

New life for Morris Canal at Saxton Falls in Allamuchy

By Warren Reporter

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The Canal Society of New Jersey, with a grant from the state, is working to save the Saxton Falls stretch of the Morris Canal in Allamuchy.

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ALLAMUCHY — The signs run from Jersey City to Phillipsburg. They inform travelers where the Morris Canal crossed, carrying Pennsylvania coal to the Hudson River from the Delaware.

Now much of the canal itself is gone. Only sections remain, mostly in the less developed western part of the state.

The Canal Society of New Jersey is working to save the Saxton Falls stretch near Hackettstown. With a grant from the state, the society will determine how complicated, and expensive, it will be to restore Locks 4 and 5 West and the Lock Tender's house on Waterloo Road.

Lock 5 West at Saxton Falls was filled in by the state as part of the process of dismantling the canal in the 1920s. Brian Morrell, president of the Canal Society, said the walls of the lock are probably intact and good candidates for restoration. The adjacent section of the canal bed was flooded and for decades used for swimming, Morrell said.

Lock 4 West is also long-buried, although one downstream wing-wall is visible. Morrell said its condition is unknown.

The locks and inclined planes are numbered east and west from Lake Hopatcong, the highest elevation along the canal.

The condition of the Lock Tender's house, also known as the Mahler House, but familiarly called Elsie's after the tavern that occupied it for many years, is known and it's not good, Morrell said. "It presents a challenge," he said in a recent interview. "It has not been treated kindly." The tavern still functioned in the early 1980s, but by the early 1990s, a nephew of the former owner took over. He ended up in prison and the property was put up for sale, Morrell noted.

The state bought the site as part of the Allamuchy Mountain-Stephens State Park complex and received a grant to install a boat ramp, improving access to the river. The Canal Society is negotiating a lease with the Park Service.

Helen Maurella, superintendent of Allamuchy Mountain, Stephens and Hopatcong state parks, said the state park division would like to see the house restored. "In the long term, we want to get the building functioning."

The canal society intends to use the house for exhibits on the trail network's resources, particularly in the Saxton Falls and Stephens State Park area and in the Musconetcong watershed. According to a grant application prepared by consultant Kate Gordon, "This will be one of the few trailside facilities focusing on historical as well as environmental resources in the New Jersey trail network."

The house will also provide ADA compliant restrooms. The former parking lot for the tavern will serve the trail as well. The lot is suitable for public programs related to the trail, Gordon wrote.

The canal society first collaborated with the state parks division more than 10 years ago, Morrell recalls, to develop a management plan for the historic transportation corridor first used by the Lenape Indians and including Waterloo Road that was built sometime before 1828, the Musconetcong River and the Morris and Essex Railroad as well as the canal. This Waterloo Valley corridor remains vital today, linking Routes 46 and 206.

Funding has come from the Leavens Foundation and the NJ Highlands Coalition, \$5,000 each. In addition, the Canal Society is applying for funding from the Warren County Municipal and Charitable Trust Fund Committee and the National Recreational Trails Program, Gordon said. She said about \$17,000 of construction costs for the project is expected to be offset by donated materials and labor by members of the canal society which has a long history of hands-on work on its projects.

The National Recreational Trails Grant would fund improvements for canoeing and kayaking along the river, Maurella, said. She said the park will also work on watershed awareness programs and has been working with the Musconetcong Watershed Association on streamside watershed management.

The entire project is expected to cost \$78,000. Architectural fees are projected at \$12,000 and permitting fees for the state will be about \$7,000.

Almost a reservoir

This stretch of the canal was almost lost when a reservoir to supply Hackettstown with drinking water was proposed. Bungalows along the river were taken over by the state, although many residents were given life rights to live in them.

Morrell said there was a thriving bungalow colony opposite Elsie's, discovered when Waterloo Road was widened.

The first residents of the area may have been related to Nathanael Saxton's sawmill. Workers building the canal lived in modest cabins, a history of the canal reveals. Later, Bayonne residents summered in the area, Morrell said.

When the reservoir was proposed in the 1970s, many of the older bungalows were still standing. There were probably about 100 cabins along the river, Morrell said, although some were not habitable due to malfunctioning septic systems.

When core borings were done, engineers determined there was no solid base for more than 100 feet, Morrell said. The area is just south of the terminal moraine of the Wisconsin Ice Age.

With no reservoir possible, the state started renting the bungalows. "It became an unsavory area," Morrell recalled. Some of the houses are still standing along Waterloo Road and on the private lanes that branch off the county road in the area of the Saxton Falls dam.

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