

Fall 2003 NNEC-SIA Champlain Canal Tour

The fall 2003 NNEC tour was held on Saturday, October 18, along the portion of the Champlain Canal leading south from the lake of the same name, between Whitehall and Kingsbury, New York. It also encompassed the Feeder Canal still flowing from the Hudson River at Glens Falls east into the parent waterway at Kingsbury. Fourteen persons, both chapter members and history-aware local residents, took part in the event, which was organized by field site committeeman Gerry DeMuro.

The north-south Champlain Canal was built contemporaneously with the longer east-west Erie Canal during the early 19th century, both constructions intended to be part of the major canal system undertaken by the state of New York. Modifications to the Empire State's aqueduct-type canals soon after their original construction made them wider, deeper, and more efficiently fed. As completed during the early 1820s, the Champlain Canal was 12 feet wide at the top, seven feet wide at the bottom, and four feet deep. Within a decade or so, the enlargement resulted in a canal 40 feet wide at the top, 28 feet wide at the bottom, and five feet deep. Other changes were made between the 1850s and 1870s, especially during the Civil War, when the military threat from Great Britain through Canada was hardly a negligible one, and the possession of an internal transportation system near the northern border was "thus logistically sensible.

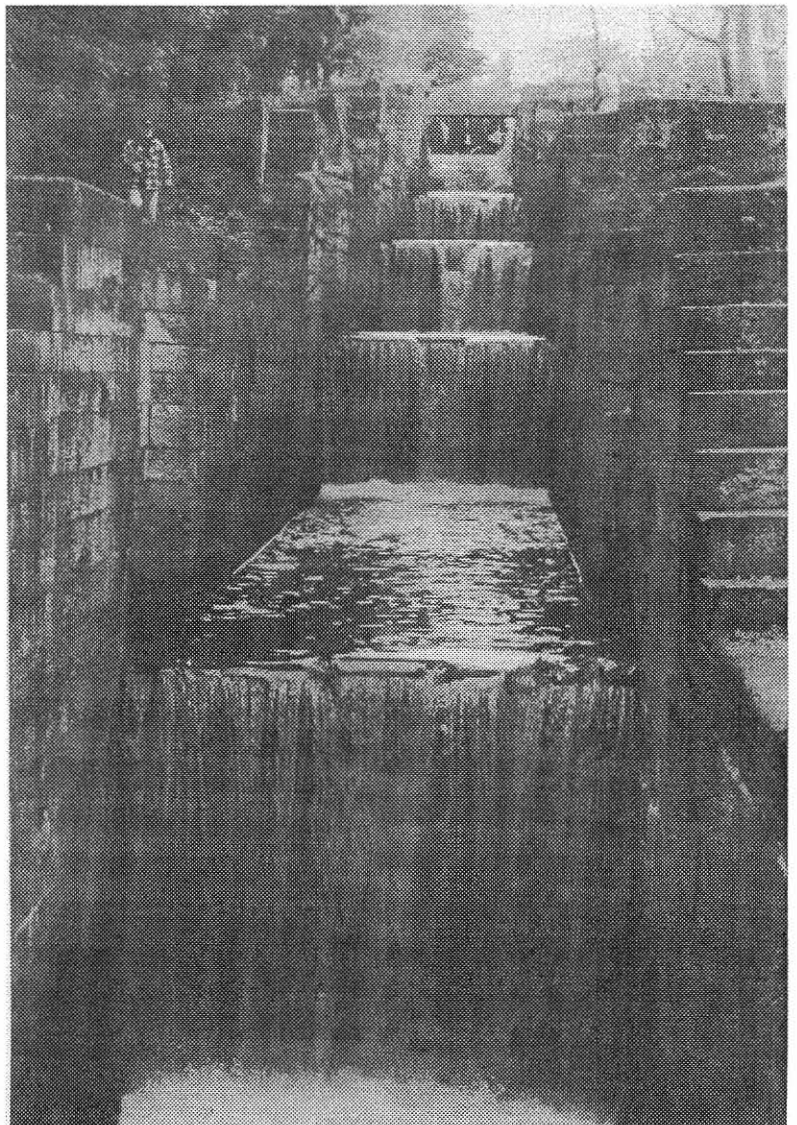
Commercial goods carried on the waterway included timber, lime, clay, marble, coal, and agricultural products, particularly hay, potatoes, and apples. Although initially, mules plodding the adjacent towpath pulled the barges, in later years, steamboats took over the task.

