

1902 Niagara Street Buffalo, NY 14207



**Black Rock**  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Black Rock  
Riverside  
Grant Amherst  
West Hertel

4th Quarter Issue:  
October-December 2017

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## Whats Been Happening at BRHS

by Doreen DeBoth, Chair



BRHS volunteers were very busy during the summer months with outdoor events. "14207 Day" was initiated in early August and there were activities for all ages going on throughout this zip code area. Eight portable exhibits of the Black Rock

Lock and Erie Canal were on display at the US Army Corps of Engineers including artifacts from our current Erie Canal exhibit. A sunny and warm day yielded a large turnout of adults and children who also toured the Black Rock Lock.



Robin Schimminger, Assemblyman at the US Army Corps of Engineers Open

Later in August, we participated in the Buffalo Police Department's D-District Community Day at Hoyt Lake. The BRHS was one of many organizations that presented various informational materials concerning health, safety, and general interest. We distributed our new Erie Canal Coloring Books, and brought antique



ice and roller skates that astounded both children and adults. Games for children and some Erie Canal-era artifacts were also included.

We are happy to announce our newest volunteer, Janine Baran. She is shown here helping out with ring toss at Hoyt Lake. Volunteers are

vital in helping us achieve our museum's goals and they bring their many talents and ideas that are much appreciated.

Oktoberfest keg-tapping this year was held at the end of September in the parking lot of Artisans Kitchens & Baths (200 Amherst St.) with music, food and vendors. The BRHS provided German-related artifacts that included books, Bavarian china, clothing and more. Our exhibits coordinator, Michele Graves (center) complemented the festivities by wearing a beautiful



authentic German outfit. Also pictured is Janine Baran on the right and Doreen DeBoth on the left.

In our last newsletter, we were remiss to include the Fenian Commemorative Ceremony that took place in June at the memorial at the foot of Hertel Avenue.

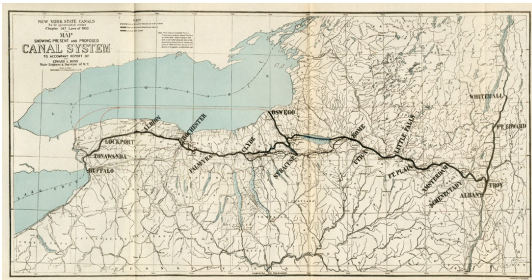


Pictured from left to right: Bill Powers, Officer Marybeth Billings, Michele Graves, North District Councilmember Joe Golombek, Jr., members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians and BRHS volunteer Bill Butler, III (far right).

## The Start of the Erie Canal – July, 1817

By Warren F. Glover

The Erie Canal proving to be the great facilitator of the westward immigrant experience and the means of eastward transport of raw materials in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century down the Hudson River to New York City, got its start on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1817. On this date, Judge John Richardson, a local land contractor, officially broke ground with a ceremonial spade. He then unleashed a team of oxen hitched to his plow in a nondescript field in northern Rome, N. Y. to begin construction of what eight years later



would become our Erie Canal. The canal then proceeded to the east and west of Rome

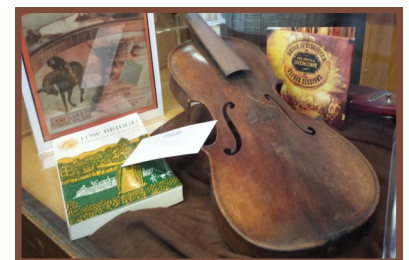
simultaneously.

In 1817, America had a very small corps of engineers, concentrated in the New York City area. These and more joined to build the canal, attracted by the prospect of steady, secure employment. Those in the trenches faced arduous conditions for little pay and no benefits, as that is all the state could afford. State handwritten registers, available to research to this day, listed their names and pay amounts, including the dates they signed on and the date they left. Many served multiple stints, being dismissed if weather, such as snowstorms, bitter cold or floods made it temporarily impossible to continue until such extremes subsided. At one time, during the height of the rush to finish the canal on time in 1823, 3,000 Irish workers were employed. Laborers were armed with pickaxes and shovels, mainly supplied by themselves. Crews were divided into teams. Each team was responsible for digging a trench by hand 4 feet deep, 7 feet wide and 500 feet long under one assignment. Their work blended into the similar work of other contiguous teams to further widen and lengthen

each local section of the canal, oriented in the direction of the closest town or city. Workers slept mostly in labor camps with tents and bedding supplied by the state, reimbursing contractors who purchased and set up this equipment in the name of the state. Water was wherever workers could find it, used mainly for washing, laundry and boiled for cooking. Potable water was scarce, so beer or distilled spirits



