

# Spindle City Historic Society

Volume 3 Issue 4

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## DID YOU KNOW

...that this year, 2000, marks the 175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the opening of the Erie Canal? Ground was broken near Rome, NY on the Fourth of July, 1817.

...that the original Erie Canal was only four feet deep, or a little higher than the top of your kitchen table?

...that the building of the canal provided impetus to the founding of RPI, the country's first school of civil engineering? Many of the self-taught canal engineers were hired as instructors.

...that there were no lights on or around the canal so that late night revelers crossing over the lock gates often found themselves the focus of an immediate and frantic rescue?

...that, while in debtor's prison, Jesse Hawley, a Finger Lakes flour merchant, wrote 14 essays outlining a system of waterways between the Great Lakes and the Hudson River?

...that young toughs from the Summit/Willow Street neighborhoods would peg rocks at passing barges, sometimes inflicting injury?

...that the early road from Albany to Schenectady, or Route 5 as we know it today, became firmly established as a highway because passengers travelling west on the canal could not tolerate the long delays caused by the 19 locks in Cohoes?

...that the Waterford Flight is the world's largest series of high lift locks?

...that low bridges, reconnecting canal-torn properties, were a nuisance and peril to canal boat travelers? When approaching them, passengers had to flatten themselves against the deck or scramble into the cabin to avoid injury.

...that Cohoes locktenders were notorious for extorting bribes and unnecessary charges from canallers?

## HISTORIAN'S NOTEBOOK

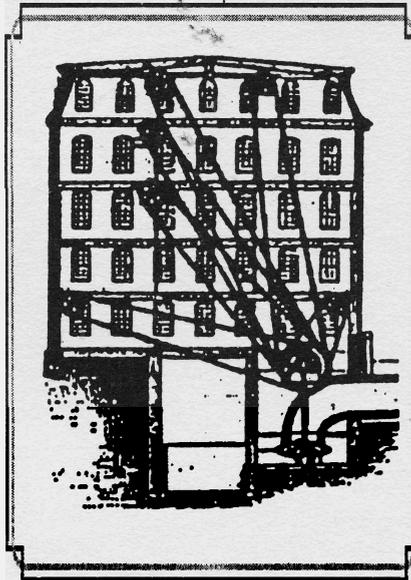
During this anniversary of the Erie Canal, it is appropriate to note that Cohoes was a canal town for the first 89 years of that artificial river. Cohoes would not exist today if not for the Erie Canal. The gray locks we find throughout the city are vestiges from what was called the "Enlarged Erie Canal". It plied 2 separate paths during 2 succeeding time periods. The Erie Canal ("Clinton's Ditch") opened in this section in 1825. Critics never thought it would work nor could they dream that it would open up our nation and make New York "The Empire State".

In Cohoes, the "ditch" had 19 locks in its system in order to surmount the Cohoes Falls. They created such gridlock that soon canallers were clamoring for improvement. Shipping through Cohoes took 6-8 hrs. to pass from what is now the Spring St. Exit of 787 and Saratoga St. to Fonda Rd. north of the city. Starting at Spring & Saratoga, there were 9 locks to Columbia St. The next lock was at White & Main; from there barges were towed between Olmstead St. & Ogden Mills, behind the Community Center to Fountain Place. There 3 locks lifted barges to No. Mohawk St. where a large

basin could accommodate up to 30 barges and canallers could replenish supplies or rest overnight. That basin is under the Harmony Mills parking lot. Two locks were located at the Pumphouse; in fact, the Pumphouse is built on one of them. Here, the canal leveled off for a long stretch in what is now the power canal on No. Mohawk. The last 4 locks lifted barges to the level of River Rd., then another level stretch to the Crescent aqueduct.

Clues remain of the "ditch" but 99.9% have been buried or disassembled. Walking north on Main St. to Schuyler St., you will notice that the buildings are facing a bank or that the street seems to be raised above the houses. That bank is the original canal, buried under Main Street. The overgrown power canal on No. Mohawk was a section of the canal in 1825. In 1837, construction began on a new enlarged canal and was completed here in 1842. The old canal became a part of the Cohoes Co.'s power canal system or was filled in. Main St., when first opened as a public highway, was called Canal Street.

