

Greenville Local History Group Newsletter

November 2007, Issue 179

Slide Show—GCS 75th

A nondescript November evening awaited those coming out for the last meeting of the year. (Nothing against nondescript; ordinary is just fine many times!) Those sharing were Phyllis Beechert, Stephanie Ingalls, Harriett Rasmussen, Richard Ferriolo, Tracy Boomhower, Dot Blenis, Walter Ingalls, Larry & Dot Hesel, Deb Teator (brief appearance to set up the computer and projector), and Don Teator.

Richard and Tracy brought a few items with them. Richard introduced his new book – an update of residents who served the country's various wars. The first book named those who lived within the town's boundary. This second book includes those additional people who lived within the school boundaries – a much larger area. A thank you goes to Richard for all his efforts in preserving more of our area's history.

Richard also voiced his concern about the progress of preserving the Potter Hollow School House, and he urged that we contact school board members to speed along this preservation effort. Richard brought a framed copy of the deed that gave the land to the new Potter Hollow school house. This framed deed will be given to the school district. Again, thank you Richard, and a thank you to Tracy.

The rest of the evening was spent viewing the 115 slide PowerPoint presentation that had been shown initially at the GCS

75th anniversary weekend. Even those who had seen it admitted to enjoying it the second time around.

Filling out this newsletter is a copy of a recent article about the Catskill and Canajoharie article. Even though the railroad never went through the town, it brushed closely enough to attract those who enjoy railroads and the C&C's history.

(Deb tells me that the GCS Yearbook Club is publishing a community recipe book. There is an entry form and directions from the advisor, Faith Bowers. I'm assuming these forms are available at the High School office. Deadline is December 21.)

So, winter beckons and with it a chance to step back and look over some ideas to work on. I will be working on digitizing negatives into computer files with the new scanner and backup hard drives recently purchased (be sure to thank town board members, if you see them, for their continued support of our historical endeavors). Of course, some of you will be working on an idea or two, and we will await your efforts in the spring.

Before we get there, I will have the annual report out.

Take care,



SURVIVING THE ERIE CANAL:

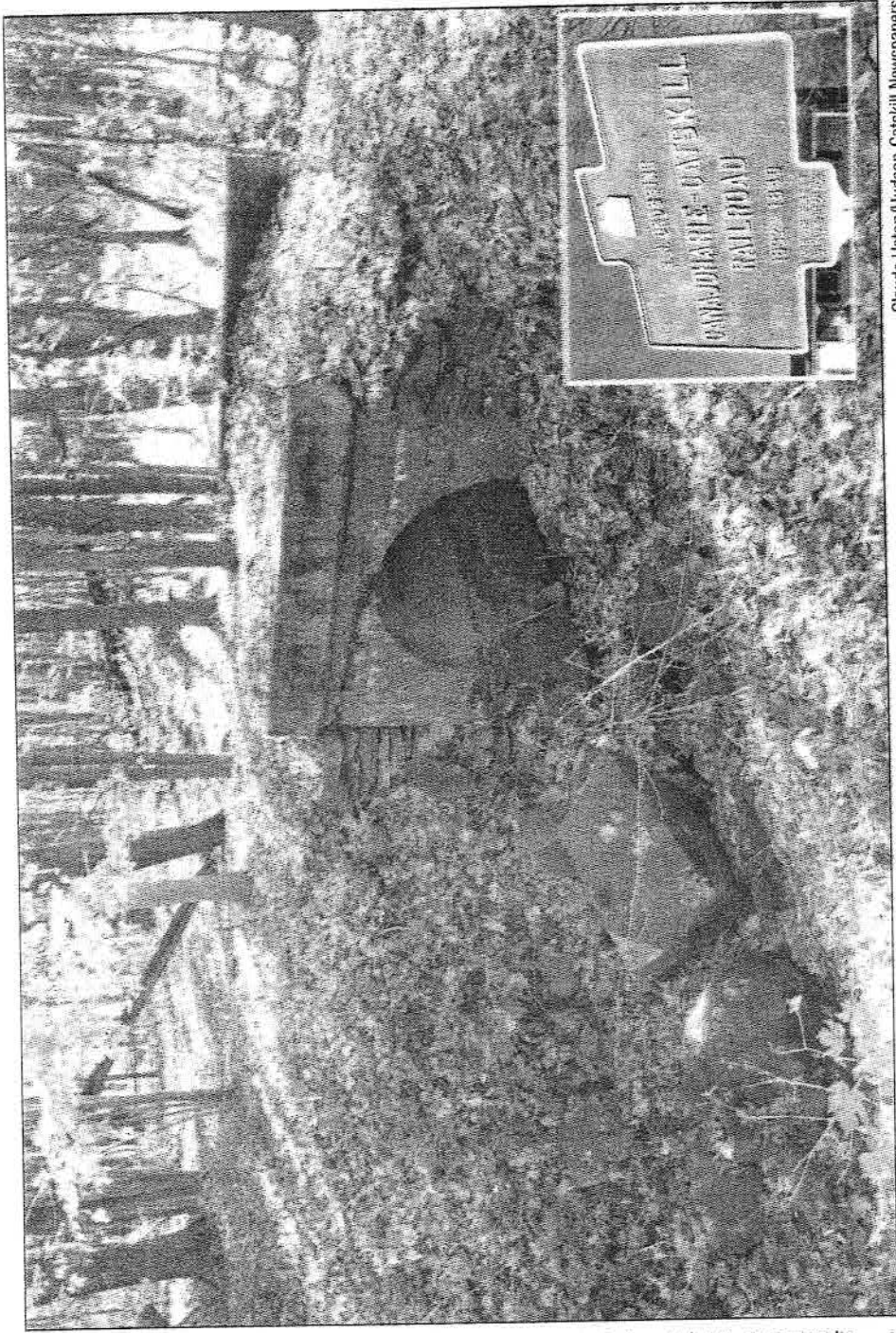
Catskill's 19th century bypass

By Jim Planck
Hudson-Catskill Newspapers C1, 2

CATSKILL — On Nov. 4, 1825, exactly 182 years ago today, the official opening of the Erie Canal was celebrated in New York City's harbor with the arrival of a small flotilla of boats led by the "Seneca Chief." The boat carried Gov. DeWitt Clinton and two commemorative kegs of "Lake Erie" water, which were ceremoniously poured into the city's Atlantic harbor to signify "the Wedding of the Waters."

It was, in essence, the exact moment that the Village of Catskill and surrounding Greene County businesses lost what amounted to their monopoly on the state's interior trade, and which began a decades-long effort by them to regain at least a part of it.

Prior to the opening of the canal, Catskill was one of the Hudson River's leading communities, an economic and cultural center whose star was on the rise, and was projected to grow into one of the Hudson Valley's premiere cities.



Claude Haton/Hudson-Catskill Newspapers

Architectural relics of the Catskill and Canajoharie Railroad era still exist in Greene County, including this stone culvert along Route 23B between Leeds and South Cairo, which gives clear indication of the line's "narrow gauge." The path was later reutilized as part of the Catskill Mountain Railroad to Cairo and the Catskill Mountain House. The inset marks the site of a former road crossing in the Durham area.

It was all due to the Susquehanna Turnpike, which literally began at the head of Main Street.

A corporate venture, the road ran out to Wattle's Ferry, now Unadilla, on the Susquehanna River, and was the brainchild of local and regional business and political leaders. The franchise was successful as a toll road, but the real benefit was to open up the markets to and from the center and western parts of the state, and, by extension, portions of Pennsylvania.

It opened in 1800, and two decades later — as the 19th century equivalent of the NYS Thruway — was continuing to run strong.

Just three years before the opening of the canal, in 1822, a lengthy account of a damaging Catskill thunderstorm in "The American Journal of Science and Arts" was written by Catskill resident Dr. Benjamin W. Dwight, the son of Yale College president Timothy Dwight.

