

Society Works to Save Canal

Lake Hopatcong is the highest elevation of the Morris Canal

The signs run from Jersey City to Phillipsburg, informing travelers where the Morris Canal crossed, carrying Pennsylvania coal to the Hudson River.

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



Credit Canal Society of New Jersey



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Lake Hopatcong is the highest elevation of the canal. It exists because of the canal. When water was needed, the engineers constructing the waterway dammed the Musconetcong and joined Great Pond and Small Pond to become what is now Lake Hopatcong.

What is left of the canal is thanks largely to the Canal Society of New Jersey, a dedicated group of volunteers who operate the New Jersey Canal Museum at Waterloo Village. The museum features displays on the major canals in the state, including the Delaware and Raritan, but its main emphasis is on the canal that ran nearby. The barn behind the museum has recently been renovated as additional display space by the society's volunteers.

The society has focused much attention on keeping Waterloo Village alive.

Primarily a canal village, Waterloo was a major tourist attraction until late 2006 when the state, which owns the property, ended its contract with the Waterloo Foundation. No single organization has come forward to run the entire village although a friends group has been formed. The canal society purchased a number of Waterloo artifacts when they were auctioned and can open several buildings to the public.

Smith's Store is the best-preserved Morris Canal store with displays of patent medicines and sewing notions as well as barrels of potatoes and corn. Canal boaters lived as well as worked on their boats and often needed to stop for supplies. The society continues to add late 19th-early 20th merchandise. Society President Brian Morrell of Stanhope said they anticipate including some hands-on activities such as grinding coffee beans and pitting cherries.

The 1820s Rutan Cabin is not authentic to the village. It was moved from another Sussex County location, but the little log house has many period furnishings to illustrate the era of a rural farmstead at the time of the canal's original construction.

The society asked blacksmith and re-enactor Andrew Drysdale of Belvidere to inventory the blacksmith shop and help prepare it to be re-opened. Now the forge is functioning and blacksmiths demonstrate of ironworking along the Morris Canal.

After years of work, the society has the gristmill open for public tours and may soon be able to operate the mill's waterwheel and its run of millstones.

Waterloo Village is not the only project of the society, Morrell said.

Saxton Falls

The society 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. Morrell said the walls of the lock are probably in tact and good candidates for restoration. The adjacent section of the canal bed was flooded and for decades used for swimming, he said.

Lock 4 West is also long-buried, although one downstream wingwall 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 Stevens 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 cost 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.

Reservoir Planned

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.

With these major projects, the society can always use new members. Check out their Web site at www.canalsoceitynj.org.