

The Chenango Canal

The other day I found a packet of photographs showing what happened to some of the houses between Greene and Brisben on Route 12 in 1964. They were moved, torn down or else their look was changed forever by uprooting trees, removing lawns and lowering or elevating the road. It was done in the name of progress, for the state road needed to be improved. I know the same thing was done when the railroad went through and before that the Chenango Canal. The Canal is long gone and the railroad looks as if it too will be soon abandoned.

Every time I drive to Norwich on Route 12, I think about the changes made. I look for the old canal bed, am so pleased when I see remnants of it and wonder how it crossed the streams. I also wonder how the farmers got to their lands that were cut off by it. After studying the *Reconnaissance Survey of the Historic Chenango Canal* conducted by Cynthia A. Carrington and Emanuel J. Carter, Jr. with the assistance of Jennifer L. Carrington, I realize that it is very hard to visualize because I am driving on it at times. At other times, the building of the new state road obliterated it.

The definitive book on the canal is Michele A. Mcfee's *Limestone Locks and Overgrowth: The Rise and Descent of the Chenango Canal*. She writes of its history in a very readable fashion with many photos, maps and human-interest stories. Her research is impeccable. The book spans the Chenango Canal's life from 1837 to 1878. This article will comprise one small span of the Chenango Canal on Stillwater Road, one small span on Route 12 and a tiny span of canal history in Brisben.

After the flash flood in November, Nancy Bromley, vice-president of the Greene Historical Society, got a call from Walter and Martha Burrows telling her she should come down and observe what had happened to the water in the culvert crossing County Road 32 near their property. Nancy called the historian and off we went not having a clue what we were going to see. The creek had risen so high that it had wreaked havoc with the John Burrows property. A foot bridge was destroyed as well as parts of the banks and trees had fallen. Under the culvert, the banks had washed away to uncover all the stonework that had been laid up on the banks. In the creek itself the wooden planks laid to stabilize the creek that flowed under the canal were exposed. The purpose of the culvert was to divert the stream under the canal so the water flowed smoothly through and didn't meander all over and possibly weaken the banks of the canal. Walter Burrows says that he has been told that these planks are chestnut. White oak was also commonly used. Any wood under cold water will last indefinitely.

The Chenango Canal was the best constructed canal in New York State. It was 97 miles long with 116 locks, 52 culverts, 19 aqueducts and 162 bridges. The canal bed was 42 feet wide at the top and then slanted in to 26 feet wide at the bottom and held 4 feet of water. The banks were six feet high so they were 2 feet higher than the water. The towpath was 10 feet wide for the animals to walk on. The other bank was much narrower and called the berme.

The culverts were stone arches that carried the canal over streams in the same way the aqueducts did. In fact, I've noticed that both terms have been used interchangeably in newspaper articles of the times. Michele McFee says she was told that the one true difference was that an aqueduct narrowed (the one over the Chenango River was 22 feet in width, so only one boat could cross at a time) whereas the culvert did not. They both had wooden troughs that held the water and towpaths that were ten feet wide.

In 1975, the county replaced the stonework of the 100 foot culvert that carried Hagerman Brook under the canal with a metal tube. Fortunately the Burrows family saved the arch keystone which has a date of 1835 on it. It's in the museum; look for it the next time you go. The Burrows also took a photo of the stone culvert before it was removed. Thank you, Walter and Martha, for your wonderful contribution to Greene's history!

Another culvert was over Crandall Brook or Spring Brook about two miles north of Greene on Route 12. In 1890, long after the abandonment of the canal, George A. Chamberlain, Highway Commissioner, made a fine mallet out of a piece of red beech, used for the building of the Chenango Canal, which was embedded in Crandall Brook when he built the iron bridge there in 1888. The piece of wood had lain there for 54 years, since July 1834. He presented the mallet to the Chenango American Office.

Let's end up in Brisben with a canal story. Brisben was a very active community on the canal with boat-making and boat-repair businesses. There was a school, shops, a tavern and a very active church. In a history of the Brisben Baptist Church, I read the following reminiscence of Harriet Day that was read at a church celebration in 1930:

"Let's swing back over the years once more and recall the first baptism I ever witnessed. It was in the old Chenango Canal (probably around 1870) about where Will Gray now has a store. The time was mid winter. Ice on the canal was eight to ten inches thick. The ice was cut away from a space large enough for baptizing. In the icy water stood Elder Hazen in his baptismal robes and he received the candidates for baptism. My mother says George W. Lenderson and two of the Ellsworths were among the number. This was the beginning of a great revival."

Remember that the Baptists have baptisms with full-body immersion. I think my revival might have been across the street at the tavern. Harriet Day goes on to say that when the warm weather returned, the baptisms were done in the Chenango River.

Think about these things when you drive along the route of the Chenango Canal. Be thankful for the few spots where it is still visible. And remember, if you don't see it, you might be on it. When you go to look at the culvert on the Stillwater Road, you are driving on the Chenango Canal that is passing over Hagerman Creek!



Stone Culvert under the Chenango Canal on Stillwater Road