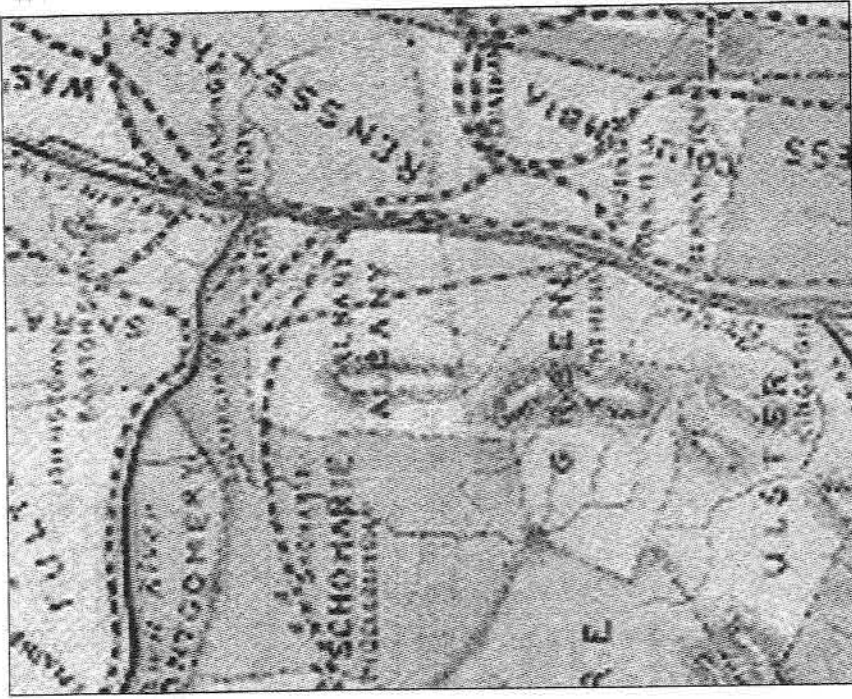
It provides a description of the village, including the creation of Catskill Point — an aspect of the positive business climate of the time — as well as referencing the turnpike and its nearest communities, all with no indication of the forthcoming downward economic turn.

Of the Point, Dwight writes, "From the point of land formed by the junction of the Hudson and the Catskill (Creek), a wharf has been extended, about one fourth of a mile, to a small island in the Hudson, formed by the opposing currents of the two streams."

"To the south end of this island there have been considerable additions of 'made' land."

"The whole of this ground is now called the Point," says Dwight. "On it several dwelling houses, stores, and other buildings, have been erected."

"At the north end of Main-Street the Catskill and Susquehanna turnpike commences," notes Dwight — this is essentially where the statue of Rip Van Winkle stands in the street corner today — "and runs in a W.N.W. (west by northwest)



Courtesy University of Rochester

This "Map of the State of New York Showing its Canals and Rail Roads" was published in 1868, and includes what is apparently the unbuilt route of the 1846 Schenectady and Catskill Railroad Company, one of several rail lines in the middle of the 19th century that never saw construction.

course about eighty-eight miles, to the Susquehanna river."

"From two to two-and-a-half miles from the Point, is situated along this road the small village of Jefferson."

"About two miles further, on the same road, is the village of Madison (now Leeds); and two miles beyond (is) Woolcott's mills (now South Cairo)."

The reality of the Erie Canal replacing the Susquehanna Turnpike as the arterial

route to and from the west is amply highlighted in "A System of School Geography," an 1836 text book by noted 19th century educational author S. Griswold Goodrich.

The book was then in its 11th edition, meaning the original printed appeared 11 years earlier, or about 1825, the same year the canal opened.

"The Erie canal is by far the greatest construction of the kind in America," writes Goodrich, "and is longer than any canal in Europe."

"It furnishes an easy method of transporting to the Hudson river, and thence to the ocean, the products of the lands near it, as well as those on the borders of the great western lakes (the Great Lakes)."

Specific mention of the canal's effect on Catskill is found within an 1887 publication of the Cayuga County Historical Society, which contains the text of a speech given the year before by an Auburn minister, the Rev. Willis J. Beecher, in memorial to one of the county's prominent citizens, Rev. Charles Hawley, who had just died, and who was originally

from and grew up in Catskill.

Hawley was an influence upon, if not a founder, of the Cayuga County Historical Society, and Beecher's depictions of Hawley's experiences are accurate because Beecher draws them almost directly from Hawley's 1869 autobiography.

