

State Skewers Stinky Sewers

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It was the summer of 1910, when a flurry of communications between canal contractors, New York State, and the Village of Fairport all had one thing in common – sewage. For years, the village had a hodge-podge of sewer lines, the origin of which can be traced to Fairport’s first municipal water system, constructed in 1893. Digging wells and pumping water to village houses was a great accomplishment. However, a less elegant solution was devised with regard to what would become of that water once it went down the drain, or more specifically, the toilet.



Fairport Village President Silas J. Robbins posing with what appear to be clay pipes, used in the installation of sewers during his term of office, 1906-1907. Photo courtesy of the Perinton Historical Society.

Our earliest sewers connected to houses and buildings throughout much of the village and were drained unceremoniously to one of two locations. Sewers on streets on the south side of the village drained into the Erie Canal, in close proximity to Main Street. North side sewers dumped their contents into Thomas Creek.

As part of the Barge Canal project to widen and deepen the Erie Canal, the H.S. Kerbaugh Company was awarded Contract No. 63. Included in this contract was the length of the canal in Perinton and Fairport. An engineer for Kerbaugh wrote a frantic letter to the New York State Department of Health in August of 1910, in which he stated, “In laying out our work we find that several sewage pipes cross it and which sewage is deposited in the Erie Canal in direct

violation of the law.” The engineer clearly stated his concern: “The sanitary conditions here are in a frightful condition and there is no doubt but what an epidemic will follow.”

The Kerbaugh company took the position that they would not incorporate these illegal sewage pipes into the design of the vertical concrete walls they were commissioned to build as part of the project, and in fact, stated that they would terminate any such sewer pipes found, and keep the sewage from entering the canal.

Fairport N. Y., Sept. 1, 1910.
Dr. E. H. Porter, Albany, N. Y. :
Dear Sir—
Your letter of the 29th received. Have referred the matter to the board of health and village board and will report soon as possible.
The sewer referred to carries mainly surface water although I am informed that some closets have been connected with it. It does empty into the canal and has for years. The sanitary conditions of Fairport are not bad. We have no typhoid or other fevers. However if the sewer in question is not permitted to empty into the canal, I for one don't know where it can empty.
I see no danger of an epidemic from the Barge canal construction, neither do I consider the sanitary condition of Fairport as “horrible.”
Yours truly,
Charles E. White, M. D.,
Health Officer.

At left is an excerpt from a letter written by Fairport's appointed Health Officer to the Commissioner of New York State's Board of Health, regarding the village's sewer issues.

The Commissioner of the New York State Board of Health immediately sent a letter to Fairport's Health Officer, Doctor Charles E. White, seeking confirmation that an epidemic was imminent. He also shared with Doctor White the canal law related to pollution, and the dumping of sewage into the state waterway. The Doctor promptly replied to the Commissioner, and stated that “the sanitary conditions of Fairport are not bad. We have no typhoid or other fevers.” The doctor also wrote, “If the sewer in question is not permitted to empty into the canal, I for one don't know where it can empty.”

Next: Canal construction dictates new sewer solution