

The Oxbow – From Vacation Spot to Ashes

Florence Rutter, 86 years of age, died in 2012. She lived the last three quarters of her life at her beloved Oxbow, Perinton's canal side community. Flo, as she was known, was the last waterfront resident of what was long ago a vacation spot. Her cottage has stood alone since her death, the final reminder of what once was a booming resort on the Erie Canal. In early September Florence's cottage burned to the ground, the cause termed "suspicious" by fire fighters.

The Oxbow, located between Fairport Road and Ayrault Road on the Erie Canal, came into existence in the early expansions of the man-made waterway, most likely in the 1850s. When the canal was first constructed, the four foot deep ditch took many twists and turns to avoid changes in elevation and obstacles along the way. During projects to widen and deepen the canal, it was often straightened, and in Perinton, this resulted in the Oxbow, which today is a remnant of the original 1825 canal.

An artistic "birds-eye view" lithograph of the area shows a small number of boat houses and cottages on the Oxbow in 1885. The place soon became a popular spot for local businesses and organizations to have picnics and baseball games. Early in the 20th century more cottages were built, and the trend accelerated with the Barge Canal construction project. By 1918, the Oxbow was a full-fledged vacation spot for people from Perinton, East Rochester, Penfield and beyond. Many of the simple cottages were constructed from the lumber of dismantled railroad box cars. Evidence of this can be seen in early photographs in which the cottage's vertical boards display stenciling from their former life on the rails.



Cottages dotting the shore of the Oxbow in 1915. The small lake created by the straightening of the canal was filled in by decades of canal dredging.

With the Great Depression came a dramatic change at the Oxbow, as rustic vacation cottages became year round homes, on land leased from New York State. In the 1950s there were sixty mailboxes at the Oxbow, but the lack of sanitary toilet facilities and other modern necessities was taking its toll. By the 1960s, the number of abandoned cottages was growing, and each decade saw less residents and more “suspicious” fires.

Now the last cottage is gone, and there are no more mailboxes on Oxbow Road. The old Erie Canal still meanders through, snaking its way past islands created by seventy years of canal dredging. What will become of the Oxbow is anyone’s guess.

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