"Our friend Charles Hawley, the son of Ezra Hawley," writes Beecher, "was born Aug. 19, 1819. He was born in Catskill, N.Y."

"His father had removed thither (from Connecticut) to engage in trade."

"At the time of his removal (the father's relocation from Connecticut), the Erie canal was not yet in existence, and Catskill was the present and prospective centre of an immense trade between New York city and the inland regions, much of which (the shipping trade) afterward followed the line of the canal, and went through Albany."

"Our own lake region (Auburn and Cayuga County) of central New York was then a portion of the tract of country whose trade went to New York city largely by way of Catskill."

"At an early date, Ezra Hawley (the father), with other enterprising New England men, ... had the sagacity to see that trade must needs grow with the settling up of the great west (central and western New York), and moved into the staid Dutch town (Catskill village), to take advantage of its prospective growth."

"For some years they made the town brisk and busy."

"Ezra Hawley occupied a block of buildings, in the different stories of which he carried on both a wholesale and retail trade in dry goods, groceries, provisions, produce of all sorts, liquors, and other goods."

"He was also a director in the village bank, an active man in all local enterprises and public affairs, and an elder in the Presbyterian church."

Thus, a picture of Catskill in the immediate years before the canal opened is provided.

The economic harm caused shortly thereafter to Catskill by the canal is stated precisely 35 years later in J. H. French's 1860 "Gazetteer of the State of New York."

"The county (Greene) has a considerable interest in the commerce of the Hudson, but less, perhaps, than it had many years ago," says French.

"No county has been more seriously damaged in its commercial and manufacturing prospects by the public works of the State than Greene."

"Before the Erie Canal was completed, Catskill, the county seat, commanded the trade of the adjacent counties west, and of the southern tier through to Lake Erie, and some portions of Northern Pennsylvania," states French.

"It was a large wheat market, and at the falls of Catskill Creek, three miles west of the village (at Madison, now Leeds), were the most extensive flouring mills in the State."

"The canals and railroads," says French, "have limited the commercial transactions of the county strictly to home trade."

That canal travel, or slack water navigation, was not only a boon to the freighting of goods, but was also a method for travelers as well, is portrayed in the January, 1838, issue of "Southern Literary Messenger," a Richmond, Virginia-based gazette.

It contains an east coast travelogue called "The Copy-Book," in which the writer's comments on the Erie Canal include, "Canal

Please see Canal, page C2

Continued from page C1

boat—deck (shaped) like a turtle's back, but a neat cabin."

"Canal runs along the Mohawk, a picturesque little Indian river. Early in the morning—the mists floating on the hills,"

"Boat drawn by two horses, a boy mounted on one — travels day and night, at the rate of 4 miles an hour, or 96 miles a day — change horses every ten miles."

Interestingly, he also references the call for which the Erie became famous.

"There are a great many bridges across the canal," he writes. "They are very low, some of them barely leaving room for the body to pass."

"Whenever the word 'Bridge' is sung out," he explains, "down go all on deck, and there lie prone until the bridge is cleared."

Thus the origin of the call which was later memorialized in Thomas S. Allen's popular 1905 American folksong, "Low Bridge, Everybody Down," and which most recently has seen inclusion on Bruce Springsteen's 2006 release, "We Shall Overcome — The Seeger Sessions," a compilation of traditional songs recorded with Pete Seeger in Springsteen's New Jersey farmhouse.

While the 1838 writer above may have found the Erie Canal scenery nice, he had less kind observations to make about the ride, and after making note of the poor condition of its villages and those who hung about the canal fronts, he basically tells the reader to avoid it.

"The weather was hot, it being August; the passengers were unsocial; the smooth motion of the boat was tiresome and monotonous; the bridges were a continual annoyance; everything around seemed cold, heartless, selfish, mercenary, and I cannot commend the grand canal either as an edifying, or as an agreeable route."

Perhaps if he had tried the rigors of overland stage travel along the Susquehanna Turnpike, he would have been more appreciative of the canal and why it was so universally hailed.

Catskill leaders were not slow, however, in recognizing the economic threat the canal represented.

