) and others jumped into action and it was quickly announced, "Great News: Historic Site in Metamora to be repaired and remain open!"

Robert Schmidt reported that on Monday June 30th, five members of the CSI Board of Directors attended a



*The Duck Creek Aqueduct as seen in this 1958 photo.*

*Library of Congress*

meeting with I Love Metamora, to listen to Eric Todd, Chief Operating Officer from the staff of the Indiana State Museum and Historic Sites. He presented the latest information on the status of the Whitewater Canal site in Metamora. On June 12th, the State announced that the Metamora site would be closed in October 2025. Their reasoning was that the \$7 million dollar amount required to match the \$7 million state grant had not been obtained and that the State Museum's budget had been reduced by the Indiana Legislature, and this action required cuts in all of their statewide programs. A few days later a \$7 million dollar grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. was offered and given preliminary approval. As a result, the future of the

Whitewater site appears to be a bit better. The authorization from the legislature is still in effect for the \$7 million and the State Museum also has about \$400 thousand dollars set aside for use in Metamora. As of Monday all the necessary signatures needed to proceed had been collected. The total of \$14.4 million was the amount required to fund the repair of the aqueduct, the Laurel feeder dam, two locks, the canal prism and also obtain a replacement canal boat.

At the meeting, these results were accepted as great news but there remain a lot of unanswered questions, such as:

*Q. The original cost estimates were prepared well over a year ago. Will the \$14.4 million be adequate to complete all the project objectives?*

*A. This will need to be revisited with a new estimate and adjust the project accordingly.*

*Q. R. Schmidt - After the terms of the grants are finalized, will the State Museum still be the entity responsible for the site?*

*A. That will need to be resolved. It could be the State Museum, the Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources (IDNR), or a third party.*

*Q. Are the grant funds just for the capital improvements?*

*A. Yes, the grant funds will be used only for making the site improvements and do not include any funds to operate the site or to provide marketing or other promotion activities.*

*Q. How long will it be before we can see actions in the area once the grant funds are received and meet final approval?*

*A. Hopefully it will be in a few months not over a period of years. The grant needs final acceptance by the Museum and the State, a revised plan developed, and contracts issued.*

*Continues on page 4*

*Q. What is the impact on the Whitewater Valley Railroad?*

*A. The railroad operates independently of the historic site and has an easement along its right-of-way to Metamora. Regardless of the operation of the site or the mill, the railroad will continue to operate as normal.*

*Q. What is the next action that needs to occur?*

*A. The Board of Directors of the State Museum will next meet in September. We should know more after that meeting about the future plans. It was suggested that those attending the meeting should contact the local state representatives and thank them for all their vigorous efforts in support of the Metamora community.*

### **Conclusions**

The \$14.4 million funding for the project seems to be resolved but the scope of the project and the entity who will eventually fund and market the site remains in question. There will still be a Whitewater Canal Site in operation beyond 2025, so in that sense the site has been saved. Hopefully this summary will keep you up to date on the status of the Whitewater site. Be assured that your Board of the Canal Society of Indiana is following the progress to keep the site open and will keep you posted on future actions as they occur. Please encourage everyone to continue to visit the site and its activities. Bob Schmidt.

METAMORA, Ind. – The Whitewater Canal State Historic Site in Metamora, originally slated for closure after the 2025 summer season, may now have a path toward preservation thanks to a funding opportunity from the Indiana Economic Development Corporation (IEDC).

According to a June 24 press release, the Indiana State Museum and Historic Sites (ISMHS) and the Southeastern Indiana Regional Planning Commission (SEIRPC) have received a pre-commitment notice from IEDC for a possible \$7 million grant to help fund the Whitewater Canal State Historic Site Preservation Project. If accepted, the funds could be combined with a previously allocated \$7 million from the state, creating a total funding package of \$14.4 million. The matching dollars were initially included in the 2023 state budget but required a local match to proceed. The project scope includes restoration of the feeder dam, Locks 24 and 25,

the aqueduct, dredging the canal, and constructing a canal boat with a dry dock system.

Cathy Ferree, President and CEO of ISMHS, said, "This is an encouraging new development. We will take this into consideration as we work to determine the next steps for the future of Whitewater Canal State Historic Site."

This latest development follows collaborative efforts among ISMHS, SIRPC, Sen. Jean Leising, Rep. Lindsay Patterson, Rep. David Abbott, the community of Metamora, Franklin County and the State of Indiana. The next steps include an environmental review, coordinated with the Indiana Department of Natural Resources and the Indiana Department of Environmental Management, as well as a comprehensive reassessment of the financial plan based on current economic conditions.

ISMHS previously announced on June 12 it would close the site at the end of the 2025 season, citing long-standing financial and environmental barriers. "This was an incredibly tough decision," ISMHS said in a statement, noting it had exhausted all prior avenues for funding.

Ferree said the canal's story remains an important part of Indiana's history. The ISMHS board will consider the IEDC development in its upcoming planning sessions to determine the site's future.

As a quasi-state agency, ISMHS operates as a nonprofit organization, enabling it to apply for grants and accept donations. Roughly 26% of its \$15 million budget comes from fundraising, sponsorships and earned revenue.

### **Questions Surrounding Indiana Code § 14-20-5-2 Raised**

In a previous statement, State Sen. Jean Leising (R-Oldenburg), who said she has championed the site's preservation for years, explained she was notified June 11 by Secretary of Energy and Natural Resources Suzanne Jaworowski that the state would "abandon" the historic site after the 2025 season and prepare it for sale.

However, suppose that plan was to move forward. In that case, it may cause conflict with Indiana Code § 14-20-5-2, which says the state accepted ownership of the Whitewater Canal land on the condition that it be maintained as a public memorial. Given that legal obligation, it is unknown how the state would plan to proceed with selling or abandoning the site without first amending the statute or formally removing that requirement. Whitewater Publications reached out to Governor Mike Braun's office for a statement.