During the first two decades of the 20th century, the new water level Champlain Canal was built by dredging Wood Creek. Steam tugs pulling strings of barges became a com-

mon sight, and petroleum was added to the list of manufactured products transported on the canal. Today, pleasure craft constitute virtually all vessels negotiating the Champlain Canal, as regular industrial traffic has ceased.

Following the morning rendezvous, the tour group drove to Lock No. 12 on the new canal, adjacent to the woefully ravaged Whitehall waterfront. There, Herman Brown, whose forebears included four generations of canal men, gave the orientation -talk, with supplemental input provided by local historians Wayne Senecal and Marvin Fraser. While on site, the party observed a cabin cruiser transiting the lock.

From Whitehall, the party went south on state Route 22 and U.S. Route 4 to Fort Ann, stopping en



*The Fall 2003 NNEC tour
attenders enjoy the five combined locks
of the Feeder Canal at Kingsbury, New York.
Photo by Nelson H. Lawry*

route to see the remnant of the once large holding basin at Mill Pond Brook on the old canal, now marshy and overgrown. The ashlar-block remnant of the basin's wastewear, which drained off excess water into Wood Creek, is still visible on the far (east) side of the marshy expanse.

The old waterway at Fort Ann features a spur canal that joins diagonally with the parent entity and once provided access to village warehouses. Two of the brick structures still stand and enjoy adaptive reuse, one of them a particularly lovely example of Greek revival architecture. Local historians Virginia Parrott and Grey Haye lent their expertise to this segment of the tour.

Traveling south from Fort Ann, the members of the tour went next to Smiths Basin, where they met Marie Fontaine, the village historian, and Edith Wright, who wrote the history of the village 41 years ago. A commercial village once arose around the canal holding basin and later all but disappeared. Most of the actual basin is grown in, but a long granite retaining wall remains adjacent to the section of the old canal. The former Smiths Basin Hotel, whose last use was as a store and post office, stands abandoned, but there are plans to rehabilitate this wonderful clapboard structure. Leading from the wastewear, the drainage canal, 7 x 7 feet in cross section and now shored up by timbers, lies closely adjacent to a road and is in danger of collapse from the estimated 400 heavy trucks a day from a planned modern quarry operation. This under-taking would also threaten the traces of early Native American history in the area.

In addition to the production and transport of potatoes, apples, hay, and milk, limestone was quarried in the hills above Smiths Basin and burned in several kilns near the village. Thousands of cords of wood were barged in to fire these kilns, and the lime thereby produced was either used for agriculture or transported south to Albany and New York City for construction purposes. The group drove up to and walked into one

large, abandoned limestone quarry. Thereafter, the convoy continued south on Towpath Road, following the canal.

The final asset, and arguably the high point of the tour, was the 7-milelong Feeder Canal built during the mid-1820s and originating at the 12-foot high, 770-foot-long dam spanning the Hudson River at Glens Falls. The tour leader for this portion was Raymond Howard, president of the Feeder Canal Alliance. The canal runs east through Hudson Falls to Kingsbury to provide water for the parent Champlain Canal. Because of the substantial volume of water flowing east from the river, each lock in the Feeder Canal-which was enlarged in the early 1830s for barge traffic-required a parallel sluiceway to ensure bypass of the water when the lock was in use. Because this canal would otherwise have permitted only a lengthy one-way occupancy once a barge or barges began transit, a small holding basin was provided about halfway along its length to relieve this situation.

The best known and most popular feature of the Feeder Canal, the five combination locks, or more casually, "the five combines", is 500 feet long and 55 feet high (each 100-foot-long lock thus lifting the vessel or barge 11 feet vertically) and was once paralleled by a like number of falls in the sluiceway, part of which can still be seen. The accompanying photograph shows the main Feeder Canal.

A number of industries sprang up along the Feeder Canal, including lumber mills and cement works, so barges carrying timber, finished boards, cement, limestone, and coal would have been common sights. The last stop of the tour was the long-abandoned canalside coal storage facility, with its five large concrete gang silos and ancillary wooden structures, still standing in an otherwise residential setting.

Nelson H. Lawry
Rollinsford, NH