A survey for an actual Catskill Canal, to run "from Catskill, on the Hudson River, along the valley of the Catskill and Schoharie creeks, to intersect the Erie canal, west of Schoharie creek," a 60 mile distance, was ordered as part of the state's Omnibus Canal Act in 1825, the year the Erie opened.

By 1830 or '31, however, its feasibility, was yet "to be reported upon to the legislature."

The survey was apparently not completed for another six or seven years, as a record of the plan next surfaces in an 1856 "Catalogue of New-York State Library," which lists an 1837 manuscript with maps called "Survey of the Mohawk and Catskill Canal, including the route of the Canajoharie and Catskill Railroad," by E. Beach and I. V. Germain.

This latter was a re-use of the proposed canal route by a rail proposal to be discussed below.

Aside from reports filed with the state in 1837, '38, and '39 — on petitions of inhabitants of Catskill on extension of Erie Canal to Catskill" and for a canal from Catskill "to the Erie canal above Schenectady," nothing came of the Catskill Canal plan, and it apparently faded quietly.

Railroads, however, were now coming to the notice of the trade world.

As early as 1824, the year before the canal opened, area leaders had already gotten federal approval for a "Survey of a route for a rail road from Catskill to Ithaca, New-York," according to the 1830 volume, "A Connected View of the Whole Internal Navigation of the United States."

However, J. D. Hammond's 1850 "History of Political Parties in the State of New-York" explains that in 1826 there was still ongoing debate as to possible routes.

Although referred to as the "Canajoharie and Catskill Railroad" in the 20th century and today, the line's actual incorporated name, which was always used while it was in existence, was the reverse — the "Catskill and Canajoharie Railroad" — as Catskill business and political leaders were the prime movers behind its creation. The marker commemorating the line's High Rock trestle crash stands in front of the Durham Center Museum on Route 145. While the crash signaled the end, it was not the final run, and the line struggled on, finally being foreclosed upon by the state in 1842, and was sold for its wood and iron.

Caption to photo on next page

"On the 20th of March, the commissioners reported (their findings to the state)," says Hammond. "Two great routes, called the northern and southern, were respectively urged on the commissioners."

Hammond explains that both proposed routes had the same path from Lake Erie's Portland to Bath, in Steuben County, after which they diverged.

"From Bath the north route led to Ithaca," he writes, "and from thence to Catskill, in the county of Greene."

The proposed southern route went down to Binghamton, then through Delaware, Sullivan, and Orange counties to Nyack, in Rockland County.

"The commissioners preferred the northern route," says Hammond, which they said could come "by the way of Delhi, in the county of Delaware, to the village of Madison (Leeds), and from thence to the Hudson river, either at the village of Athens or Catskill, as shall be deemed most expedient by the person or persons who may by law be authorized to lay out the road."

This last indicates there was equally strong pressure from the political and business leaders of both Athens and Catskill to be the rail's terminus, and the state was thus going to leave it up to the surveyors and engineers to decide.

Whether a decision was ever made is unclear. Listings of the proposed station stops pick up the eastern end at Cairo, with Durham next, after which it heads into Delaware County and Stamford.

According to Hammond's 1850 work, however, the sum of \$2,538.61 was spent on the survey in 1828, ostensibly from Cairo west.

The rail line, or at least a portion of it was even surveyed. An 1869 geography of the Mississippi Valley, which has a detailed discussion of elevations for canals connecting the river's headwaters to the upper Great Lakes, also includes elevations to New York's Lake Erie and Lake Ontario.

Specifically, one of the Lake Erie references says its elevation from sea level is 565.33 feet, and that it was established "By Surveys of Catskill and Portland Railway, (in) 1828," Portland being the far western end of the route, with Ithaca actually a halfway point.

Of note is James Macaulay's three volume "Natural, Statistical, and Civil History of the State of New-York," published in Albany in 1829, while the route's survey was yet ongoing. Significantly, it suggests the Catskill to Ithaca line was only the second railroad to ever be proposed in the state.

"In the State of New-York," says Macaulay, "much has been said on the subject, but no rail roads have as yet been constructed."

"The Hon. Stephen Van Rensselaer, and some others, in 1826 procured the enactment of a law to make one from the city of Schenectady to the city of Albany."