## Local Response and Community Advocacy

In response to the closure announcement, local organizations and officials joined together to advocate for a transparent, community-centered path forward. Representatives from the Franklin County Community Foundation, I Love Metamora, Franklin County Chamber of Commerce, Franklin County Tourism, Main Street Brookville, and others have also been working together with elected officials to bring local voices to the table.

The local coalition is encouraging community engagement and pledges to provide updates as the situation develops.

One thing remains certain: the shopkeepers in Metamora will continue to operate and host events as usual, keeping the spirit of the town alive regardless of what the future holds for the canal site.

Updates will be shared as more details regarding the funding proposal and preservation efforts become available.

## Anderson Daily Bulletin, Anderson Indiana, May 15, 1969

The Indiana Department of Conservation took over the canal as a state memorial a generation ago and around 1948 completely rebuilt the old aqueduct, using as many of the original heavy timbers as possible. The department was obliged to alter the design a bit to make it practical but an excellent job of reconstruction and restoration resulted and the rebuilt structure will stand for many years.

Much of the enthusiasm for giving this stretch of canal a new lease on life followed an energetic campaign of John P. Goodwin of Brookville in the early 1940s to save the feeder dam in the West Fork of the Whitewater at Laurel. The dam had been badly damaged by a flood and was disintegrating rapidly. Mr. Goodwin and certain of his influential friends organized the Whitewater Canal Association for the purpose of restoring a portion of the waterway for posterity. While not all of the aims of the Association came to pass, the section of the waterway down as far as Yellow Banks was restored and is now maintained by the state.

Through the years there were proposals to operate some sort of a canal boat on the segment of the canal that parallels U.S. Highway 52 just below Metamora.

Milford E. Anness, a native of Metamora and now an attorney in Columbus, was a leading spirit in the canal project. Robert Gordon of Connersville was also active.

A real gain was made in 1964 when an outboard-driven craft, The *Valley Belle*, was built and began operations. Starting at the rest park along the highway just below the Millville Lock, the boat made a trip through the lock and up to the edge of Metamora, then down past the rest park to a bend in the canal some distance below. Due to the flood damage to the feeder dam at Laurel, the supply of water to the canal had to be turned off and the boat could not operate during 1968.

Dick Green, conductor of the "Our Neighborhood" column in The Muncie Star, informs us that equipment is now on hand to repair the ailing Laurel dam. A cofferdam has been placed, making it possible to divert water once again into the canal and provide the necessary flow to make the boat operation possible again.

The boat trip, ordinarily taking about 45 minutes, may be lengthened this year. Plans are being made to run the *Valley Belle* upstream into the village of Metamora, itself a quaint, peaceful community that was a beehive of the canal era. In Metamora three modes of transportation may be seen side by side: the canal, the railroad and the main street of the town.

The Whitewater Canal, first project of the Great Internal Improvements Program a century and a half ago, to get into actual operation, was built between 1836 and 1847. It extended originally from Lawrenceburg, through Harrison, Brookville, Metamora, Laurel and Connersville to Cambridge City. The original state plan called for it to go to Hagerstown. After the canal was finished to Cambridge City, a group of Hagerstown businessmen organized their own company and had the canal extended into that town.

Later a new canal was built from Harrison to Cincinnati, negotiating a high hill in North Bend, Ohio, by means of a 1,300-foot tunnel. This portion of the canal was a busy one and had not the spring freshets farther up the watercourse interrupted operations from time to time the canal might possibly have met its expenses.

The Whitewater was an important gateway into the interior of Indiana during its day but the coming of the railroad ended its usefulness.



**From American Canals  
Issue #3, November, 1972**

**By  
Harry Rinker**

On Sunday, March 19, 1972, I decided try and locate the route and remains of the Whitewater Canal between Connersville and Brookville, Indiana. I had little prior knowledge to aid me, knowing only that the canal went through Connersville and that there was a covered bridge aqueduct at Metamora.

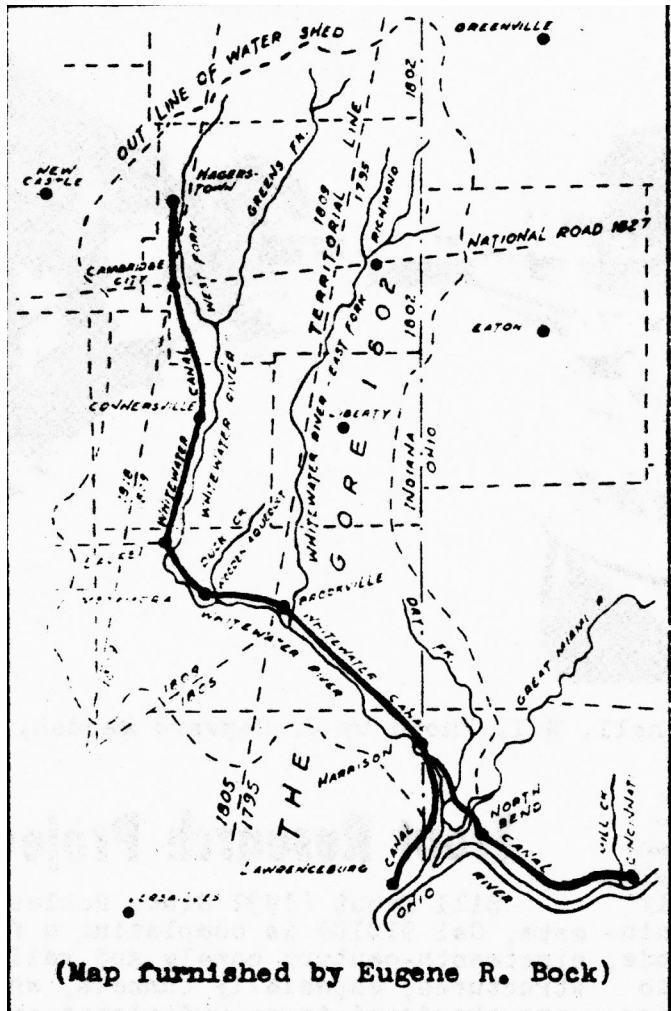
Since I arrived in Connersville from the west, I sought Indiana Route 121, which I noticed from my road map paralleled the Whitewater River and, I hoped, the canal. It was a fortunate choice for as I was leaving Connersville to the south, the road cut across an open ditch which I recognized as the prism of the canal. Just to the north were the remains of two lock walls. Beside the road where it crossed the prism was an historical marker which read: "In 1836 construction began on this fifty-six lock, one hundred one mile canal. Open from Lawrenceburg to Brookville (1839), it was extended to Laurel and Cincinnati (1843), Cambridge (1846), and Hagerstown (1847).

