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CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

# Canal break of 1927

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**Bethinking  
of Olde  
Orleans**

“Fifteen cubits upward did the water prevail; and the mountains were covered.” — Genesis 7:20

A little ways east of Eagle Harbor in the Town of Gaines, Otter Creek flows under the Erie Canal through a culvert. Because of the geographic terrain, high embankments of earth and concrete support the canal much above the level of Otter Creek.

Early in August 1927, two boys who had been walking along the canal bank at that site noticed what appeared to be a small leak. Upon arriving at Eagle Harbor, they reported their discovery to Leon Walters, the bridge tender. But before any state officials or equipment could arrive at the scene, the south bank had collapsed.

A large piece of concrete which plunged down blocked the southern opening of the culvert through which Otter Creek flows. Within minutes, water started backing up Otter Creek, which in turn flooded hundreds of acres of fertile land to the south.

An inland lake two miles long and a half-mile wide was reported south of the canal along Otter Creek. In places, this water was 50 feet deep.

It was believed that muskrats digging in the canal embankment caused the leak, which grew bigger and bigger by the pressure of the water.

This photo, which was taken shortly after the water had started to subside, shows Albion-Eagle Harbor Road looking west at the Otter Creek gully east of Eagle

Harbor. The house of “Skinny” Porter in the distance and another house next to it were under water up to the second floors. The residents of these marooned houses were rescued after spending a night in the upper rooms.

About one half-mile south of the gully ran the tracks of the BL&R electric trolley, which were under five feet of water. Trolley passengers were transported by autos during this flooding between the Gaines Basin Road and Eagle Harbor stops.

Stop gates on the canal were closed as soon as possible, shutting off other levels of the canal. This, however, meant that canal navigation was tied up west of Rochester until the damage was repaired.

More than 100 feet of the canal embankment was washed away in the disaster. It took more than 100 workmen with steam shovels, electrically operated concrete mixers, pile drivers, other machines and six weeks of steady labor to repair the canal bank.

Because of blockage in the culvert, the water damage to crops and farmland was self contained. Had the canal broken on the north side, extensive damage would have occurred to farms all the way to Waterport.

C.W. Lattin is the Orleans county historian. His column appears every Thursday in *The Journal-Register* and *The Albion-Advertiser*.