

WOOD CREEK HISTORY

From the papers of the late Judge Michael J. Larkin

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THE STATE ARCHIVES SEARCHED FOR INFORMATION.

The Early Navigable Streams and what was done to improve them—The Inland Lock Navigation Company—Boating on Wood Creek—Changes Time Has Brought.

Since the adoption by the City of the present sewerage system Mayor Kingsley has taken a great interest in the undertaking, and at his instance Counselor E. A. Rowland has made some searches in the state archives at Albany, in the course of which information was obtained that is of interest regarding early Rome and Wood Creek, the outlet for the city sewage.

The possibilities of inland navigation within this country were noted at an early day by far-sighted men, and the improvement of the peculiar advantages which New York possessed in that respect has made her the Empire State of the union. As early as 1783 General George Washington, in company with Governor George Clinton ascended the Mohawk River to Wood Creek and Oneida Lake and visited the sources of the Susquehanna, and thereupon wrote to his friend, the Marquis of Chastellus, one of Rochambeau's generals, of the immense diffusion of the vast inland navigation of the United States, and favored connection by these routes with the west.

Facility of communication between the Great Lakes and the Hudson, because of the navigability (with slight

obstructions) of the Mohawk and of Wood Creek, and of their proximity to each other at the summit level or portage, was early noted, and determined the trend of settlements through New York State and the erection of forts to protect the portage at Rome; of Forts Craven, Williams and Stanwix on the Mohawk and of Forts Bull and Newport at the head of navigation on Wood Creek.

The portage from the Mohawk to Wood Creek was occupied as early as 1725, and Fort Bull was built soon after, which was destroyed by the French on March 27, 1756.

In the Paris documents of 1751 (vol. xiii) we find an itinerary from the mouth of the River Chouegen or Oswego to Chenectedi, now Schenectady, which includes the following:

"From Oneida Lake we enter the River Vilcrick (Wood Creek) which empties into that Lake, and ascend nine leagues to Fort Bull. This river is full of sinuosities, narrow and sometimes embarrassed with trees fallen from both banks. Its navigation is difficult when the water is low. It is, however, passable at all times with an ordinary batteau load of 1,400 to 1,500 weight. When its waters are low an ordinary batteau load can not go by the River further than within a league of Fort Bull. It becomes necessary then to unload and make a carrying place of the remainder by a road constructed to the fort or to send back the batteaux for the other half load. Fort Bull, which was burnt in 1756 by a detachment under the order of M. de Lery, was situated on the right bank of this River near its source on the height of land.

"The river of the Killed Fish (now Fish Creek) flows also into Oneida Lake; the English used it formerly but abandoned it because there was a portage, and have preferred Vilcrick which they have cleared. It took five days to ascend the River from Chouegen to Fort Bull, and three and a half from Fort Bull to Chouegen. It is estimated to be about 36 leagues.

"From Fort Bull to Fort Williams is estimated to be one league and a quarter. This is the carrying place across the height of land. The English had constructed a road there over which all the carriages passed. They were obliged to bridge a portion of it, extending from Fort Bull to a small stream near which a fort had been begun, though not finished. It was to be intermediate between the two forts, having been located precisely on the summit level.

"Fort Williams was situated on the right bank of the River Mohawk or des Agniés, near the rise of that river on the height of land, and was abandoned and destroyed by the English after the capture of Chouegen. (Fort Williams was a stockade fort and was located a short distance south of the site of Fort Stanwix, which was erected in 1758 under orders of General Abercrombie.—Documentary History of New York, Vol. 4, p. 521.)

"From Fort Williams the Mohawk River is navigable. Batteaux carry the same load as in the River Vilcrick to the portage at the Little Falls."