The marker was put there in 1966 by the Indiana Sesquicentennial Commission; and then, no doubt, the remains of the lock were a source of community pride. Not so today! Today the prism and lock chamber are the dumping sites for old tires, beer cans, and numerous other forms of trash. The chamber itself is two-thirds filled with dirt and garbage. Weeds have overgrown the area. The masonry of the lock walls is badly decayed, the once straight edges of the cut stone weathered to resemble misplaced pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. The berm bank of the canal is now home of railroad tracks, the ideal road for the canal hunter. My efforts revealed that the tracks follow the berm bank the entire distance from Connersville to Brookville. When the road left the prism, one needed only to keep a sharp lookout for the telltale tracks to pick up the canal bed once again.

Route 121 south of Connersville follows the canal prism most of the distance to Laurel. One finds lock remains by looking for large clumps of weeds and what appears to be mounds of dirt along the side of the road. I spotted the locks south of Connersville. The first must have been two chambered, or else the bypass flume had exceptionally fine cut stone work. Both chambers showed signs of gate recesses. Only the downstream entrance walls remain visible; the rest of the lock is filled with dirt and, in fact, may contain the remainder of the walls intact. The lock is overgrown with brush and trees. The walls can be seen clearly only if you are headed

north.

The second lock, at the junction of Route 121 and Road 125 West in Fayette County, is in very bad condition. Again, the cut stone has weathered badly; apparently a poor quality of shale stone was used. Although overgrown with weeds and small brush, the entire chamber is open. As in Connersville, no one seems concerned with the fate of these two locks; content to let them decay, ghosts from the past slowly fleeting away until they vanish unnoticed from the scene. It was easy to spot what once were canal warehouses, now exhausted skeletons of their past. At Laurel, Route 121 turns away from the canal and eventually deadends at Route 52. Turning east on Route one again finds the canal at Metamora and is greeted by colorful signs proclaiming "Metamora - Historical Canal Town."



Here the canal has become the center of an effort to restore vitality to the community by rewatering the canal and finding new uses for the buildings along its banks. The end result is that Metamora is one of the most pleasing, pleasurable canal towns that I have visited.

A prime mover in this project is the State of Indiana, Department of Natural Resources. It has rewatered a section of canal, restored the covered bridge aqueduct and the Millville lock (built in 1842), is restoring an early grist mill, and conducts boat rides aboard the *Valley Belle*. Picnic facilities abound; and, even on a cold March day, there was a large crowd at the site. The aqueduct alone makes the trip worthwhile. Its heavy wooden trusses, a roof line which provides cover for the towpath on the upstream side carries one's mind quickly back into the nineteenth century.

In Metamora itself, numerous individuals have taken the old buildings and, while retaining the facades, have turned the insides into antique shops, craft shops, restaurants and museums. The restoration is the epitome of good taste; nothing appears overdone. Along the canal are private homes, a church, bank, three-story Masonic building, locktender's house and numerous one and two story commercial buildings. Other communities wishing to learn the potential in canal restoration are well directed to visit Metamora. (Harry was a Director of the American Canal Society and was President of the Pennsylvania Canal Society.)

**You can find out more about the  
Whitewater Canal and all of  
Indiana's canals at the  
Canal Society of Indiana website.  
Search for Canal Society of Indiana  
or go to [indcanal.org](http://indcanal.org)**

## **Notable Dates in Whitewater Canal Restoration**

1937 – Whitewater Aqueduct (aka Duck Creek Aqueduct) surveyed

1941 – The Whitewater Canal Association is formed.

1943 – The state conservation commission are tasked to conduct a survey for a park in the Whitewater Valley. Residents of Metamora and the Whitewater Canal Association push to have the canal restored for water power. It is also noted that the village remains much as it was 75 to 100 years ago.

1946 – An article in the *Palladium Item* newspaper notes that the section of canal between Laurel and Brookville is being restored. This includes work done to the Laurel Dam, a tear down and rebuild of the Duck Creek Aqueduct, restoration of a twin arch culvert, the possible restoration of two locks, and the old grist mill. And maybe a canal boat. The Yellow Bank Culvert is destroyed.

1950 – Work on canal structures ends as funds dry up. Water was flowing through canal, the aqueduct had been rebuilt, new feeder gates installed, and the lock at Metamora was stabilized.

1953 – The WCA had cleared and dredged nine miles of canal between Laurel Feeder Dam and Yellowbank. The paper notes that the first boat to use the canal in 1839 was the *Ben Franklin*. The park is called the Whitewater Canal Memorial.

1960 – Feeder dam repaired, plans to restore grist mill and turn into a museum.

