

Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin • County Historian

Vol. VI

6-13-84

No. 24

ON THE ERIE CANAL

The Historic Gaines Jubilee has announced that as part of its celebration in Gaines this year a public program will be sponsored on the Erie Canal. It will be presented by Mr. William Holahan of Middleport and is entitled "Fifteen Miles on the Erie Canal". The program will be held on Monday evening June 25 at 7:30 p.m. in the Eagle Harbor Methodist Church. Mr. Holahan who is interested in local history has been the Postmaster in Middleport since 1962. His presentation will include almost extensively primary source material from the diary of Asa Fitch.

Through Mr. Holahan's interest and research he was able to procure a copy of the Asa Fitch diary from Yale University. The diary which was written in 1826 describes a scientific trip that Asa Fitch took on the Erie Canal only one year after it was totally completed. Included in the account are observations of people and places along the canal. Asa Fitch at the time was eighteen years old and was attending Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y. Mr. Holahan, with this material, will take his audience on a trip along the Erie as it was in 1826 from Rochester to Middleport.

The Erie Canal was begun near Rome, Oneida County, N.Y. on July 4, 1817 with Governor Clinton participating in a ground-breaking ceremony. Landmarks of Orleans County contains this information on the canal as it relates to our area:

"The whole western part of the canal was put under contract in 1821. The work was pushed energetically and during the autumn of 1823 the canal was navigable as far west on the western

section as Holley and during the following season reached the foot of the ridge at Lockport." Thus we may deduce that the Erie Canal was being dug through the remainder of Orleans County 160 years ago. The Historic Gaines Jubilee denotes this anniversary of the canal as it was completed in 1824 where it passes through the Town of Gaines at Eagle Harbor.

It is difficult for us to realize now the tremendous importance and changes brought about by the canal. In 1817 when the first turnpike across the state was built, an eight-horse freight wagon could, with good luck, make the journey from Albany to Buffalo in fifteen days. If travel conditions were bad, the trip might take as long as a month and a half. The freight charge was \$100 a ton. The canal boat schedule was five to six days and the freight charge was \$6. per ton.

Wheat was one of the more important items in those days. A regulation freight wagon drawn by a team carried one hundred bushels of wheat weighing about three tons, while the teamster walked. That same team hitched to a canal boat could haul fifty tons of wheat without any great effort while the captain sat comfortably on deck. Freight waited at every dock and towns literally sprang up over night along the Erie Canal. Wheat in this area sold for 30¢ a bushel before the canal but went up to a dollar a bushel after it opened. Canalside real estate doubled and redoubled in value. The canal during its early years was overflowing with traffic. So much toll money rolled into the State Treasury that the Legislators even thought about abolishing real estate taxes. The Erie Canal was undoubtedly the greatest, costliest and most successful project ever undertaken in the New World. By the time it was completed and opened in Oct. 26, 1825 it had cost around seven million dollars. It was acclaimed at home and abroad as the eighth wonder of the world.

The photo included here shows the installation of the Eagle Harbor lift bridge in 1914 when the canal was last widened and deepened. It is one of many photographs to be found in Historic Gaines 1809-1984 recently authored by Delia Robinson.