In 1791, on Governor Clinton's recommendation, the legislature appointed a committee to investigate and

report on obstructions to navigation in the Hudson and Mohawk, and following a survey between Fort Stanwix and Wood Creek, an exhaustive report was presented in 1792 which resulted in the incorporation of the Western Inland Lock Navigation Company to open lock navigation from the Hudson to Lake Ontario and Seneca Lake, by an act passed March 30, 1792, the preamble of which recited that the reason for it was that communication by water between the southern, northern and western parts of this state would encourage agriculture, promote commerce and facilitate a general intercourse between the citizens of the state. The list of directors included the most prominent men in the state, such as Philip Schuyler, J. Van Rensselaer, Walter Livingston, and of local interest Dominic Lynch, Marinus Willett, Jellis A. Fonda and Leonard Ganesvoort. They were required to complete navigation to Wood Creek, so as to admit passage of boats 40 feet long and 20 feet broad and drawing two feet of water, by January 1, 1798, and through Wood Creek to Lake Ontario and Seneca River by January 1, 1808, under penalty of forfeiture of their charter. But this appearing impracticable, on December 20, 1792, the legislature reduced the required width of locks and hence of boats to ten feet, and granted them the right to let water power for hydraulic or manufacturing purposes on their route, confirming in said company title to all land under water occupied for their purposes of construction as a free gift from the state during the term of their corporate existence.

This company, although aided materially by the state by charter grants, stock subscriptions and appropria-

tions from time to time, was never prosperous in its affairs, and after about 30 years of effort, upon the construction of the Erie Canal, its chartered rights and property were purchased by the state. As Wood Creek was a necessary and useful part of this company's scheme of navigation, it may be well to review the work of the company.

The lands occupied or traversed by it in and west of Rome lay within the Oriskany Patent, granted to Peter Schuyler, George Clarke and others in April, 1705; the Fonda Patent, granted to Jellis or Giles Fonda in January, 1736; the Oneida Reservation, ceded by the Oneida Indians to the State by treaty at Fort Stanwix in 1788, which included the Wood Creek Reservation, so-called, lands adjoining Wood Creek on the south, from the mouth of Canada Creek to Oneida Lake which were not sold by the state till 1832; and in the Roosevelt purchase or Scriba Patent, granted in December, 1794, to George Scriba, of which in January, 1795, he sold the Franklin and Robinson tract, which included all lands bordering Wood Creek on the north from Canada Creek to its junction with Fish Creek.

The company was limited by act of March 9, 1793, in lands taken for its purposes, to a strip 20 feet in width on either side of any canal and to a strip 100 feet in width on either side of any lock, constructed by it. On March 31, 1795, it appearing that but about 743 shares of its capital stock were subscribed and of these 240 were forfeited by default in payment of subscription, the State of New York subscribed for 200

shares and paid 20 pounds on each share.

In 1795 a canal was constructed around the falls at Little Falls, about one mile in length with six locks, and another 1 1/4 miles in length at German Flats.

On April 11, 1793, the Legislature, reciting that the Navigation Company had determined to connect the waters of the Mohawk River with those of Wood Creek by a canal and locks, with a view to furthering those improvements, resolved to loan the company 15,000 pounds, and took a bond and mortgage on the company's real estate at Little Falls, on the Mohawk River, for repayment by January 1, 1813, with interest at 6 per cent.

On March 17, 1797, the Legislature extended this time of payment to 1816, and passed an act enabling the company to procure the sum of \$250,000 to more effectually and speedily prosecute the improvements in said navigation.

In April, 1802, the stock was re-arranged to let in defaulted stockholders, and to insure that end they voted to increase dividends from 15 per cent to 20 per cent, each share being divided into three shares of \$120 each.

On March 21, 1806, the company secured an extension of five years from January 1, 1803, for the opening and completion of navigation down Wood Creek and extending to Lake Ontario and the Seneca River.

The canal at Rome, some two miles in length, was built under William Weston, an English Engineer, and was opened for use in 1797, from the Mohawk near the McCutcheon

place, to Wood Creek at the United States Arsenal, now R. M. Wilson's manufactory. This was operated until 1820, several wooden locks being built in Wood Creek.

President Dwight of Yale College, visiting Rome in 1799, referred to the canal as a sprightly stream, adding not a little to the cheerfulness of the village. The locks were of brick, which were replaced by stone, the brick being thereafter used in part for the walls of the old court house from 1806 to 1844 and later in the dwelling house belonging to Mrs. F. J. Thomas at the corner of George and Court Streets.