1964 – Plans for replica canal boat announced. Mill museum was complete. On July 26, The *Valley Belle*, a gas powered boat, was launched. The 30-foot-long and 10-feet-wide boat seats 30. The 45-minute trip passes through the restored Millville lock.

1968 – Dry conditions stop boat rides.

1969 – Boat rides continue.

1980 – The new *Ben Franklin II* is brought into use. The 44-foot-long boat was designed to look like a traditional canal boat and was pulled by animal teams.

1990 – The *Ben Franklin III* is put into use. The boat can hold up to 80 passengers.

2020 – The State Park is closed due to Covid.

2022 – The *Ben Franklin III* is lifted from the canal to be inspected and the bow breaks off.

2025 – The state of Indiana announces that the Whitewater Canal Park is to close at the end of the year. Shortly after, it reconsiders.

# Canal Tidbits and News

In July 2025, the **Potomac River** flooded and severely damaged C&O Canal park and trail. In July 2025, intense storms and prolonged rainfall led to major flooding along the Potomac River, causing widespread damage to the C&O Canal National Historical Park and Towpath Trail. The rising river overwhelmed canal banks, washed out towpath sections, collapsed retaining walls, and uprooted trees along the 184.5-mile trail from Georgetown to Cumberland. Park officials reported severe erosion and infrastructure damage near Great Falls, Harpers Ferry, and multiple lock sites. The National Park Service closed several trail sections to ensure public safety and began deploying crews to assess and clear debris. Historic structures and popular access points like the Monocacy Aqueduct and Carderock Recreation Area were also affected. The flooding disrupted both recreational use and ongoing preservation projects, setting back months of maintenance work. Park Superintendent Tina Cappetta stated that while emergency repairs are underway, full restoration may take months, depending on federal support and weather conditions. Cyclists, hikers, and history enthusiasts have been encouraged to check alerts on the park's website before planning visits. This summer's floods underscore the increasing vulnerability of historic infrastructure to extreme weather events and the importance of long-term resilience planning for the beloved C&O Canal corridor. (This article was generated by ChatGPT using publicly available sources)

Ohio's America 250 has unveiled the **Lake Erie to Ohio River Trail** where you are invited to "drive your own adventure." An on-line interactive map or a pdf version will help you find various sites across the state. This is all part of the 2026 celebration of America's 250 birthday.

The owner of the **Rockin' Thunder River Tours**, which offers rides between Madison, Indiana, and Frankfort, Kentucky, has had to cancel due to inoperable locks along the Kentucky River. Flooding in April of this year destroyed lock equipment at three of the four locks that the tour passes through. So far, the Kentucky River Authority has not announced any plans or a timeline for repairs. The locks date back to the mid-1800s, when the river was used for trade. The locks were repaired in 2010 and brought back into use at that time.

**Thomas X. Grasso** was given the posthumous honor of having a tug named for him. Tom served for 40 years as the president of the Canal Society of New York State, and was also the president of the Inland Waterways International. The New York Canal Corporation has been updating its floating fleet with the purchase of some smaller pusher tugs; however, this new tug is a full sized, the first of its class to be purchased in 90 years.

The U.S. Maritime Administration has added nearly **850 miles of inland waterways** to the Marine Highway Program, expanding federal grant eligibility for shipping development projects to new routes. The expansion centers on a route that runs through the Great Lakes, dubbed M-90. This corridor is more than 2,300 miles long, and stretches all the way from Minnesota to New York. The expansion includes the addition of new authorized project sponsors on the M-90 route: the states of Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota, Michigan, and New York, along with Ports of Indiana and the Erie-Western Pennsylvania Port Authority. The expansion also authorizes four new routes on the Big Sandy River, Cumberland River, Green River and Ouachita River. (Credit The Maritime Executive)

The **Manayunk Canal**, which was once part of the Schuylkill Navigation, has been restored with flowing water. The Flat Rock Dam project was designed to restore river water to the old towpath canal, which had become a stagnate channel after the Navigation's abandonment in the 1940s. The Manayunk is part of the popular Schuylkill River Greenways Trail.

**Three iconic concrete bridges** designed by Frederick Law Olmsted located in the Genesee Valley Park in Rochester might have a brighter future now that the local legislature has signed off on a proposal to restore them. The bridges cross the New York State Canal and were installed to connect trails that had been cut by the construction of the Barge Canal in the 19-teens. The restoration plan is due by early 2027.

**Goats** are being put to work cleaning canal banks in the Greece Canal Park, near Rochester. The animals eat almost everything, including poison ivy.

*Continues on page 9*



The **Muskingum River Navigation** is once again open between Lock 2 and the foot of the closed Lock 11. Recent restoration of Lock 7 allows the use of the full river. The Muskingum is one of two navigations that features hand operated locks. The system is operated by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources.

The final section of the **Farmington Canal Heritage Trail** in Farmington, Connecticut, has opened after decades of delays. However, more work needs to be done to finish the entire 84-mile-long canal trail.

In May, a ceremony marked the completion of the Morris Canal **Plane 2 East restoration** with the installation of new signage. It has taken about 20 years to get to this point.

After years of discussion in Scioto County (Ohio), work might begin on the **restoration of Lock 50** of the Ohio and Erie Canal. The work will include developing a pedestrian trail, vehicle access roads, an observation deck, and interpretive signage telling the story of the area's canal-era past. Lock 50 sits where the Ohio and Erie Canal began its final descent across the Scioto River bottoms toward its terminus in West Portsmouth at a site once known as Union Mills.

After months of waiting, the **Day Peckinpaugh**, the last surviving motorship from the NYS Barge Canal era, has been moved south to Peekskill, NY, to an uncertain future. The *Day* had been berthed for years in the eastern end of the canal at Waterford, after the State of New York decided to de-accession her as a museum artifact. Efforts were made to find her a new home, but when that failed, she was sold for scrap.

