



**SOLEBURY TOWNSHIP HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

**EDWIN HARRINGTON BOOKS**

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THE DELAWARE CANAL**





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The Delaware Canal



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### The Delaware Canal

American ingenuity has brought forth a number of remarkable structures over the course of history. One of those that mostly survives is the Delaware Division Canal, from Easton to Bristol, built to bring coal from upstate to our neighborhood.

Anthracite coal was discovered about 1760, and at first was scorned as a fuel. But gradually it caught attention, and became popular because of burning thoroughly and unsmokily. Then came a demand that required transportation over miles of rough terrain, where there were few roads. Around 1810, Josiah White owned a rolling mill and a wire factory in Philadelphia, fueled by dirty bituminous coal brought with difficulty from Virginia. He needed a better source, and sought anthracite. He and partner Erskine Hazard organized the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company, built a wagon road south to Mauch Chunk, and then a fantastic canal from there to Easton. It was a complex of locks, dams and channels, along the steep drop of the Lehigh River, for forty-six miles - Little Switzerland.

This was toward the beginning of the canal era, and further enthusiasm resulted in plans for an extension to reach Philadelphia. In 1827, urged by White, the senate of Pennsylvania authorized the Delaware Division, to link up with the Lehigh Canal. A survey was made, over fifty-nine miles, and Bristol was decided upon as the terminal. A scheme for an extension of seventeen miles to the city was never designed, since the river below Trenton Falls was open for transport. The first shovelful of dirt was turned over on October 27, 1827, with many dignitaries present. Local farmers and Irish immigrant labor undertook the task, for about fifty cents a day.

Thomas G. Kennedy was appointed superintendent. He was a man of remarkable energy, undertaking political and social ventures, and having three wives. His grandparents had come from Ulster and settled in Tinicum, and he was born in 1783. While young, he moved to Newtown, studied law under Abraham Chapman, served in the state Assembly, and was High Sheriff of Bucks County from 1815 to 1818. He first married Violetta, sister of the painter Edward Hicks. In 1820, he became first secretary of the Agricultural Society of Bucks County. He purchased the Milton (Carversville) Tavern in 1817, then became interested in the canal project, and moved to Erwinna, where he married, in succession, Julianna and Rachel, granddaughters of Colonel Arthur Erwin of Revolutionary War fame. Thus he was in a position and location to undertake the canal project.

By 1830, the canal had been completed from Bristol to New Hope, and was extended to the Lehigh River by 1831. It had cost \$1,430,000, and had twenty-eight locks, eighteen lock houses, nine aqueducts, one hundred six bridges. It was in use by 1832, and soon an average of fifty boats were passing up and down. The locktenders were paid \$25 a month, with free lodging and coal. Locks opened at 4 AM, closed at 10 PM and all day Sundays. A boat captain always sought to get through a lock before closing, or he lost time and money. A captain would blow a conch shell horn upon approaching a lock, and usually could pass through in ten minutes.



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The canal boats were typically eighty-seven feet long, ten wide, and could carry up to ninety tons of coal. On the return trip, they often transported fish, flour, salt, furniture, rope and hardware; but sometimes went back empty. An entire family lived on board, cooking on a coal stove; and the youngsters had the job of guiding the mules, which were well fed and cared-for - much smarter than horses. They clip-clopped along at two miles an hour, wary of muskrat holes on the banks. A company owned coal boat had only a number, but privately-owned craft were named General Taylor (a favorite), Gray Eagle, Pocahontas, Liberty, Neptune, Enterprise.

The canal froze in winter, and the water level was lowered for repairs. Boats were hauled up at yards in Bristol, New Hope, Point Pleasant and Erwinna, for overhaul. The drop from Easton to Bristol was 165 feet, and there was a water wheel at New Hope to bring in added volume. There were no locks from New Hope to Yardley. The peak year was probably 1866, when 792,000 tons of coal passed through. But after that time, railroads were taking over and traffic decreased: down to 130,000 tons by 1915, 65,000 tons by 1931, when commercial traffic ended.

There was a cross-connection at Easton, to the Morris Canal, from Phillipsburg to Jersey City - a fearsome undertaking, completed in 1832, with upper elevation of 759 feet, via Lake Hopatcong. There was also a crossover at New Hope, to allow boats to transfer to the Delaware and Raritan Canal, built in 1834. The Delaware and Hudson Canal went from Honesdale to Kingston, New York, with an aqueduct crossing above the Delaware at Lackawaxen, an early Roebling suspension bridge, completed in 1828.

The Delaware and Hudson Canal expired in 1903, following devastation by the famous flood of that year. Its aqueduct over the Delaware was converted to a toll bridge, lightly used by traffic in that backwoods area. The infamous Morris Canal was abandoned, mercifully, in 1924, after several railroads across northern New Jersey had taken over. The Delaware and Raritan Canal, starting as a feeder from the river opposite Lumberville, and receiving boats from the Delaware Canal below New Hope, now squirrels through Trenton in tunnels, thence onward across New Jersey's open land to the Raritan River. Along the way, it provides a water supply for several towns and for irrigation of truck crops.