Walter Lipka



## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

The Spindle City Historic Society welcomes new members *Sandy Bradshaw, David & Marjorie Dame, Chris Kendall, Paul Lanciault, Patricia McDonough, Mr. & Mrs. Willard J. McGraw, Jr. and Robert Reu.*

## MOHAWK PAPER MILLS

an illustrious past and bright future

While most of Cohoes' major businesses are now a "thing of the past", the Mohawk Paper Mills, at 465 Saratoga St., is still a thriving concern. The first paper mill in Cohoes at the present location of the Mohawk Paper Mill was the Frank Gilbert Paper Company. This mill had its own groundwood pulping station, located at the northern portion of the site, where pure wood was ground into pulp by mechanical means. At that time, no chemicals were used in this process, nor was any cooking or bleaching involved. The finished pulp was coarse and of dark color, so was used as a base stock for wallpaper rather than as writing paper. By 1919, the Frank Gilbert Co. had become part of the Hercules Paper Co., and in 1922 became Mohawk Papermakers, Inc. under the direction of Harry Prockard. The company was reorganized in 1931 as Mohawk Paper Mills, Inc., with George E. O'Connor at its head.

The newly reorganized company encountered considerable difficulty during the early years of the Great Depression. The need for paper was drastically reduced due to the slowdown of business activity, and paper prices fell accordingly. Some paper mills were forced to sell at cost to keep in operation. Mohawk Paper Mills found it had to compete against older, larger, and better-known mills for the limited available opportunities to sell their products. The fledgling company found its niche, dealing mostly in bond, ledger, and cover papers, and was able to survive the depression and flourish in the recovery period in the late 1930s thanks to its superior management and employee dedication. However, the onset of the Second World War posed an even greater threat to the business. Although there was a ready market for paper products, the shortages of raw material and manpower were deeply felt as resources were directed toward the war effort. During this period, the federal government took a portion of the paper produced, forcing the mill to divide the remainder of their product on an allotment basis to provide each of their loyal customers with a fair share.

The mill had ceased to grind its pulp as had been done in early years, instead relying on purchased pulp from many sources, including the northwestern states of the US, Canada, Sweden, and Norway. Pulp from North American sources was sent by rail, and material from Europe by ship. The restrictions of wartime made it difficult to obtain pulp from many of these sources, so the mill experimented with new types of pulp, including alpha cellulose. This led to the development of several new lines of text paper, of much higher grade than previously manufactured by the Mill. The wartime shortage of other types of paper induced customers to try the new papers; the high quality of the material created a new and lasting customer base.

Over time, sales of Mohawk Paper products increased, and renovation and modernization of their facilities were

necessary. Many of the manufacturing operations were streamlined, paper machines upgraded, new controls added and automation implemented throughout the mill. New warehouses were built to accommodate increasing production, which grew from 5000 tons in 1932 to 25000 in 1950.

War intervened once more, as the federal government again instituted the allotment system during the Korean Conflict. This time, finer grade paper manufacturing continued, and the U.S. government used much of the mill's output in the war effort.

Despite slowing sales in the latter portion of the 1950s, the company maintained its high standards and continued to keep abreast of improving production technology, permitting it to remain competitive among an increasing number of rivals in the specialty paper field. In the 1960s, major corporations like Coca-Cola, Pepsi Cola, CBS, ABC, Phoenix Mutual Life Insurance, and AT&T printed their annual reports on Mohawk paper, and Mohawk's paper was also used by standard Oil, John Hancock Insurance, Polaroid, NBC, General Electric, and Westinghouse.

The two mills now operational – one in Cohoes and another in Waterford's Northside district - have had a long-standing relationship with the Union of the International Brotherhood of Papermakers. The union was invited in 1939 by company president George O'Connor to organize the 200 workers in Cohoes and Waterford. The mutual antagonism that so often exists between labor and management has been largely absent at Mohawk's mills due to a strong spirit of cooperation. It is this spirit that has helped Mohawk become a world-class company known for its innovation and high quality. The leadership of the O'Connor family has ensured the mill's success through capital investment, a cooperative work environment, and continued hard work. Today, a third generation of the O'Connor family holds key positions within the business: Tom O'Connor jr. is Vice-President/General Manager, Joe O'Connor is Director of Sales Administration, and John O'Connor is Director of International Sales and Customer Service. Together, they oversee the highly successful operation of more the 350 employees, who manufacture more the 275 tons of premium printing paper per day for markets throughout the United States and around the world.

*June Cherniak*

## **The Forgotten Railroads of Cohoes – Part 2**

### *The Rensselaer and Saratoga Railroad*

*By Steve Lackmann*

Another of the early railroads to impact the development of Cohoes was the Rensselaer and Saratoga Railroad. This railroad was the first to enter the boundaries of the present-day city, with rails being laid across Van Schaick Island in 1835. Upon further research, it was learned that this railroad bed is one of the oldest in New York State. It is predated only by the original Mohawk and Hudson railroad which began service between Albany and Schenectady roughly along present day Route 5 (Central Avenue) in 1831.

