

## The Great Canal Debate of 1909

### Part two of a two part series

In addition to the possibility of rerouting the canal outside the commercial district of Fairport, another decision was required, regarding the future of the Main Street Bridge. Some residents believed a fixed position bridge was the best alternative, while others favored a lift bridge. There were problems and benefits related to each. The fixed bridge would be at a significantly higher elevation to allow for the passing of boats underneath, but would result in a steep approach at both ends of the bridge. Some residents viewed a lift bridge as nothing more than a costly nuisance, which would delay traffic, already a problem due to the railroad crossings and the new Rochester, Syracuse and Eastern electric train crossing Main Street just north of the canal. And many were concerned that the village would be responsible for the operating costs of a lift bridge, estimated at \$1,000 per year. From the perspective of those who favored an alternative route for the canal, all these problems disappeared if the canal no longer passed through the central business district.



*Looking east, with the old Main Street bridge in the distance. At this point, the canal had been widened up to the spot where the boys are playing to the right.*

In order to keep the project on schedule, New York State could not delay the decision on the route of the widened canal. Residents signed petitions for the proposal of their choice. The newspapers published editorials, and it was no doubt a hot topic of discussion on the streets and in the saloons. Of course, it was very personal for some folks, particularly if the canal's path required the use of their property.

With tensions running high among the local citizens, New York State canal officials soon paid a visit to assess the viability of each of the three proposed canal routes. Engineers, accompanied by representatives from Fairport, traveled to specific locations of each of the proposed routes, noting

natural features, elevations, and other obstacles to construction. In late March, the engineer's decision was communicated in a letter to village officials, which stated, "... that the canal be constructed by widening and deepening the present alignment as contemplated in the plans for contract No. 63 now in Albany awaiting approval." Regarding the other two options, the report indicated that topography prevented either from being viable, in particular stating that the proposed route through the southern portion of the village was "very inadvisable because of engineering difficulties and expense."

Will O. Greene, proprietor of the Monroe County Mail, was not happy with the state's decision when he wrote the following commentary: "All our fond hopes have vanished in regard to the Barge Canal being ousted from the village and the state's greatest folly is to be perpetuated through the business portion of our fair hamlet." With the matter of the canal's route settled, residents and village officials focused on the design of the Main Street Bridge. A public meeting was held on a Saturday night "to consider the bridge problem." Citizens were asked "to express their views as to which will be the most desirable, a lift or stationary bridge." The state's engineer in charge of the project, Frank M. Williams, committed that "any suggestions as to this bridge which you think should be considered will be given careful attention."

As we all know, the lift bridge option was chosen. It is clear that Frank Williams was a man of his word. The unique design of the lift bridge was in fact the result of the concerns raised by the community, regarding both the grade elevations at the north and south ends of the bridge, and the proximity of West Avenue.

In retrospect, most would agree that retaining the canal in the heart of the Fairport business district was the right decision. And despite the brief delay we may encounter when the bridge goes up, it is hard to imagine the village of Fairport without the canal.

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