

Survival of Fairport's Iconic Lift Bridge

By Bill Poray, Perinton Town Historian

The 2019 to 2021 rehabilitation of Fairport's iconic lift bridge provides an opportunity to reflect on events in the bridge's past. In many ways, it is surprising that it was every built, and that it still exists at all.

The year was 1909, as New York State developed plans for the Barge Canal expansion. A movement developed in Fairport, supported by many local residents, as well as the two village newspapers, which advocated that the canal be ousted from the central village area altogether. They saw the Barge Canal expansion project as an opportunity to relocate the canal south of Church Street. One of the benefits cited by local citizens was the opportunity to develop the land currently used by the canal. Petitions were circulated, signed by many in the community, weary of what they viewed as an outdated ditch, which cut the village in half.



1909: a view to the south, showing the steep grade to the old Main Street canal bridge.

Canal officials arrived in Fairport in mid-January of 1909 to review three potential options for relocating the canal. By late March, the state had rendered a decision. Based on land surveys and excessive cost, engineers determined all three options for relocating the canal to be impractical. The larger Barge Canal would follow the same path. The Monroe County Mail published the following on March 25, 1909: "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 location of the canal settled, it became apparent that canal engineers favored a lift bridge for Fairport, to replace the existing fixed-position bridge. Many local residents were boisterous in their opposition, citing traffic concerns. They pointed to the two existing railroad crossings and trolley crossing that already existed on North Main Street, and exclaimed that adding delays caused by a lift bridge would be a traffic disaster for pedestrians and vehicles alike. Ultimately, the state cited canal wall geometry and grade issues as the reasons why a lift bridge was the only solution. Engineers met with Fairport leadership and citizens, and helped to increase support for the lift bridge. Residents appreciated the inclusion of stairways, allowing pedestrians to cross the bridge while in the raised position. New York State also committed to pick up the tab for the bridge tenders, the employees who operate the bridge.

The lift bridge was only 43 years old in 1957, when the first serious attempt was initiated to remove it from service. At the time, a debate raged over eliminating the North Main Street railroad crossings. The Fairport Chamber of Commerce took the lead, petitioning New York State Governor William Harriman to "seek a solution to Fairport's oldest and touchiest problem – the elimination of the grade crossing at the railroad and the

lift bridge at the canal. This project has moldered for years in the minds of past Fairport administrations and civic groups. There has been much talk and little do.”



1950 view of the lift bridge at Main Street in Fairport. The wood plank deck was replaced with metal grating in 1953.

Two years later, after much talk but no action, New York State put forth a proposal for an overpass of the railroad crossings, but not including the lift bridge. The overpass would require the removal of many of the existing North Main Street buildings. The Chamber of Commerce felt the proposal was inadequate, and a local newspaper report exclaimed, “Why not get rid of the bridge too.” With a lack of funding, the project was eventually abandoned.

In the early 1970s, opposition again mounted to eliminate the lift bridge and railroad crossings. The bridge was unreliable, and public sentiment to replace it was growing. The state and many local leaders favored a four-lane fly-over, elevated bridge, to span from near High Street, almost to Pleasant Street. The controversial plan was shelved, and then a similar one put to use, on Turk Hill Road.



October 31, 2020: The final stages of rehabilitation of the lift bridge are underway.

In 1987, the lift bridge received a major overhaul, which coincided with a renewed appreciation for the presence of the canal in Fairport, now considered “the crown jewel” of the NYS canal system. After surviving numerous attempts to remove the Main Street lift bridge from service over its 106 years, the most significant rehabilitation of the historic structure is near completion, with an anticipated opening in February of 2021.