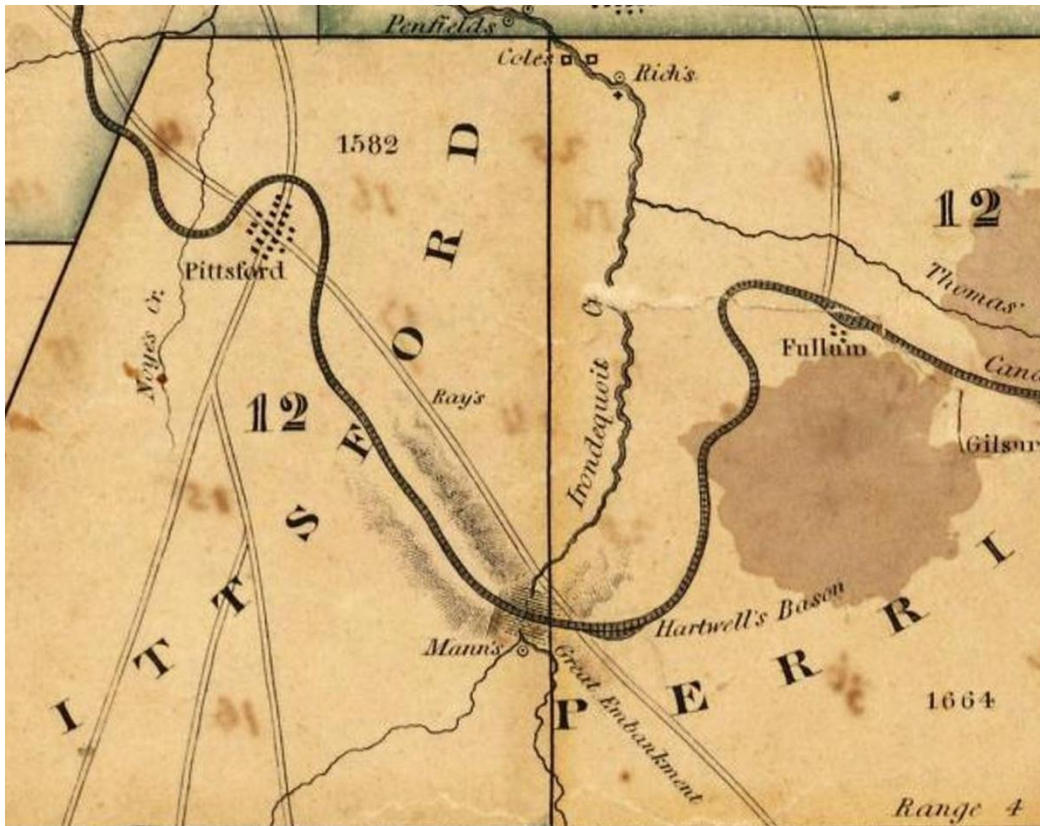


## The Crooked Canal from Fairport to Pittsford

I received an inquiry from a gentleman in Auburn recently, one that many of our residents and visitors have probably wondered: Why does the canal makes a big bend between Fairport and Pittsford rather than simply taking a straight route?"

The great southern bend in the route of the canal was chosen as it was the path of least resistance. In 1808 the New York State Assembly put forth a resolution: "...to cause an accurate survey to be made of the rivers, streams, and waters (not already accurately surveyed), in the usual route of communication between the Hudson River and Lake Erie, and such other contemplated route as he may deem proper...". It is the last part of this quote regarding "other contemplated routes" which provided surveyor James Geddes with the latitude to deviate from the commonly held belief that Lake Ontario must be part of the canal system, so as to avoid the hills and valleys of this region.



1820s map shows the southern route taken through Bushnell's Basin, then called Hartwell's Basin.

Geddes was against incorporating Lake Ontario into the canal's plan. Utilizing the Genesee River north to Lake Ontario would require a great quantity of locks. One look at the upper and lower falls of the Genesee confirms this. Others preferred a canal from Oneida Lake to Lake Ontario to bypass the high ground east of Rochester. But utilizing Lake Ontario meant that freight on canal boats would need to be transferred to schooners capable of handling lake conditions. Geddes recognized this as an unworkable solution. He believed the answer was to find a route east of Rochester, low enough to be fed by the waters of the Genesee River.

The biggest problem with an inland route was the Irondequoit valley, through which the creek of the same name flows. Surveys by Geddes and his men revealed that the optimum path across the valley was to be found in southern Perinton and west, toward Pittsford. James Geddes was delighted to find that natural ridges of glacial origin, known as eskers, could provide a method for boats to pass over much of the valley and creek, 70 feet below. In the words of Geddes, "...to pass over these arid plains, and along the very tops of these high ridges, seemed like idle tales to everyone around me."

Surveyor Geddes was successful in making the case for the route we know today. The construction in 1822 of a man-made ridge, known as "the Great Embankment", was required to join forces with the natural ridges to provide passage over the Irondequoit valley. Two man-made ridges were required, one almost a third of a mile in length, the other significantly shorter. The combination of the natural and man-made ridges resulted in an elevated passage of well over a mile in length, and was one of the great engineering accomplishments of its time.

*Written by Bill Poray, Perinton Town Historian*

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