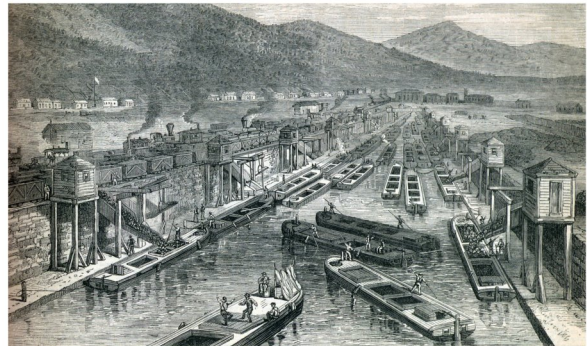
Although delayed, the plan to move the **Lois McClure**, the replica sailing canal boat to the Old Erie Canal Park in Port Byron, NY, continues to (slowly) move forward. The boat sits on the dry about 6 miles from the park and awaits the necessary approvals to be moved and placed in the old canal bed in front of the Erie House Tavern.

## Guidebook Available

If you missed the Schuylkill Navigation Bicentennial trip but would like the guidebook, we do have extra copies available. The book is in the 8.5 x 11 format with 56 pages and features full color images and includes listings of all the canals, dams, locks and slackwater sections north of Reading. The cost is \$26.00, which includes the shipping and postage. Contact the ACS for purchase.

### Schuylkill Navigation Bicentennial

Canal - Rail Excursion Guide  
Reading to Port Carbon  
April 5, 2025



Presented by  
The Friends of the Schuylkill Navigation  
and  
The American Canal Society  
with the  
Reading Blue Mountain & Northern Railroad

Have you visited the American Canal Society website at

[www.americancanals.org](http://www.americancanals.org)?

You will find information on each state, what canal groups are active, where to find archives, canal data sheets, maps, past issues of American Canals and Canals Canada.

Our blog features book reviews, in-depth articles, photos, and Terry Woods' Canal Comments.

# THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON HISTORIC CANALS

## Personal reminiscences of the early years of the World Canals Conference

by Dave Johnson

*This article was written for a Canal Comments in 2016.*

When the thirtieth World Canals Conference convenes next September in Syracuse, New York, it will be the first time in seven years that the event has been held in North America. In the eighteen years since 1998, only six conferences—three in Canada, two in New York, and one in Pennsylvania—have been held on this side of the Atlantic Ocean; (eleven have been in Europe and one in China). The fact that three out of four of the U.S. conferences will have been on the Erie Canal further illustrates how this event has evolved from a small annual gathering of North American canal nuts. Terry Woods has invited me to summarize my personal memories of the early predecessors of the high-tech, high-budget expositions that the recent conferences have become.

It all began in 1988, when the superintendent of the newly established Illinois & Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor (I&M NHC) invited managers from national, state and municipal canal parks to come to Morris, Illinois, to attend the National Conference on Historic Canals (NCHC). The keynote address at the opening session was delivered by Dick Stanton, superintendent of the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park. He was joined by speakers, mostly from the National Park Service, on topics related to canal maintenance, historic architecture, and structure rehabilitation. The next day, the delegates toured the I. & M. Canal. The conference wrapped up the third morning with discussions on recreation, interpretation and tourism at historic canal sites.

The park managers and rangers who attended that first conference were enthusiastic and felt that another meeting should be held the following year. Steve

Humphrey, executive director of the National Canal Museum in Easton, Pennsylvania, volunteered to host it in 1989. Word of the event had spread through the non-profit state and local canal societies, and when the professionals convened in Easton for the second NCHC there were many amateur canal buffs, representing the American, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Virginia Canal Societies, the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal Association, Shenango Valley Conservancy, Friends of the Delaware Canal, Delaware & Raritan Canal Watch, and Cascades Locks Parks Association in attendance with them.

The program organized by Steve Humphrey and



*Photo by Robert Barth*

Lance Metz, the museum's renowned historian, featured many of the speakers that have been recognized over the years. Among the featured speakers were Mark Newell, Brian Morrell, Emory Kemp, Abba Lichtenstein, and Rory Robinson.

The second day of the conference was planned as an all-day tour of the four canals that converged in the area. Easton, at the junction of the Lehigh and Delaware Rivers, was the point at which boats bringing anthracite down the Lehigh could move into either the Delaware

Canal to Philadelphia or the Morris Canal in New Jersey. The tour was planned to visit all of them, plus the Delaware & Raritan Canal. However, a major storm overnight had raised the rivers, flooding parts of the Delaware Canal, and forced some changes in the itinerary, which Steve and Lance quickly organized. Late in the afternoon, the delegates themselves amended the program again, repeating an event from the 1988 conference. During what was planned to be a brief rest stop in Lambertville, New Jersey, the I. & M. veterans led most of the delegates into a nearby public house for an unscheduled happy hour, threatening to throw the already jury-rigged tour completely off-track. Finally, after the bar ran out of chicken wings, the refreshed delegates climbed back into their coaches and proceeded to the scheduled dinner stop.

The opportunity for canal society members from around the country to gather and meet with park professionals, development agencies and planning commissions on issues of common interest was a major step in establishing the conference as a permanent fixture. Several of the groups represented were just beginning to preserve and restore canal sites in their areas. This interaction made the Easton conference a landmark event and firmly established the basis for subsequent conferences. However, it was to be the last National Conference, for the following year's meeting was across the northern border.