"Since then," he adds, "an act has been passed authorising the making of a rail way from Catskill, on the Hudson, to Ithaca, on Fall Creek, at the head of Cayuga Lake."

"These roads, should they be made," says Macaulay, "are to be constructed by companies, the State taking no interest in them." This means private funding alone

would have been necessary, which perhaps explains why the line was not built.

"The expense of the latter (the Catskill-Ithaca line) is estimated at \$1,500,000," says Macaulay, which would have been an enormous financial undertaking in 1828 dollars.

The Catskill and Ithaca line is again referenced three years later in an 1831 House of Representatives list of federal surveys "made pursuant to the War Department, subsequent to the 4th March, 1829. ... as had been begun, but not completed, prior to that date." This means the survey was started after that March 1829 date, but had not yet been completed by 1831.

Even as late as 1843, in a discussion of railways in New York State, in Grenville Mellen's "Book of the United States," the plan is still mentioned. "The Ithaca and Catskill railroad is to extend a distance of one hundred and sixty-seven miles, from Ithaca to Catskill, on the Hudson," it states, but clearly, by this time it is only a paper railroad and had been for some time.

Beers' 1884 "History of Greene County" says of it, "An act of March 21st, 1829, extended the time for opening subscription books (obtaining investment capital) to the following year," and then adds, "With this beginning the first attempt at railroad building (in Greene County) failed."

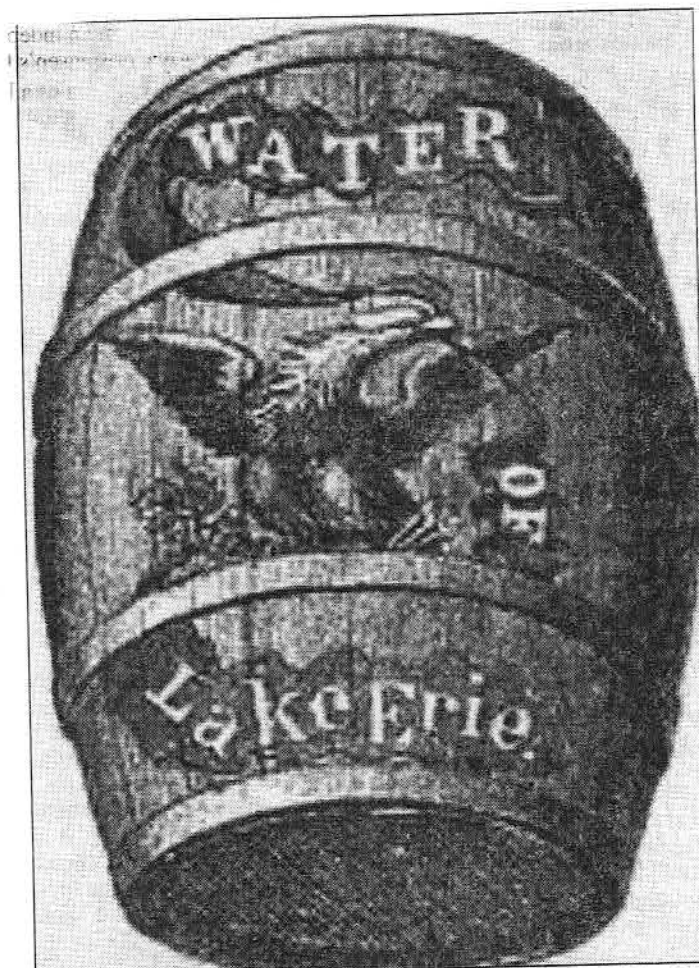
The second attempt for a railroad to bring a trade route to the area was the Catskill and Canajoharie Railroad, which got off to a slow start, had a troubled existence, and an early demise.

Beers' "History" notes it was incorporated on April 19, 1830, but aside from a ceremonial groundbreaking in October 1831 — which apparently failed to attract investors — the project languished.