Troy was fast becoming a booming industrial city during the first three decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, its prosperity was being overshadowed by the burgeoning business economies in both Albany and Schenectady and points northward such as Saratoga Springs and Glens Falls. Troy was not to be left out! A railroad that stretched northward from Troy to Saratoga was the obvious answer to the politicians and businessmen anxious to keep up with those two rival cities. Two of the men primarily responsible for the building of the railroad were Richard Hart and Stephen Warren. Hart had amassed his fortune by investing in various stagecoach lines north from Troy to the Lake Champlain region. Unfortunately, the coming of the Champlain Canal severely cut into his profits. Stephen Warren was one of the premier makers of stoves. His thriving business helped put Troy on the map as one of the top stove manufacturers in the United States. Together they formed a partnership that raised the capital necessary to build the railroad. One of the major problems they encountered was where to build a bridge to bring trains into Troy.

After much political bickering and squabbling, contracts were let to build a railroad bridge into Troy. The site of this bridge is the site of the present-day Troy-Green Island Bridge. Construction on the railroad quickly began north of Waterford to Mechanicville (then known as Borough) onward to Ballston Spa. However, additional money was necessary to build the railroad north from Green Island to Waterford. Bridges had to be built to span the three outlets of the Mohawk and these took much time and expense to complete.

This last section of the railroad was completed and opened for passengers on October 6, 1835. Unfortunately, there was no station built at Cohoes. A June 1871 D&H timetable reveals no scheduled stops at all between Green Island and Waterford. In fact, Cohoes isn't listed at all! Rail passengers to and from Cohoes were forced to use the Troy and Schenectady Railroad instead.

That situation was to change in 1851. In that year the Albany Northern, one of the predecessors of the present day Delaware and Hudson, built the railroad that currently passes through downtown Cohoes. Only then did passengers have a direct route southward to Albany and northward to Saratoga and beyond. The Delaware and Hudson absorbed the Rensselaer and Saratoga into its corporate empire in 1871. After that date, the R&S ceased to exist and the line through Van Schaick Island was referred to as the Green Island branch of the D&H.

After the 1871 merger, virtually all of the major freight and passenger traffic was rerouted over the current Delaware and Hudson line. The branch through Van Schaick Island was relegated to secondary status. As a result, the line saw little of the improvements necessary to make it a truly first class branch line. The bridges were rebuilt prior to World War I, but the total weight the bridges could carry was small compared to others built around the same time. The actual rail used was light in weight compared to the heavier rail used on the main line. As a result, the only locomotives used on the branch were lightweight steam switchers and diesel switchers. No heavy steam locomotives or large multiple unit diesel locomotives were ever allowed on the branch. Some of this lightweight rail

can still be seen today if you look through the weed covered right-of-way in front of the Van Schaick mansion or in the brush directly across from the entrance to the Van Schaick Marina.

Freight service was important on the Green Island branch. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, manufacturing facilities began to dot the area of Van Schaick Island. One of these early facilities that relied on the railroad for deliveries was the Matton Shipyard. A spur track was built into the yard to accept deliveries of raw materials needed for the building of boats and later, steel tugboats. Another industry that located on the railroad was the Rensselaer Manufacturing Company, one of the larger valve manufacturing facilities in the Capital District. Unfortunately, these manufacturing facilities closed during the 1970s and 1980s. The last Cohoes business to utilize the railroad was the former John L. English wholesale grocery warehouse on Delaware Avenue. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the warehouse received approximately 3 deliveries a week. However, even this warehouse closed in the middle 1980s, leaving no revenue-producing activity on the now mostly abandoned branch.

Until the rails were removed in the mid-1980s, there were approximately 3 freights per week using the line. Most of the activity was freight destined for the General Electric silicone plant in Waterford as well as the former Grand Union food warehouse located next door. Freight was also moved on the branch to the former Ford Motor Company plant as well as various other industries in Green Island such as the former Manning Paper Company (now Lydall).

Little is left of the Rensselaer and Saratoga in Cohoes. But the beautiful old bridges built by the American Bridge Company in the early 1900s still remain. The bridge from Green Island to the southern end of Van Schaick Island (the “black bridge”) is still there as are the remaining two bridges. One now carries automobile traffic to Peebles Island and the other from Peebles Island to Waterford stands stripped of tracks and awaits possible reopening to limited automobile traffic to provide access to the Island from Waterford.

What does remain of the old tracks ends in weeds and rubbish halfway up Delaware Avenue. Past Ontario Street the tracks were removed and the railroad right-of-way was used to widen northern Delaware Avenue to provide better access to the Peebles Island facility of the New York State Department of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (the former Cluett-Peabody bleachery).

It probably won't be long before all of the remaining rail has been removed in Cohoes and the old line will dead-end at the northern tip of Green Island. When that day comes, it will mark the end of one of the oldest stretches of railroad in New York State and one that helped tremendously in the early development of our immediate Capital District area.

