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ONONDAGA LAKE & RIVER

IN

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BY

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ONEIDA LAKE & RIVER

in

ERIE CANAL DAYS

by

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ONEIDA LAKE

The map of the Empire State shows near the geographical center a considerable area of blue, about which border the counties of Oswego, Oneida, Madison and Onondaga - this large blue area is designated as Oneida Lake.

Why always called Oneida Lake instead of Lake Oneida is not known. The larger lakes are spoken of as Lake Superior, Lake Michigan, Lake Huron, Lake Erie and Lake Ontario, respectively. We find Lake Okechobee in Florida, Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire; and even in our own state the smaller lake south of Lake Champlain is called Lake George, though it is somewhat less in area than is Oneida.

Oneida Lake is the largest body of water lying wholly within the bounds of the state. It is a trifle over twenty miles long and is six miles in width at the widest point - averaging four miles in width. Its area is about eighty square miles or fifty-seven thousand square acres. It lies three hundred seventy feet above sea level, and about 125 feet above the level of Lake Ontario.

Unlike the Seneca, Cayuga and the other so-called finger lakes, which are the result of glacial action and are very deep, Oneida Lake is evidently the remains of a once mighty river which drained the accumulated waters of a vast area of floods from the melting glacier many thousand years ago. During this glacial period and the flow of water from the melting ice, the level of the present Lake Ontario was doubtless from one hundred fifty to two hundred feet higher than at present, thus covering the present area of Oneida Lake. The present Saint Lawrence River outlet was covered by ice, and for untold periods of time the greater portion of the overflow of the accumulated waters of a vast inland sea of fresh water found its way to the ocean by way of the Oneida Lake and Mohawk River valleys to and through the valley of the Hudson River.

After the glacier melted sufficiently the Saint Lawrence River provided an outlet for the waters of all the Great Lakes, and Lake Ontario was lowered to somewhere near its present level. The present water-shed or divide at Rome, New York became the point where the runoff extended in two directions, Wood Creek flowing into Oneida Lake to the west and the Mohawk River flowing east to join the Hudson River.

Oneida River became the outlet of Oneida Lake, joining the Oswego River at a confluence with the Seneca River at Three River Point. The Oswego River thus became the outlet of all the finger lakes and Oneida Lake.

Being but the remains of the glacial river, Oneida Lake, unlike Seneca and Cayuga and the other glacial formed bodies of water, is shallow - nowhere exceeding fifty-five feet in depth, with much of its area materially more shallow.

It is necessary to proceed nearly five miles east from Brewerton to near Frenchman's Island to find a depth of twenty feet - and there are several low lying islands, besides many bars, reefs and ledges, with scant depths of water above.

An Indian could have launched his canoe on Oneida Lake and proceeding west by way of the Oneida River and at Three River Point into the Oswego River and reached Lake Ontario at Oswego. Once over the latter lake he would descend the Saint Lawrence River to the outlet of Lake Champlain, the Richelieu or Sorel River, and ascending that stream would reach Lake Champlain. A journey of over one hundred miles over its surface would bring the Indian to Wood Creek, flowing into the lake. Following this creek he would be able to reach a point of comparatively short portage of a mile or two, allowing him to launch his canoe in a creek flowing into the Hudson River. Following the Hudson he would reach the Mohawk River; and ascending this river, with but a few short portages at some of its falls and rifts, he would reach the site of the present city of Rome. Here a short portage of about one and a half miles would permit the traveler to launch his craft on the water of another Wood Creek - proceeding down which he would reach Oneida Lake; thus completing a circumnavigation of nearly five hundred and seventy-five miles - with but few portages - of a portion of central and all of northern New York. Since the cutting of the canals this large area has become an artificial island.

Over the Lake Ontario, Oswego River, Oneida River and Lake and the Mohawk River route, the aborigines made their way from nation to nation, mostly bent on war and conquest - later perhaps exchanging and bartering and following the quest of game, fish and fur.

between Wood Creek and the Mohawk River."

This chain of waterways was used extensively during both war and peacetime. In 1768 the first official mention of improvement is found in a message from Governor Moore to the General Assembly.

After the war of the Revolution, the first official mention of improvements is found in 1784 in a petition from Christopher Colles to the legislature proposing a plan of inland navigation to Fort Stanwix. A petition from the same source in 1786 resulted in a move to improve navigation of the Mohawk River, Wood Creek and the Onondaga (now Oneida) River to Oswego, and for "extending the same if practicable to Lake Erie." No Legislative action, however, was taken on this proposal.

No further record of activities along this line are found until the year 1791 when an act was passed authorizing the exploration and survey of ground between Fort Stanwix and Wood Creek in the county of Herkimer. The survey was made and report submitted January 3, 1792.