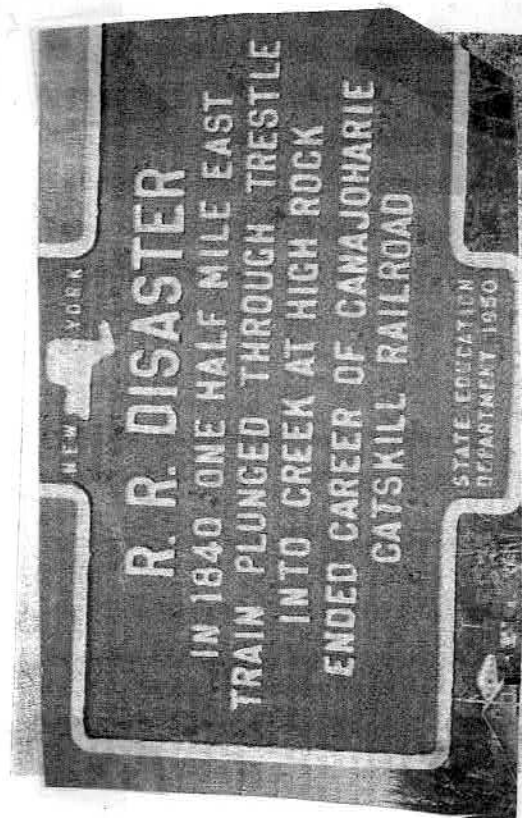
An 1835 issue of the "American Railroad Journal" states its specific purpose. "This road was intended to divert a part of the business of the Erie Canal to Catskill."

"The stock was subscribed, but nothing has been done on the road," it says.

An 1838 Edinburgh, Scotland, publication, "The Stranger's Guide through the United States and Canada," also noted the line's purpose, stating, "The Catskill and Canajoharie Railroad Company is incorporated for the purpose of making a railroad to intersect the Erie Canal at Canajoharie."



This 1877 drawing from "History of the City of New York" depicts one of the original 1825 green-painted, gold-banded kegs from which NYS Gov. DeWitt Clinton poured the water from Lake Erie into the Atlantic to symbolize the "Wedding of the Waters." The New-York Historical Society owned it at the time of the drawing.



Erie side-contracts and three railroads.

The Catskill and Canajoharie was one of them, and it received \$300,000 backed by the security of the state.

The first 22 or 26 miles of it to Oak Hill or Cooksburgh actually got built and was in operation at least through 1840, but it ran into consistent mechanical problems, including a wreck.

The train's engine apparently didn't work properly and was of a specialized design that could only be repaired down in Paterson, N.J.

After going twice by steamboat down to the machine shop for unsatisfactory repairs, it was set aside, and Beers says stage horses were then

used to pull the car or cars along the line.

Additionally, there had been consistent ongoing questions and criticisms about the rail line's finances, including a state Senate committee investigation in 1837, and the line's operation was officially over in July 1841 after failing on its loan from the state.

NYS Governor William H. Seward included the bad news in his 1842 Annual Message to the state Legislature. "The Canajoharie and Catskill Railroad Company, and the Ithaca and Owego Railroad Company (an unrelated line) — having failed in July and October last (respectively) to pay the interest on the stocks issued in their behalf under laws passed in 1838 and 1840 — the amount of that interest, equal to \$11,405, was paid at the treasury (by the state)."

"Proceedings of foreclosure have been instituted," Seward says.

"A portion of the Canajoharie and Catskill railroad has been made," he adds, "but I regret that there is not a probability of its completion under present circumstances."

The fate of the Catskill and Canajoharie was not soon forgotten. About a decade later, in 1851, Freeman Hunt, editor of the NYC-based monthly "Hunt's

Merchant's Magazine and Commercial Review," included the line's failure in a story titled "Internal Improvements in the State of New York."

"In the Message of Governor Seward, in 1842," says Hunt, "he announced the fact that the Ithaca and Owego, and the Catskill and Canajoharie Railroads, had failed, leaving the State to pay the interest and principal on \$515,100 of State stock loaned to said companies."

"The total loss to the State, by the payment of principal and interest, in consequence of the loans of its credit to these two roads, is \$1,010,827.87."

The line's short career is succinctly summarized a few years later, in the 1860 publication of Henry Poor's "History of the Railroads and Canals of the United States of America."

"The Canajoharie and Catskill Railroad Company was chartered in 1830," it states. "The construction of the road was commenced in 1837, and a portion partially constructed at an estimated cost of \$3,571 per mile, when completed." This would have been an a severe cost per mile at that time.