The financial condition and prospects of the company did not warrant their continuing improvements west of Oneida Lake, and accordingly on their filing a petition to that effect on April 11, 1808, the legislature accepted their surrender, discharged them of further duties regarding waters lying west of Oneida Lake, and vested said rights in the people of the state.

After the war of 1812 the energies of the people were largely turned to internal improvements, and the Erie Canal project, connecting Buffalo and Albany by water, was carried through successfully. The rights of this company were of course directly affected, and we find in the act of April 15, 1817, that the canal commissioners were empowered, when in their opinion the state's interest called for the vesting in the state of the rights and property of the Inland Lock Navigation Company, to pass a resolution to that effect and notify the company; that the supreme court should thereupon appoint appraisers, etc., and the damages should be audited by the comptroller and paid by the treasurer;

and that the people should thereupon be invested with all the lands, waters, streams, canals, locks, etc., of the said company.

On April 12, 1820, the commissioners of the canal fund were empowered by law to borrow the amount of said company's damages and the expenses of appraisal, etc.

Pursuant to the foregoing statutes Richard Varick, Nathaniel W. Howell, W. W. Woolsey, Obadiah German and Elisha Jenkins were appointed by the court as commissioners to appraise the damages of the company by the taking by the state of their property. From their report filed at Rome on June 24, 1820, it appears that the capital stock of the company was then \$232,000, then paying 3 272-1,000 per cent, and the damages to be awarded to individual stockholders were \$91,616, and to the state as a stockholder \$60,024.80. On August 11, 1820, the justices of the supreme court confirmed such assessment. On September 15, 1820, Barent Bleecker was by the company authorized to receive the sum due the company, and on October 2, 1820, these moneys were paid to Mr. Bleecker and the state resumed possession and property of all the rights granted, to the company 28 years before.

Wood Creek next figured as a state highway or as a part of a navigation system about 1832, when the Oneida Lake Canal Company was incorporated with a capital of \$40,000 to construct a canal from the Erie Canal to Oneida Lake and a feeder from Oneida Creek to the Erie Canal. It was in the same year that the Wood Creek reservation was thrown open by the state to private

purchase and in the list of owners of local interest we find such names as Henry A. Foster, Alanson Bennett, Calvert Comstock, Amos A. Bissell and Solomon Rathbun. From the Oneida Reservation, ceded to the state in 1795, there was reserved for public use, along the south side of Wood Creek, a strip of land six rods in width, and running from the mouth of Canada Creek to Oneida Lake. The canal as built by the company connected the Erie Canal at Higginsville with Wood Creek near the junction of Fish Creek. It was bought by the state in 1840 for \$50,000. The towing path ran along on the west and southerly side of the canal but the canal fell into decay in a few years and was given up.

The waters of the Creek are no longer vexed with the keel and oar as in 1812, when about 300 boats with 1,500 tons of merchandise passed over its surface.

Civilization and commerce have demanded and found more efficient helps in the discovery and application of steam to locomotion and in the building and enlargement of the Erie Canal and the harnessing of the giant of electricity to bear the world's burdens.

One hundred years ago on the Mohawk and on Wood Creek Romans received their groceries and other freight in boats which were from 40 to 50 feet in length steered by a large swing oar and carrying a movable mast in the middle, with a square sail and topsail. With a fair wind they would make six miles an hour against the stream. In the absence of this help they were pushed forward by long poles, ~~sat~~ against the bank or bottom of the stream. Four men on each side were able to make

from 18 to 20 miles a day up stream and more with the current. The tolls at Wood Creek were \$3 a ton and as much more on the boat and the freight charge \$1,25 per one hundred weight. From Utica to Oswego by this route, 114 miles, the journey took nine days. Compare with this the Empire State Express, transporting us from New York to Buffalo in nine hours—a distance of 450 miles—a journey crowded with luxuries, most of which were unknown and undreamed of by the good citizens of Rome, a century ago.

Yet it is not unprofitable to review this old-time chapter of life and to mark the development that has come to us. Sanitary science, then almost unknown, has had, too, its ample development; has brought its lessons, its rewards and its problems; and, as tributary to its service has now called to its aid the same stream which a century ago played a not inglorious part in developing the commerce of the Empire State.