An act for opening lock navigation within the state from the Hudson River to Lake Ontario and Seneca Lake was passed March 24, 1792. Canals were to be of a size for proposed boats forty feet long, twenty feet wide and drawing, when loaded two feet of water. Subscription books were opened and shares of stock were sold. Complete surveys were made before work was commenced. The committee reported to the Directors September 1, 1792.

In the spring of 1793 work was begun at Little Falls, but was forced by lack of funds to stop in September. Many of the stockholders had failed to pay for stock subscribed for. In June, 1794 work was again started and carried on until the works at that place were completed November 17, 1794.

The canal was four thousand seven hundred and fifty-two feet long with a fall of forty-four feet seven inches. There were five locks, each having nearly nine feet lift. Their chambers, excavated from solid rock, were seventy-four by twelve feet to allow boats drawing three and one half feet of water to enter at all times. Two thousand, five hundred fifty-one feet of the channel was cut through the solid rock.

In the summer of 1793 Wood Creek was cleared of fallen timber and straightened, thus shortening its course seven miles.

In 1797 a canal from the Mohawk River to Wood Creek was completed, one and three-fourths miles long and forty-seven and a half feet wide, allowing boats with a draft of three and a half feet to pass. It had two locks, one of ten feet and the other of eight feet lift, and a feeder. In the same year a canal and locks were built at German Flats.

In 1808 the Western Inland Lock Navigation Company, as it was called, surrendered all its grants and privileges west of Oneida Lake.

No more work was done to improve navigation, and in February, 1808, the first legislative measures toward what later became the Erie Canal were begun.

June 19, 1812 a law was passed authorizing the Canal Commissioners to purchase the rights of the Western Inland Lock Navigation Company.

Construction on the Erie Canal began July 4, 1817 at Rome.

The Erie Canal was a bold venture, the early history leading to its construction being very interesting - politically and otherwise - but as this paper concerns more particularly Oneida Lake and its commerce, the history of the canal must be reserved for the pen of a more capable writer in another paper.

Let us now consider the Oneida River as it was in the days before waterway improvements, together with a brief survey of what was afterwards done toward making navigation practicable.

ONEIDA RIVER IMPROVEMENT

Oneida Lake and Oneida River were seriously considered as the route of the old Erie Canal, and in later years became the route of the present Darge Canal.

With the opening of the old Oneida Lake Canal (of which more will be said later) in 1835 to its abandonment in 1863 - and again during the brief existence of the new Oneida Lake Canal in 1877 to 1878 - Oneida Lake and Oneida River constituted a link in the short passage between the eastern portion of the Erie Canal and Lake Ontario at Oswego.

Surveys of the river were made in 1809 by James Geddes, giving the length as eighteen miles with a fall of twelve and a half feet.

A wing dam was erected at Caughdenoy about 1825, with a wooden lock on the north side of the river. This wing dam proved inadequate as it raised the level of Oneida Lake and was removed in 1829.

Many plans for improvement of the river navigation were made, but it was not until 1838 that money became available for carrying them out. \$75,000 was appropriated towards making a steamboat channel and providing for a side-cut and lock at Caughdenoy, and a dam and lock at Oak Orchard. In 1840 the lock at Oak Orchard and in 1841 the dam and the lock at Caughdenoy were completed. These locks were built to pass steamboats

with side wheels and were larger than those of the Erie Canal, even after the enlargement of the latter, being one hundred twenty feet between gates and thirty and a half feet in width.

Some work was done in the way of excavating a river channel by means of a horse powered excavator or dredge. In 1842 navigation with a three foot draft was possible from the Oswego Canal at Three River Point to the foot of Caughdenoy Lock and rapids. There were over two hundred lockages at Oak Orchard during the navigation season of 1842.

Owing to financial conditions, work was not resumed on the Oneida River project until 1847 when \$20,000 was appropriated to resume excavating. Did space and time permit, it would be most interesting to relate the many local and intimate angles of all that my notes contain relative to this waterway - but I must not digress.

In the spring of 1850 navigation was opened to and into Oneida Lake. Steamboats, built the year previously, were placed in commission, and canal boats began operating over this route from Oneida Lake and Oneida River to and from Oswego on Lake Ontario and the Hudson River.

This through route was used until plans for the new Oneida Lake Canal were made and the locks of the old Oneida Lake Canal were removed in 1863 - though there had been practically no traffic over the old canal after 1861. It was also continued in use for local navigation into Oneida Lake until the opening of the barge Canal in 1917. This waterway cut off bends in the river, using only a portion of the Oneida River as the canal route, and shortening the distance between Three River point and Brewerton from twenty to ten miles.