The First International Conference on Historic Canals (ICHC) was held in September 1990 at Chaffey's Lock, Ontario, hosted by the Canadian Parks Service and the Friends of the Rideau Canal. John Bonser, superintendent of the Rideau Canal, and Dave Ballinger, manager of the northern district, led a well-planned program at one of the finest venues of all the sites where the conference has ever been held, the Opinicon Hotel, a rambling nineteenth-century summer inn next to the canal and on the shore of its namesake lake. With only about sixty participants, it allowed the delegates to engage closely in the discussions and field trips. The most lasting memory of that conference, however, came from an unplanned incident that resulted in a tradition that was sustained for some twenty years. When a slide projector jammed during the presentation by a young lady from Parks Canada, NPS Ranger Rory Robinson, from the Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area, sprang to her rescue. Proclaiming his expertise in AV equipment, he quickly flipped the carousel over to free-up the troublesome mechanism. Unfortunately, he failed to ensure that the retaining ring was fully locked on. It was not, and 120 Kodachrome slides scattered across the

carpet. During the closing session, Bonser and Ballinger presented Rory with a gold-painted Kodak carousel mounted on a polished wooden base. The trophy was named (for reasons probably best understood by Canadians and too complex to try to explain here) the Dink Award and its recipient the "Dink of the Conference." Rory ensured that it would be passed on to future "dinks" by announcing that Cuyahoga Valley would host the next conference.

The 1991 conference met at the Quaker Square Hilton in Akron, Ohio, and featured the northern part of the Ohio and Erie Canal. It was organized and led by NPS Rangers Rory Robinson and Paul Labovitz, and backed by a coalition of state and local organizations, both public and non-profit, including the Canal Society of Ohio and the Cascade Locks Park Association. The theme was "The Future Echoes the Past: Innovative Uses of Historic Canals." Tours for the 80 delegates in attendance covered the 65-mile corridor from Cleveland to Zoar, with major visits to Canal Fulton and Roscoe Village.

In those days there was no formal process for choosing sites and hosts for the conference; it was believed that an unofficial "committee" gathered in the bar late at night and chose where the next meeting would be. That's how it was when the delegates sat down the final morning for the closing session. There were two of us from the C & O Canal Association: John Frye, a member of our board and a seasonal park ranger on the canal; and myself, in my first year as the association's president. We were sitting with our wives in the first row, thinking about the long drives home that we would soon be starting, while Rory passed the Dink trophy on to ACS president Bill Trout, the new "winner." He then announced the next year's conference site by smiling at John and me and saying, "The committee met last night and we think you guys ought to host it." Recovering from shock, we replied that we would see how the superintendent of the park felt about it, and let them know.

Tom Hobbs, the new superintendent of the C & O Canal NHP (Dick Stanton had retired in 1989) enthusiastically accepted the proposal, and quickly assigned Gordon Gay, the chief of interpretation, to work with us on the planning committee. Hal Larsen, C&OCA vice-president (and five-term past-president) also joined the committee. The four of us met regularly over the next year. We chose Harpers Ferry as the best place to hold the conference, because it was a good base for tours to all

*Continues on page 12*



sections of the 185-mile long canal and an important historic location in its own right. The hotel we selected had easy access, and provided adequate lodging and meeting facilities for the anticipated attendance. The most enjoyable part of our work was planning and checking out our field trips. We scoped out three afternoon tours that allowed us to show off the major attractions of almost the entire canal, from Cumberland to Great Falls. The hardest part was deciding on a theme for the conference program, and recruiting potential guest speakers.

We had also discussed how we might make the conference truly international. Could we attract delegates from beyond North America? In the spring, we received an exciting surprise from British Waterways. A letter came from Tom Brock, a canal manager in Warwickshire who had been awarded a fellowship to come to North America and study U. S. and Canadian canal parks. He was making advance contacts with parks and organizations that he hoped to visit. He would be in America during the time we had scheduled the conference. It took us about thirty seconds to decide to invite him to fit the conference into his itinerary.

Another letter from England followed soon after. A group from the British Inland Waterways Association (IWA) was planning their own tour of North American canals in June, and was also seeking contacts with societies that could help guide them. Hal Larsen and I met them when they reached Washington and spent two days showing them sections of the C & O in D. C. and suburban Maryland, and George Washington's Pawtowmack Canal in Virginia. A couple of weeks later, as their tour neared its end, a one-day symposium and dinner was held in Buffalo, New York, with officers and members of both the American and Canadian Canal Societies joining with the IWA group. Although none of our IWA visitors were able to return in the fall for our ICHC, it established new international contacts, and several of them, including Roger Squires and Ron Oakley, became regular

participants at later World Canal Conferences on both sides of the ocean.

The 1992 ICHC at Harpers Ferry drew about eighty attendees. With a registration fee of \$125, we had a budget of about \$10,000 to work with. This proved to be just about the right total. It covered lunches and dinners for three days, two chartered coaches each day for the field trips, and all of our expenses for copying, postage, coffee breaks, and plenty of beer in the hospitality room. The three afternoon field trips took the delegates to all of the most prominent sites on the canal from Cumberland to Great Falls. Rory presented the Dink Award to Bob Schmidt, president of the Canal Society of Indiana. At the closing dinner, hosted by Superintendent Hobbs at a country inn near Great Falls, Tom Brock presented a fine slide program on British canals. This was not the last we



*The Nine Mile Creek Aqueduct in Camillus was a site visited during the 2000 WCC. Today, this aqueduct has been restored and you can take a boat ride across it. Photo by Terry Woods.*

were to see of him.

The next three conferences followed the same formats. In 1993, the conference was held at Dartmouth and Halifax, Nova Scotia, sponsored by the Shubenacadie Canal Commission. The following year, we were back with Parks Canada at Peterborough, Ontario, on the Trent-Severn, visiting its great hydraulic lifts and the Big Chute incline. Then it was down to Augusta, Georgia, in '95, where Jeanie Allen introduced us to southern hospitality, barbeque, low-country boil, fried chicken, and music by Savannah's Emma Kelly, the

“Lady of Six Thousand Songs.” Tours included South Carolina’s Old Santee Canal State Park and the Augusta Canal’s three-arch Ray’s Creek “akeydux,” just a mile downstream from Amen Corner. Other memorable highlights included the release of a very large rattlesnake on the floor during a lecture on fall-line ecology, demonstrating who you might meet along the Augusta Canal towpath.

