

Bethinking of Old Orleans

Vol XX

C.W. Lattin County Historian

No. 13

3-29-2000

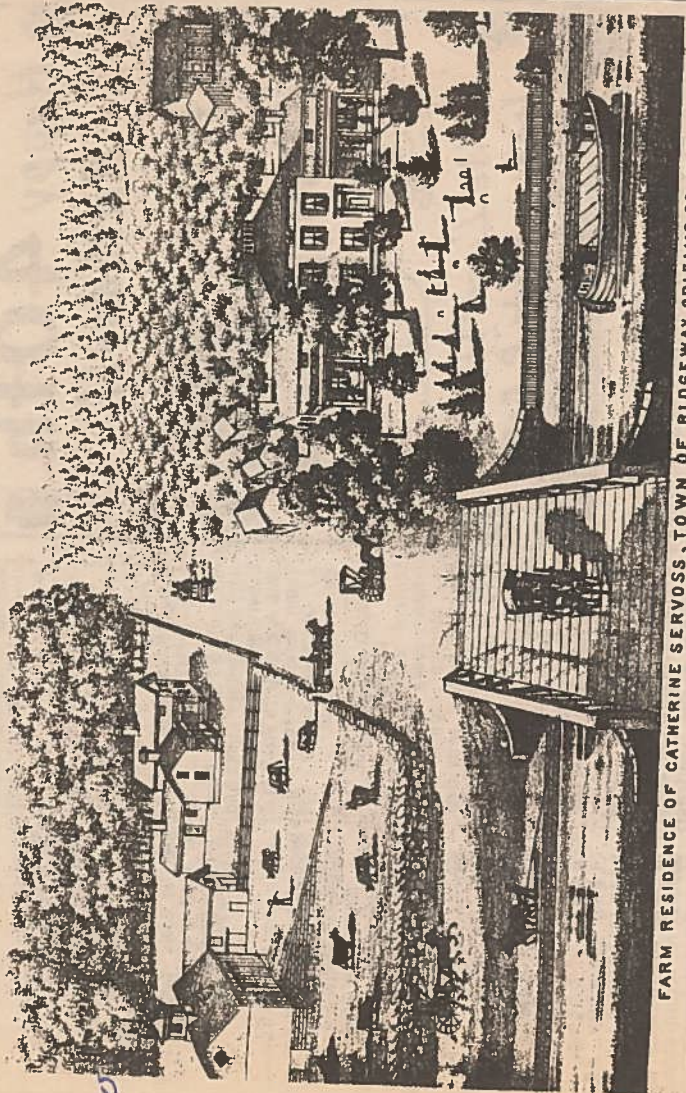
ERIE CANAL - 1825

Simultaneously with the establishment of Orleans County in 1825 the grand Erie Canal was also opened for traffic. Judge Arad Thomas wrote as follows: "To no part of the State of New York has the Erie Canal proved of more benefit than Orleans County. Although the soil was fertile and productive, and yielded abundant crops ... its inland location and the great difficulty of transporting produce to market, rendered it of little value at home. Settlers who had located here, in many instances, had become discouraged ... As soon as the canal became navigable, Holley, Albion, Knowlesville and Medina villages on its banks were built up. Actual settlers took up the unoccupied lands and cleared them up ... the lumber of the county found a ready market and floated away. Wheat was worth four times as much as the price for which it had been previously selling. Prosperity came in on every hand, the mud dried up, and the mosquitos and the ague and the fever, and the bears left the country. Farmers paid for their lands surrendered their articles and took deeds from the company. Good barns and frame houses and houses of brick and stone began to be built as the common dwellings of the inhabitants."

Prior to the Erie Canal the few people who lived in what is now Orleans County when it was Genesee County, found it a great hardship to get to Batavia, the county seat. The Tonawanda Swamp to the south was like a barrier. Once out county was formed, this area became self-contained yet with access to major cities and markets via the Erie Canal.

In 1816 the N.Y. State Legislature appointed a canal commission and the next year DeWitt Clinton prepared an act authorizing the beginning of the work. The whole western part of the canal was put under contract in 1821. But autumn of 1823 the canal was navigable as far west as Holley and during 1824 was completed through what is now Orleans County to Lockport.

When the canal was opened on October 25, 1825 it was 363 miles long and its original cost was \$7,143,780.86. Under an Act of May 1835, the canal was enlarged from a width of forty feet to seventy and straightened out in certain areas to reduce its length to 350 1/2 miles. It was last enlarged through this western section around eighty years ago when the minimum width was made ninety feet.



FARM RESIDENCE OF CATHERINE SERVOS, TOWN OF RIDGEWAY, ORLEANS CO., N. Y.

Prior to the canal opening it took six weeks to get across the state. Once the canal was finished people could travel between Albany and Buffalo in eight days. Passengers using packet boats found them much more pleasurable than stage coaches.

Our illustration is taken from the Illustrated Historical Album of Orleans County 1879. It shows Fruit Avenue looking north in the Town of Ridgeway with the Erie Canal in the foreground. It depicts great prosperity

illustrating what Arad Thomas had spoken of earlier in this article.

Come Celebrate

On Saturday, April 15 Orleans County will note its 175th Anniversary with a history program at the Orleans County Court House. Beginning at 1:30 p.m. various speakers will talk about our early beginnings. Anniversary cake will be served and the program will conclude with a performance by the Community Mass Choir ending at 4:00 p.m.