Many thanks to Jim Shaughnessy, from whose book *Delaware & Hudson* (Howell-North Books, 1967) much of this historical information was gathered.

*A Spring 1977 photo of a train traveling along Delaware Avenue past the Van Schaick Mansion heading south toward Green Island.*



**ELLA MANN**

**1883 – 1918**

The *Cohoes Republican* described Ella Mann as “one of the best known residents of Cohoes....a young woman who was loved and highly respected by all who knew her.....one of the most efficient teachers in the local schools”. Mann Avenue recalls her family name. So, who was Ella Mann? Her story was researched and documented by Paul Huey, State archaeologist at Peebles Island, and appeared in the *Times Union* on November 15, 1998. The following is a condensed version of his article.

Ella Mann was a native of Cohoes who received her education in the Cohoes public schools. She graduated from Egberts High School and the Cohoes Training School for Teachers and began her teaching career about 1905. She and her father, foreman of the Cohoes Water Works, lived in the company pump house on North Mohawk Street until 1911, when she moved to the upper end of Younglove Avenue – both residences still stand.

The United States had entered World War I in 1917 and in the spring and summer of 1918, numerous soldiers stationed in France became ill and died. By September, an especially dangerous strain of influenza entered the U.S., starting in Boston. Nationwide, 60,000 deaths were attributed to this epidemic. It was believed that soldiers home on furlough may have brought it to Cohoes and on October 4<sup>th</sup>, city public health officer, Dr. John Archibald, issued a warning that the influenza was “gaining some ground in Cohoes”.

On October 15<sup>th</sup>, Cohoes schools were closed and teacher Ella Mann became one of the first volunteers to assist in nursing the poor stricken with the flu. Eventually, theaters and the library were closed too and public gatherings were forbidden, including church services, funerals and meetings. The situation worsened. Nurses were scarce and on October 22<sup>nd</sup>, Ella was stricken with influenza. The epidemic reached a new height in Cohoes by October 25<sup>th</sup> with Archibald conservatively estimating that there were 1,000 cases in the city. Ella Mann died on October 28, 1918 at age 35.

In a corner section of St. Mary’s Cemetery in Waterford stands a solitary stone marker with the inscription:

ELLA L. MANN  
SEPTEMBER 26. 1883 - OCTOBER 28, 1918  
ERECTED BY  
HARMONY MILLS IN GRATEFUL REMEMBRANCE  
OF A VOLUNTEER NURSE  
WHO GAVE HER LIFE FOR OTHERS.

Last year, Ella Mann received the Cohoes Caretakers’ Volunteer of the Year Award; her plaque hangs in the Cohoes Music Hall conference room.

**Spindle City Historic Society Membership Application**

President - Linda C. Christopher

First Vice President - Daniele Chermiak

Second Vice President - Dennis Rivage

Secretary - Helena Keilen

Treasurer - June Chermiak

<input type="checkbox"/> Individual Membership	\$10.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Institutional Membership	\$25.00
<input type="checkbox"/> Senior Citizen Membership	\$ 5.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Contributing Membership	\$35.00
<input type="checkbox"/> Student Membership	\$ 5.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Sustaining Membership	\$50.00
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Mail completed form with membership fee, payable to Spindle City Historic Society, to:

June Chermiak, Treasurer, 415 Vliet Boulevard, Cohoes, NY 12047

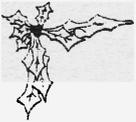
## CHRISTMAS MEMORIES

Being of French Canadian descent, my favorite musical memory of Christmas has to be Midnight Mass at St. Joseph's Church in Cohoes. Every Christmas Eve, my parents would drag all of us sleepy kids to Mass only to awake to organ music and those angelic voices singing *Il est ne le divin enfant* (He Is Born, the Infant Divine), with the altar boys carrying the precious Baby Jesus to the crèche.

Now, fifty years later, I bring my mother to the church and we relive those memories of long ago listening to the beautiful pipe organ and the choir singing those French Christmas hymns. Most important of all for me is the fact that the parish still has the same Baby Jesus. It was handcrafted with love out of wax by my great-aunt, Sister Adelais. She used real locks of hair from my six aunts, uncles, and from my father, now deceased, to adorn the head of the Infant Jesus.

Merci beaucoup Father Joe, St. Joseph's Choir and parishioners for keeping those memories alive.

*Mrs. A. Burdo*



Frohliche Weihnachten

*Vesele Vianoce*

**Feliz Navidad**

**Hauskaa Joulu**

**Buon Natale**

**Nollaig Shona Dhuit**

**Eid Mubarik**

*Joyeux Noel*

**Wesotych Swiat**

*Boldog Kara'csonyt*

**Season's Greetings**

*Gledelig Jul*

Spindle City Historic Society

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