

Enlarged Barge Canal Required Longer Bridges

In November of 1903 the voters of New York State overwhelmingly supported a proposal for the modernization of the Erie Canal, to be renamed the Barge Canal, at an estimated cost of 101 million dollars. The changes resulted in a much deeper and wider waterway, capable of accommodating boats with significantly greater cargo carrying capacity. No longer would small packet boats be pulled by horses or mules. Instead, large barges would either be self-propelled or escorted by a tugboat.

The original Erie Canal was constructed from 1817 to 1825. It was four feet in depth, and 40 feet wide, and could accommodate small wooden packet boats of up to 30 tons capacity. In the early 1860's the canal was widened, and the depth increased to seven feet, which allowed for bigger boats of as much as 240 tons. When the Barge Canal project was completed in 1918, much larger boats could be utilized. Often several barges were pulled by a single tugboat, with a combined capacity of 2,500 tons. Enormous grain-carrying barges joined the fleet on the Barge Canal, each 36 feet wide and 256 feet in length. By canal standards, these vessels were enormous, and just barely fit in the canal system's 57 locks. The barges traveled day and night, and in some areas, oil lanterns were hung on wooden piers to mark the navigable channel of the canal. Many of these piers remain visible east of the bridge at Lyndon Road.

Eight roadway bridges cross the canal in Perinton today, the same number as when construction on the Barge Canal began in 1905. With the widening of the canal, most bridges were too short and had to be replaced. This was necessary wherever a bridge crossed the canal in New York State. Three of the bridges built about one hundred years ago in Perinton still exist today. These include bridges at Parker Street, Main Street, and Marsh Road. The bridge at Parker Street was built in 1912, and recently received landmark status by the Fairport Historical Preservation Commission. It is a Warren Pony Truss design fabricated by the Lackawanna Bridge Company. The one lane bridge over the canal at Marsh Road in Bushnell's Basin was also built in 1912 and remains in service today.

The lift bridge at Main Street will celebrate its centennial birthday in 2014. Long considered a marvel of engineering, the bridge is referred to as having an irregular decagon (ten sided) design. It crosses the canal at an angle of 32 degrees. Also a Fairport village landmark, the Main Street lift bridge had a near-death experience in the 1970's. In order to deal with Main Street traffic concerns, a plan was devised to replace the lift bridge with a 1300 foot long concrete span over the canal and both sets of railroad tracks, including those that used to exist just south of High Street. After much debate, an alternative solution to Main Street traffic concerns was found in the replacement of the one lane bridge at Turk Hill Road. The new bridge opened on August 19, 1983.



Early 1913 view looking south, shows the old canal lift bridge at Fairport Road to the right, and the new replacement bridge on the left. During Barge Canal construction, the waterway was rerouted slightly to the east through this section. The newly excavated Barge Canal is shown through the center of the photo, and the old canal, to the right. Horse-drawn wagons are traveling east over a temporary earthen passageway, connecting the old Rochester Road with West Church Street. Shortly after this photo was taken, the new bridge was put into service, and the old lift bridge removed.

Written by Bill Poray, Perinton Town Historian Published in the Fairport-ER Post, 08/015/2013