From 1931 to 1950, our canal gradually developed leaks, went dry, gained brush and weeds, and generally stank. Then the Delaware Valley Protective Association was becoming persistent, organized by Hal Clark and Francis Taylor, and improvements were undertaken, especially repairs to the Ingham Creek aqueduct. Canal water was seeping into cellars and septic tanks along the way. There was talk of making it into a roadway, but protests ended that idea. Maurice Goddard became interested, and \$78,000 was allocated for maintenance. Governor Leader came and inspected, was wined and dined. Joe Busik offered to provide stone for repairs. In 1967, the canal strip along the river was named Theodore Roosevelt State Park. There were plans for patching and dredging, work on locks and towpath repairs. In 1967, it was



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declared a national landmark, and the danger of extinction was past. A \$50,000 study of needs was made, \$32,000 appropriated for improvements. A question of property and building rights along the canal came up, but this was later settled by recognition of grandfather clauses.

The Friends of the Canal was formed, supplanting the DVPA, in 1986, Governor Scranton was given a mule barge ride, \$1,000,00 was to be spent, and in 1988 the name was changed to Delaware Canal State Park. Meanwhile, a section had been paved over at Morrisville; the canal was filled in at Bristol Pike, Tyburn Road, US 13, Wheatsheaf Road and Mill Creek, and most traces were obliterated under the Levittown Shopping Center. It definitely ended at Grundy Park in Bristol. A new Lower Bucks County Canal Preservation Committee began making plans to restore.

Ken Lewis was named superintendent in 1990, with two part-time rangers, mechanic and secretary. Cleaning, clearing and removing encroachments began. Will Rivinus became chairman of the Friends of the Delaware Canal, and studies were planned establishing a Delaware and Lehigh Canal National Heritage Corridor. Big words!

In 1992 a new dredge was purchased with \$100,000 mainly raised through persuasion of Congressman Jim Greenwood. It was named Zabel, after a contributor Zabel Davis of Yardley; and it went to work chewing at the debris and banks, tidying up the eyesores. Municipalities along the way and the Grundy Foundation added funds. Then the state allocated \$7,650,000 to provide for fully watering and to restore all structures. The memorial Virginia Forrest Recreation was established, above Centre Bridge, with picnic and restroom facilities. Will Rivinus wrote a Guide to the Delaware and Lehigh Heritage Corridor, and he took over the leadership that Hal Clark had begun years ago. The renovated lockhouse at New Hope was made into a gift shop as an adjunct to the shop at the Mercer Museum. The decayed shopping center at Levittown was demolished, preparatory to revitalizing that blanked out section of the canal. Susan Taylor took over as executive director of The Friends of the Canal; and students at the New Hope-Solebury Elementary School undertook a study of the canal's history. Lots of progress.

Now about those mules. All the earlier hard-working souls had long since gone to mule heaven; but in 1953 Pete Pascuzzo came along and organized the first barge rides: a four-mile pleasure trip from New Hope to Centre Bridge and back. It made a delightful afternoon for residents and tourists alike, clean and comfortable. By 1971, Pete had eleven mules and four brightly decorated barges, with Maude as their leader. By then the voyage was only to -Phillips Mill and back; but it attracted up to five hundred passengers daily. A good time was being had by voyagers and mules alike.

During the 1980s, a new organization had taken over, run by George Schweikhardt and Leo Ramirez. Father Carey, of St. Martin's Church, came down into the valley and blessed the



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mules, assuring them of eternal salvation. Later the concession was operated by Lee Urbani, called The New Hope Boat and Navigation Corporation. Schweikhardt was tempted away by an organization on the Schuylkill Canal, and departed, taking along four boats and eight mules: Spooky, Molly, Benjamin, Leonard, Sebastian, Stella, Jim and Sophie.

In 2002, the Friends celebrated their twentieth birthday, announcing the completed reconstruction of Groundhog Lock, near Riegelsville. And there were barge rides, pulled by Daffodil and Joe, including guitar music and a picnic supper. How those crusty old coal boat captains would have taken note, and their comments certainly would never be fit to print. Hurricane Floyd, mostly a sudden deluge, came and went in one afternoon of September 1999, and caused only minor damage through erosion along the banks. But Hurricanes Charley and Ivan, of 2004, did more extensive damage, as their tail ends came our way. Rick Dalton, manager of the Delaware Canal State Park, estimated that thirteen projects totaling \$9.2 million would be needed to repair the damage. The hardest hit area was north of Solebury Township, in Northampton County, where stretches of the towpath were wiped out. A breach near Washington Crossing was repaired, allowing water to flow in the canal at New Hope, and Friends of the Delaware Canal and the Historic Canal Improvement Corporation provided \$101,000 toward the work. The park authorities applied to FEMA for a grant to pay for 75% of the \$9.2 million.

Susan Taylor said that she was optimistic that full restoration could be accomplished, but that the work would take at least a year. She observed, "Floods have damaged the canal many, many times over the years, but it has always survived." Actually, the September floodings of 2004 followed upon a ten-year, \$17 million overhaul project that included the Virginia Forrest memorial area above Centre Bridge. A Flood Response Fund was set up, contributions payable to the Friends of the Delaware Canal.

What of the future? It seems that tropical storms are going to be a threat for years to come; but, as Susan noted, somehow the canal has kept its nose above the water.

Ned Harrington  
January 2003



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