Tom Brock, our friend from British Waterways, returned for the conferences at Peterborough and Augusta. In 1996, he organized and chaired the first World Canals Conference, which was held at the International Convention Center in Birmingham, England, under the sponsorship of British Waterways and the IWA. The conference was attended by more than 260 people. They were mostly British, Irish, Canadian and American, but there were also a few French, Dutch, German, Belgian and Swedish delegates, indicating the possibility that the conferences could expand beyond the English-speaking countries. The theme was “Regeneration” and many of the presentations emphasized efforts to restore and revitalize waterways for commerce and economic development in addition to history and recreation, a new concept for American canallers. This conference became the prototype for the big conferences that would come in with the new century.

Following the Easton conference in 1989, the sponsors for the next gathering had been chosen by an informal committee (usually—probably—Robinson, Ballenger and Dave MacDougall of the Trent-Severn, but also, perhaps, others). After the Birmingham conference, it became apparent that a more formal process should be established. The 1997 conference was held at Pawtucket, Rhode Island, hosted by the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council and the Blackstone Canal National Heritage Corridor. During a train trip to Worcester, Mass., representatives of the sponsoring organizations of all of the previous conferences met in the club car and created a permanent steering committee to select future hosts and sites. The committee, consisting of the past-conference chairs, chose Rory Robinson as chairman and met at each subsequent conference for the next ten years. It established standards and procedures for potential conference hosts to submit proposals, and made the selections.

The last conference of the original style was held in 1998 at Joliet, Illinois, on the I. & M. NHC, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the first National Conference. Highlights of the conference, which was attended by about 130 delegates, including some from the U. K.,

Ireland and France, included walking, bicycling and motor tours of the I. & M. and Hennepin Canals and a boat tour on the Illinois Waterway. Conference delegates also took part in site planning exercises at historic points along the corridor, including an old hotel, a grain elevator, and a hydro-electric plant. Each of the three groups focused on the potential use of one of the sites for historic interpretation, educational programs, community outreach, and adaptive re-use.

In 1999, the conference was shared by two countries: it began in Lille, France, and then moved to the Canal du Centre at LaLovière, Belgium, where we toured the nearly completed Strépy-Thieu lift. It confirmed the scale of the event set at Birmingham and established the format for all of the WCCs that have followed. (It is remembered, also, for the extravagant feasts, as our Walloon hosts attempted to outdo the French in the elaborate spreads that were laid out for us.)

At the 2008 conference on the Rideau Canal at Kingston, Ontario, the Steering Committee agreed to merge the Conferences into Inland Waterways International (IWI), which then took over the selection process. The World Canals Conferences of today are a lot of fun and provide an opportunity to visit modern, operational waterways, but one still misses the ‘easy-going’ good times at those earlier conferences on historic canals. Boy, wasn’t the beer cold!

*Dave Johnson was a member of the board of directors of the American Canal Society between 1992 and 2024 and a director of the Pennsylvania Canal Society since about that same time. He recently retired after three decades on the board of directors of the C & O Canal Association, during which he served three terms as president (1991-1994). He was chairman of the planning committee for the 1992 ICHC, a member of the WCC Steering Committee from 1997 to 2008, and attended every conference but one from 1989 to 2011. He was also an active NPS volunteer at the C&O Canal National Historical Park for twenty-five years. He lives in Bethesda, Maryland.*

# Historic Newspaper Archives

Transcribed by Richard Palmer

## Oneida Dispatch Friday, May 20, 1870

The Break in the Canal. - The break in the Erie canal near Whitesboro, on Monday night, proves serious. The boat *Eddie of Ithaca*, laden with merchandise, was carried into the break when it first occurred. Temporarily this acted as a dam; but before morning the water had torn out a large space under the boat and its presence only caused a deeper and more dangerous break in the bank. The boat *Jennie Dieffendorf*, of Phoenix, laden with lumber, was also drawn to the break and left stranded by the receding waters alongside the *Eddie*.

The break in the canal is one of the worst that has ever occurred in this section. The escaping torrent tore out the earth from a channel 80 to 300 feet in width and from 4 to 8 feet deep and reaching all the way to the river. The soil in that locality is sandy and was quickly cut away. The barn of George Stimbacher, situated just below, was shipwrecked, and badly stove up. The cargo was mostly lost. The crew, consisting of several chickens, was lost, but a cow, who had taken passage for the night, was saved by a cable thrown from shore.

A deep cut under the track of the New York Central Railroad furnished a temporary stopping place, and when engine 249, with an eastward bound freight train, soon plunged without hurting anyone. The engine is still in the cut, and the tender with one freight car are partly on the track, in a very demoralized condition, behind it.

Early Tuesday morning the work of repair began, and all day men were busy at both canal and railroad. Little could be done at the canal until the water was out; but the stop lock near Rome saved this level, west of that place, and boats were running Tuesday afternoon, between Rome and Syracuse.

It is thought by Canal Commissioner Wright, that the break will be so far repaired as to allow the letting in of water Wednesday night, and that by letting the water in carefully, boats could be moved by Thursday morning. The general opinion seems to be that navigation cannot be resumed before Saturday or Sunday, if then. On the railroad all travel was suspended until 3:45 Tuesday afternoon. At that time the first train passed over the northern track, and trains are now on time.

