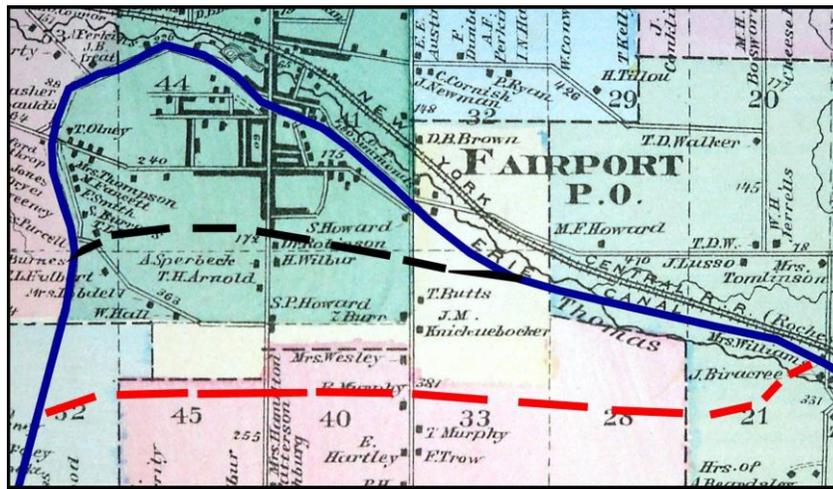


The Great Canal Debate of 1909

Part one of a two part series

Fairport owes its existence to the construction of the Erie Canal, first proposed in 1807, and made fully operational in 1825. The canal quite literally put Fairport on the map. But with plans to widen the canal in the early 20th century, many residents began to question the wisdom of the continued presence of the canal in the heart of the village.

The state's plans for widening the canal would mandate the removal of many commercial buildings on the south shore. In order to span the added width of the canal, new bridges would be required at Turk Hill Road, Parker Street, Main Street, and Fairport Road. Some people felt the usefulness of the canal was on the decline, and considered it a filthy antiquated nuisance, which brought undesirable elements to town. The railroads had become the dominant method for transporting freight. Further, with the advent of the automobile and decent roads, people were beginning to recognize the future of trucking as a means of transporting goods.



The solid line indicates the existing route prior to the widening of the canal. The two dotted lines indicate the alternative routes proposed in 1909.

Local citizens began to promote alternative routes for the canal, in order to bypass the commercial district. These prospective changes had benefits, including avoiding the need for the destruction of important buildings, and the potential for reducing the requirement for so many new canal bridges. In January of 1909, an editorial in the local newspaper advocated a new route, which would essentially straighten the canal's path. The proposed course would cut through the southern portion of the village parallel to Church Street, but further south, approximately on a line where Clinton Street is located. This proposal would join the existing canal at some point south of Fairport Road, eliminating the need for a bridge at that location.

Another proposed route was even further south, and would extend west from Cobb's Bridge (today's Lyndon Road Bridge) and after progressing slightly south, cut across town, joining the existing canal in the vicinity of the oxbow, southwest of the curve at Hulburt Road. Proponents of this plan stated their case: "This route is about a mile and a half shorter than the present canal, has only two highway crossings and is through inexpensive property." Residents in favor of each of these proposals cited what they believed would be a great benefit to the village – the removal of the canal from the central business district. This would allow for the extension of Prospect, Cole, and Beardsley Streets north, across the filled in former canal property, each terminating at the Rochester, Syracuse, and Eastern trolley.

Further strengthening the case for the removal of the canal from the central village were the statements of an anonymous New York State civil engineer, interviewed by the local newspaper. He stated that widening the current canal would result in the "removal of all the buildings on the east side of Main Street from the present canal to Steubing's bakery," and on the west side of the street, "not only the Schummer's block, but the Seeley block on the opposite corner would have to go." He further cautioned that the position of the new Main Street Bridge would be dramatically changed, cutting across the canal diagonally, so that its south end "would point somewhat toward West Avenue. It would thus not be parallel to Main Street." These comments only served to elevate the concerns of residents.

Written by Bill Poray, Perinton Town Historian Published in the Fairport-ER Post, 02/28/2013