substituted. Food was gleaned from nearby fields, farms or fruit trees, with the state supplying some limited rations on an unpredictable basis. Latrines were temporary, and dug with shovels. It was back-breaking work from sunup to sundown for pay ranging from \$.37 to \$.50 per day, with supervising engineers, who laid out the route for the workers to follow, being paid \$1.00 per day. The working conditions had no union mitigation or health regulations. They were deplorable and dangerous, not only due to mechanical hazards but caused by widespread diseases, common where sanitation was lacking, such as malaria, cholera and dysentery. To relieve the monotony of work and vent their grievances, the Irish and others wrote folk tunes and played musical instruments. Most of the workers were illiterate and misunderstandings and prejudices caused labor riots and armed conflict, encouraged by the presence of guns, knives and alcohol. The workers and engineers mostly worked cooperatively and together came up with practical devices to expedite trench digging, such as the wheelbarrow, stump pullers using chains and teams of horses and black gunpowder to explode through hillsides and rock





formations.

Many settled in the nearby towns and cities along the route where they had worked when the canal was finished, according to which one most impressed them on the way. They influenced Irish-inspired architecture in many of the buildings they may have helped construct, as these towns flourished and expanded. Many construction contractors started in business just to dig the canal and reap state money.

They in turn hired largely local labor and farmers who leased out their teams of horses or oxen going from pulling a plow to dig small crop ditches to pulling excavating disks to dig a much larger ditch. The laborers were paid by the state in some cases daily to prevent them from disappearing from an arduous, unhealthy job. At times when the state budget was decreased, they would be paid with whiskey or locally grown produce, although this



practice was kept to a minimum as the hiring inducements promised money the laborers counted on to maintain a bare minimum standard of living on

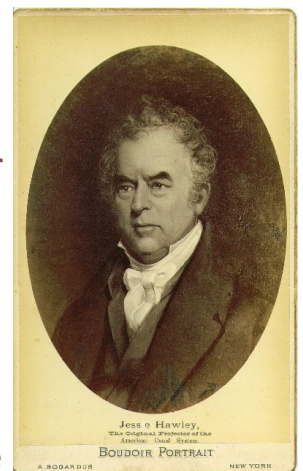
the job site.

Most of the workers' funds would be sent back to their families, who no longer had a breadwinner in their homes. The farmers were paid a minimal salary and enough to take care of their animals, although at planting and harvesting time, many local farmers would leave to tend their crops so their family would have enough subsistence to survive. The legend is that the labor force was overwhelmingly Irish and while for some stretches of the route this may be true, many Chinese, British, Germans, former slaves, freemen and migrants from New England were also hired.

The canal was 4 feet deep, 40 feet wide and 363 miles long, from Lake Erie to Albany, with the route to continue down the Hudson River to New York City. The canal packet boats to later

traverse this waterway were built to be shallow draft to accommodate the lack of depth. The canal in the 1870s would undergo the first dredging efforts meant to accommodate heavier commercial boat traffic. This civil engineering marvel affirmed New York State's political ascendancy over Virginia, known at the time as the home of our first four Presidents. The canal also bolstered our state's new dominance over trade with the major east coast ports through goods transhipped through New York City from the Erie Canal.

This waterborne passage across the state had been envisioned since the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century, mainly by Cadwallader Colden, a scientist and politician, who in 1724 wrote a series of journalistic essays urging the building of such a route across New York State as the only way to speed up commercial shipping in this area and have a positive and dynamic impact on the intrastate economy. But the eventual route, roughly following the east – west Mohawk River, west to Lake Erie, was credited to an anonymous essayist, calling himself Hercules. He later revealed himself as Jesse Hawley, from Connecticut transplanted to Upstate New York, where as a failed flour merchant, he wound up in debtor's prison, where he penned his essays for local newsprint. His published entreaties in 1815 caught the attention of DeWitt Clinton, then the civic-minded legislator in the state assembly, later becoming Mayor of New York City. He vowed a canal must be built. He was inaugurated as Governor of New York State on July 1, 1817 three days before the groundbreaking for the canal, having been elected largely on his assurances to the business community that he would strive to determine that a canal could be engineered and financed as a possible build.





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**Museum Hours:**  
Monday 3-7 PM  
Friday 10-4 PM  
Saturday 11-3 PM

**Find us online!**



[www.blackrockhistoricalsociety.com](http://www.blackrockhistoricalsociety.com)

## The BRHS

### Seeks Volunteers

Your expertise, interest and/or love of history are good reasons to volunteer.

Students, seniors and everyone in-between are welcome to volunteer in

various areas of interest: office/computer, education, outreach, maintenance, etc.