## Syracuse Daily Star Tuesday, May 2, 1848

Break in the Canal - Detention. Early yesterday morning, about twenty-five feet of the tow-path on the canal, one and a half mile east of this city, on the long level, was swept entirely away, and a large quantity of water was discharged, which did considerable damage to the railroad track and to cellars of dwellings in Lodi.

At noon yesterday, the track of the railroad, from the tunnel east near half a mile, was submerged to a depth of one to three feet. Owing to this circumstances, the cars going east, which should have left here in the morning at 8 o'clock, were detained until 6 p.m. The train from the east managed to plough through. The break occurred on a portion of the new embankment on Barker's job, just completed. The banks were overflowed.

The mention of boats, of which there were a considerable number, was the most serious consequence. One boat, the *Onondaga* of the Syracuse and Oswego line, laden with oats and flour, for the east, was passing just as the break occurred, and was careened up against the bank. A portion of her load was taken off. It is thought the boat was uninjured. Superintendent Bree had a large party of men industriously engaged in repairing the break and boats commenced passing about 2 p.m.

## Syracuse Daily Star Tuesday, June 1, 1847

Canal Navigation. Accounts reach us from all quarters - especially from the east - of the detention of canal boats. This detention is caused in part by overladen boats being aground, and in part of the inability of the single locks to pass the large number of craft constantly arriving.

A letter received here on Sunday, states that between Whitesboro and Frankfort locks the canal is completely blocked up.

At the single locks a little east of us there is not a single hour in the day when boats are detained. Despite the utmost industry and skill of the lock tenders, they cannot dispose of the business as rapidly as it pressed upon them.

We were amused, as well as a little surprise, a few



days since in reading an editorial in the N.Y. Evening Post saying an enlargement as not needed; that the true remedy was (instead of enlarging the canal,) to build more boats! Perhaps that logic will do for the meridian of New York but we assure the Editor of the Post that there is not a child on the line between Albany and Buffalo who cannot teach him better,

**Syracuse Daily Star**  
**Saturday, September 4, 1847**

Blockade upon the Canal. The canal from this place east, for four to six miles, is jammed full of boats, and has been for the last ten days, and perhaps longer. It is caused by a deficiency of water on the long level, between Lodi locks and Utica.

There cannot, we understand, be any greater amount of water procured, unless the capacity of the canal is increased to hold it. If the canal was enlarged, two feeders might be added, which would afford an abundant supply of water.

The present state of things is very annoying to boatmen and businessmen, and their losses alone, would pay the interest on the cost of an enlargement. And yet, with all the facts staring them in the face, the Albany Atlas, and other papers and politicians of that ilk, that the enlargement must not progress any faster than the annual surplus, over and above constitutional pledges, will pay, as the work goes forward.

What short sighted men some politicians are! We have one prediction to make. That party which opposes the speedy enlargement of the Erie Canal, and the completion of the lateral canals commenced, is doomed to occupy lasting situations in private life. Let those who choose mark it.

**Syracuse Daily Star**  
**August 4, 1847**

Canal Navigation. Yesterday at noon, a very large number of canal boats, all heavily laden, were blocked in between Salina Bridge and the Lodi lock in this village. The delay was occasioned by the lack of water on the upper level.

These interruptions, which we are informed are not confined to this section, but constantly occurring, fall heavily upon the boatmen. To lay by idle three or four hours a day, with nothing for those in their employ to do, is a serious drawback upon their hard earnings as well as their time, which is money. The present state of things is the natural fruits of that unwise policy which led to the abandonment of the Enlargement. Never was a greater error committed, or more early paid for.

As an 'old salt' remarked to us yesterday, "there are many smart men among us, but they are not all boatmen." Here is the key to the whole matter. Men without experience or opportunity for observation, are those who most vehemently oppose the great work of enlarging the Canal.

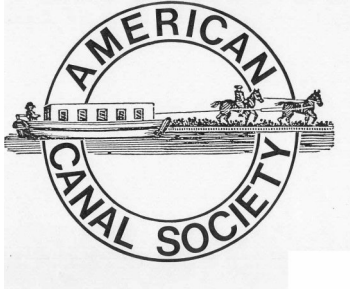
"Debt" and "taxation," and "pauper canals," are terms they can understand: but how it is that an inland trade twenty times greater than it was ten years since, requires new and enlarged facilities for its accommodation - two and three locks where there was but one before, a water passage and a deepened channel - surpasses their comprehension. For legislators we should have practical men; those who have had experience in business, and who will act with a single eye to the public good.

**Rochester Daily Democrat**  
**May 3, 1843**

HEAVY BREAK IN THE CHENANGO CANAL. The Lebanon Reservoir, one the the costly structures devised for the purpose of treasuring water in the vicinity of the summit level of the Chenango Canal about four miles from Hamilton village, broke down a portion of its bank on Wednesday last. Several acres of woodland were swept entirely clean, taking off not only the trees, but the entire surface down to solid rock. Two or three saw mills were swept away so clean, that not a vestige of anything is left to mark the place where they stood.

The trees and rubbish, together with the stones quarried out of the sides of the ravine, leading to the reservoir, by the water, were deposited in immense masses and heaps upon the beautiful meadows bordering on the Chenango river, rendering desolate and dreary some 100 to 150 acres of the fairest portion of that delightful valley. They were in one portion from 5 to 6 acres of Kingley's meadow, that is perfectly covered from one to four or five feet deep, with stones and gravel, and is said to be entirely ruined.

The damage to individuals is very considerable, presume not less than \$1,000 or \$5,000 - the greater portion of which we believe is sustained by the Kingsleys and Mr. A. Campbell. The damage to the State would be very great if this reservoir was needed but we believe there is an abundant supply of water for the canal from the other reservoirs, and that this structure was a useless expenditure in the first place, and will not probably be repaired.



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