

TURNPIKE TALES

by Jim Ford

"TURNPIKE TALES" #7

(Historical items from the "Madison Bouckville Antique Week" region)

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The Madison-Bouckville area has been rich in history from the arrival of the first settlers to the present day. As an addition to the website, we have decided to share some of that history in order that the patrons who travel to the Madison-Bouckville Show will have a better understanding of our truly unique region.

THE BEST CONSTRUCTED CANAL IN AMERICA

The story of the Chenango Canal and its influence on the Antiques Show area is a story of triumph achieved following many long years of attempting to persuade the State Legislature as to the merits of such an undertaking.

Settlers to our region had originally been arriving by ox cart and horseback. They followed very primitive roadways. Then, in 1803, the Third Great Western Turnpike was chartered and the route chosen was to go through Madison and McClure's Settlement. (today's Bouckville) The improved highway allowed goods to move from our area to markets further east in a more timely fashion. However, potholes and mud continued to cause problems in delivering those goods.

From the earliest years of the 1800's a movement was underway for the construction of canals. Pressure was placed on the state government to provide funding, with the argument that goods from the newly-developing western portion of our nation, as well as settlers moving from the east to that new western area, would greatly benefit the state.

The Erie Canal, constructed between 1817 and 1825, was the end result of these deliberations. Trade on the Erie Canal quickly showed the citizens of New York the benefits that a canal could bring.

Other parts of the state pushed for a canal also, with the Chenango Valley being in the forefront. A committee of Chenango Valley citizens was formed, with Moses Maynard of Johnsville (the name McClure's Settlement had been changed to Johnsville by this time) being one of the principals of the group. Mr. Maynard would later build the "White House" Hotel near the bank of the new canal in 1837.

In 1825 an Omnibus Bill was passed by the Legislature to survey a possible route for the new canal between Binghamton in the south and a point near Utica in the north, where it would join the Erie Canal. However, because of concerns about the availability of water along the summit level of the proposed canal, the Legislature did not pass the Canal Bill until February 23rd of 1833.

Work on the canal was begun in July of 1834 and was completed by October of 1836. Goods were now brought from northern Pennsylvania to the Chenango Canal at Binghamton. From there, they traveled north to the terminus with the Erie Canal. The regular travel schedule and the smooth ride on the canal convinced many businesses to ship their goods on this new conveyance.

We should mention that in all of the efforts to secure the Chenango Canal, a continual proponent had been William C. Bouck, both when he was the Canal Commissioner and later as Governor of New York. In gratitude, the citizens of Johnsville renamed their community in his honor.

At this point let's include some interesting facts about the canal and what had to be constructed along the canal route. The canal was 97 miles in length. Contracts were let to construct sections of the canal, which would then be joined together. Many immigrants, especially the Irish, would help in the construction. The surface of the canal was 42 feet wide and the bottom was 26 feet wide. The depth of the canal was four feet. There were 116 locks constructed, as well as 19 aqueducts, 52 culverts and 162 bridges. In addition, 7 reservoirs were built to maintain the water level on the summit level of the canal, which is the Bouckville area.

(thus the name Summits for the Bouckville baseball team) Madison Brook Reservoir, later renamed Lake Moraine, was one of those reservoirs.

The changes in the Madison-Bouckville-Solsville area due to the canal were substantial. Population grew and businesses thrived. Professional stone masons, hired to construct the locks for the canal, remained and built the magnificent cobblestone structures in the area. The Landmark Tavern building and the Octagon cobblestone home in Madison are prime examples of their fine work.

The canal never achieved the financial success that the state expected. The cost of maintaining the canal banks and the repair of the locks, plus the arrival of the railroad into the region, signaled the end of the Chenango Canal. The canal was closed in 1876 and the property along it was sold soon after.

Today we can see remnants of the canal at various locations. The stretch from Solsville to Pecksport is maintained as a special fishing area. The remains of locks are visible on the Canal Road from Solsville to Oriskany Falls. But gone are the days of mules pulling canal boats along the towpath to distant markets both north and south.

In recent years a group has been formed called the Chenango Canal Association. They maintain a five mile stretch of the old canal between Solsville and Hamilton. A walking trail has been established along the former towpath route. If you are in the area, please take some time and walk a section of the trail. It is amazing how you can imagine yourself back in the times when the Chenango Canal offered so much promise to our region.