THE OLD ONEIDA LAKE CANAL

With the completion of the Erie Canal, and even before the Oneida River had been improved, considerable traffic moved into and out of Oneida Lake, tortuous and vexing as was the river navigation. It soon became evident that a canal from the east end of the lake to the Erie Canal would open up a large and lucrative trade in sand, timber, wood, and perhaps other items from the region around the lake.

This leads us to the construction of the old Oneida Lake Canal or "side-cut", as it was locally known.

The canal was the direct result of a need for water communication between the Erie Canal and Oneida Lake, to facilitate the flow of products from the lake region and adjacent territory, and to bring into this region manufactured and other goods from the Hudson Valley.

The early attempts by the Western Inland Lock Navigation Company had contemplated improvements all along the Mohawk valley, to and down Wood Creek to Oneida Lake. With open navigation through the lake, improvements beyond through the Oneida River would permit navigation to the confluence of the Oneida and Seneca at Three River Point. These improvements were to be made, permitting navigation by the Seneca to Seneca Lake, and by the Oswego to Lake Ontario.

As before stated, no attempts were ever made by this company towards improvements beyond Oneida Lake, and in 1808 all its rights were surrendered to the State. After the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 all the works of the old company were purchased by the State and abandoned. This left the inhabitants of the Oneida Lake region without access to the former markets of trade.

For many years attempts were made to induce the State to provide a communication between the lake and the Erie Canal - all without success. Finally a company with a capital of \$40,000 was organized to build a canal and the State legislature, in 1832, passed an act authorizing the incorporation of the Oneida Lake Canal Company - the law-makers believing that the better interests of the whole proposition could be best served by the company rather than by the State.

The State granted many privileges, but insisted that the company supply an amount of water to the Erie Canal equal to that drawn from that source to supply the waterway. The State laid out the route and its engineers generally supervised the construction, but at the expense of the company. The latter was allowed to take possession of needed lands.

The company was authorized to construct the canal, maintain it for fifty years and to establish the rates of toll - these not to exceed three times the amount charged on the Erie Canal. The State reserved the right to take possession of the canal and feeder at any time within ten years upon paying to the company the whole of moneys expended, together with interest at the rate of ten percent, after deducting the amount of tolls that had been collected.

As constructed, the Oneida Lake Canal extended from Higginville on the Erie Canal to a point on Wood Creek about two miles from Oneida Lake. The canal proper was four and one half miles long - Wood Creek being used with a tow path along its south side to the lake.

Early in the fall of 1835 the canal was completed at a cost of about \$65,000, and the feeder to Oneida Creek south of Oneida at an additional cost of about \$14,000, making a total of about \$79,000.

In the four and one half miles of canal there were seven wooden locks, overcoming a fall of fifty-six feet. Each lock was ninety by

fifteen feet. There was also a guard lock. The prism of the canal was forty feet wide at the water surface, twenty-six feet at the bottom, with five feet in depth of water. The lock dimensions were the same as those of the Erie Canal at that time and would accommodate a boat seventy-five feet long with a width of fourteen feet, drawing perhaps four and one half feet and with a capacity of about seventy-five tons.

Navigation was opened September 12, 1835 except on the feeder, which was not completed. In fact, the feeder was never made entirely navigable and no great amount of water was ever delivered by it. The same year, 1835, the company was authorized to increase its capital stock by \$35,000, and in 1836, permission was given to further increase its stock by another \$10,000. A part of this money was to be, and afterwards was, used to improve the navigation on Fish Creek for four miles above its junction with Wood Creek.

After two years of company operation, a petition from the inhabitants of the territory about the lake and canal was presented to the State, requesting that the latter purchase and operate the waterway. Many petitions were presented to the State asking for relief from the high tolls, stating among other complaints, that the feeder was inadequate.

Finally, in 1840, after several bills had been taken up by the legislature and not acted upon, an act was passed authorizing the State to purchase the canal for a sum not to exceed \$50,000. On April 12, 1841, the purchase was made - a certificate of stock for \$50,000, bearing interest at five percent, was issued by the State and delivered to the Canal Company.

Time and space will not permit more than a brief survey of the later history of this waterway, however.

The State spent large amounts of money in improvements from time to time. A new towing path for one mile along Wood Creek was constructed. However, the high waters of the creek in spring destroyed towpath work nearly as soon as it could be completed. Locks were repaired and the feeder was bottomed out, thus accommodating three feet of water from the Erie Canal to Oneida. Various other improvements were made to care for the rapidly increasing canal business.

From 1847 to 1854 the amount of traffic on this canal became very heavy, largely because of the opening of Oneida River to canal navigation in 1849 and the launching of lake steamboats by the Oneida Lake and River Steamboat Company in that year. Steam navigation began in the spring of 1850 between Three River Point and the Oneida Lake Canal, east of Oneida Lake. More details regarding this steam navigation will be given later in this paper.