"In 1838," writes Poor, "the State made a loan to the Company of \$200,000."

"In 1841 the Company failed to pay the interest on the loan, and on the 20th May, 1842, the road was sold by the Comptroller of the State for the sum of \$11,600, the balance of the loan being a total loss."

"The project was soon after abandoned," adds Poor.

Interestingly, a record of how the state inspected the route and determined to shut it down is found in a Wisconsin history, where noted New York civil engineer and surveyor E. H. Brodhead, an Ulster County native, had moved in later life.

Brodhead had an illustrious career, both in New York and Wisconsin, including work on multiple railroads, the municipal bounds expansion of New York City, Onondaga Reservation and its boundaries with Syracuse, and, for Seward, delineation of the large "John Brown" tract in the Adirondacks, originally owned by the infamous Civil War era guerilla.

Amidst a lengthy biography of Brodhead in Charles Tuttle's 1875 "Illustrated History of the State of Wisconsin," it notes, "The next year, (1842), he surveyed a route for a railroad from Catskill on the Hudson River, to Canajoharie in the valley of the Mohawk."

"A small portion of the route had been built," it says, "but was so badly located and constructed, and the whole route proved of so formidable a character, that, upon his report (to the state), the project was abandoned, and the

portion constructed taken (torn) up."

Other proposed routes and attempts at getting a railroad to either link with the Erie or with points west surfaced much later in the century, but they didn't come to fruition, although local trains to the mountains were built and were successful.

By that time, however, plans for either a trade canal or a railbed cutting crossland to the Erie Canal were no longer fraught with economic necessity. The Catskill Mountain House, at Pine Orchard on the escarpment, had made its appearance about the same time the Erie opened.

Thus, as freight and business trade fell over the ensuing decades, tourism — and the revenue from it — increased. The area, in a stroke of unplanned fortune, had essentially switched one economic engine for another.

The same 1838 Scottish "Stranger's Guide" referenced above states that Catskill "is a flourishing village."

"The village is in the immediate neighbourhood of the Catskill Mountains," states the guide, "and has become the resort of people of fashion and pleasure, who design (want) a tour to the Pine Orchard, 12 miles distant, situated on the Catskill Mountain, 2,212 feet above the surface of the Hudson River, where a splendid hotel has been erected for the accommodation of visitors, which commands an extensive prospect (view) of the course of the Hudson, and of the surrounding country, as far as the eye can reach."

"About two miles west (of the Mountain House) are the falls of the Kaaterskill, a tributary of Catskill Creek, which present a beautiful and romantic cascade of 240 feet, in two perpendicular descents."

"Coaches leave Catskill for the Pine Orchard twice a-day; fare, one dollar."

The new economic base continued to sustain the region in the years ahead even as the last dying gasps of the old trade route economy lingered and expired.

By that time, however, the Catskill Mountain House-inspired tourism economy was so engrained throughout the region that no one had any time to remember or worry about a day in November 1825 when the Erie Canal, with the emptying of a keg into New York harbor, derailed Catskill's merchandising future and turned the community from a path of urban-city destiny.

Regarding Canajoharie, an 1839 NYC book, "The Tourist, or Pocket Manual for Travellers," adds, "The (Erie) canal runs through the northern section of this village. This will be the terminating point of the projected Catskill and Canajoharie Railroad."

The project's actual non-ceremonial ground breaking occurred near Catskill Creek in the Autumn of 1835.

Beers says that construction contracts were let for the route of the entire line the next year, with the anticipation that it would be completely operational by 1837.

Like the proposed canal before it, the line was to follow the route of the Catskill Creek to the Schoharie, then up to the Mohawk and the canal. The station stops were listed as Cairo, Freehold, Oak Hill, Livingstonville, Middleburg, Schoharie, Sloansville, Charleston, and Canajoharie, for a total 63 mile route.

Initial capitalization was insufficient and after getting authority to borrow \$400,000 more in 1837, still more money was needed. Thus, in 1838 — when the state loaned \$4,000,000 to the Erie Canal to enlarge it — another \$8,000,000 in additional construction funds were included in that bill, to be shared among