You can strengthen your community, learn about preservation, and meet new people. Every volunteer can make a difference. To volunteer, contact us via email on our website or call 716-510-4007.

## Artifact Donations

If you think you may have items or photos that tell the story of our area. you CAN bring them to the museum, or we will gladly pick them up (call 716-510-4007).

When the canal faltered, an inventive Clinton kept it going.

The state pursued the initial \$7,000,000 for the canal, originally called by naysayers as “Clinton’s Ditch” or “Clinton’s Folly”, realizing if it was to be built, the state would have to go it alone. President Thomas Jefferson said a federal subsidy for such a project would be “little short of madness”, adding a project of this magnitude could not be done for at least another 50 or 100 years. Jefferson lived to see the canal built and used. Clinton’s political enemies agreed, saying such a project would be more than twice as long as any other canal then existing in the world and would be financially and practically unfeasible. The longest canal at the time was the “Canal Du Midi” at 140 miles in length, linking the Mediterranean Sea with the Bay of Biscay in southern France. But when the Erie Canal was built it would reduce the cost and travel time per mile of transporting migrants and escaped slaves to the west and Canada across the state from six weeks to six days. The cost of shipping a ton of wheat eastward from Ohio to New York City would go from \$100 per ton to less than \$10 per ton.

Within eight years tolls had paid off the eventual \$14,000,000. cost to build the Erie Canal. In 1836, the canal was widened to 58 feet. A new barge canal was put up in 1911, incorporating portions of the original route. The canal proved to be a “river of gold” flowing into New York City, causing the city to grow from 120,000 people in 1825 to 1,100,000 residents by 1870, when the railroads began to carry people and freight even faster and more cheaply yet than the Erie Canal, as a twisting water way with locks as elevation-changers for mule-driven and later steam packet boats, ever could.

## UPCOMING EVENTS



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## 2017 FALL SPEAKER SERIES

Thursdays at 6 PM

October 19

**PETER ROBINSON SETTLEMENT PROJECT OF 1823 & 1825**



Michael E. McCarthy, author, President of the Irish American Cultural Institute Rochester Chapter, and Advisory Board Irish Studies Program St. John Fisher College will speak about this crisis that sparked renewed threat of an agrarian revolt centered in southern Ireland. Sir Robert Wilmot-Horton, the British Under-Secretary for the Colonies, devised a relief scheme to emigrate impoverished Irish out of Ireland and relocate to Upper Canada. This presentation of these little-known projects will describe the political and social ramifications for each country as well as the personal implications for the families.

October 26

**ERIE CANAL, BUFFALO HARBOR & MEN THAT MADE IT HAPPEN**



Peter Fillin, founding member of the Preservation Coalition of Erie County, Life Trustee of Preservation Buffalo Niagara, and instructor for four docents in Buffalo, will discuss the Erie Canal and Inner Harbor, and will include influential historical figures; Samuel Wilkinson, Charles Townsend and Oliver Forward who are now resting in Forest Lawn Cemetery.

November 2

**AUTHENTICATING THE SCAJAQUADA BATTLEFIELD SITE**



Douglas J. Perrelli, Ph. D., RPA, Director, Archaeological Survey and Clinical Assistant Professor, Anthropology at University at Buffalo will present Historic maps of the mouth of Scajaquada Creek in the area of this historic battle that are being arranged in a time line and geo-referenced for comparability of change through time. Ultimately, this information will be used to establish locations best suited for archaeological testing for evidence of the battlefield.

November 9

**200 YEARS AGO: What Were They Thinking?**



Ray Wigle, from the Niagara County Historical Society at each of its three locations, and manager of the Erie Canal Discovery Center in Lockport, will look at the need for—and construction of—the Erie Canal, with a focus on Lockport and the western end of the canal. The audience should gain a new appreciation of how significant an achievement the Erie Canal was for New York and the United States.

November 16

**TO POLAND AND BACK FOR FAMILY**



Patricia Ann Filipiak writer, educator and 17-year member of the Polish Genealogical Society of NYS, will discuss her struggle to learn about her family roots. As a second generation Polish American, she discovered through oral memories, records and later the internet, discoveries that revealed secrets and surprises. Her experiences will be helpful to anyone who is interested in their family genealogy regardless of their nationality.

[www.blackrockhistoricalsociety.com](http://www.blackrockhistoricalsociety.com) email: [info@blackrockhistoricalsociety.com](mailto:info@blackrockhistoricalsociety.com) hours: Monday 3-7 Friday-10-4 Sat. 11-3

## Current Exhibit

Stop in and see the **Erie Canal Exhibit** with a special collection of musical instruments, tools and clothing of that era.

You won't want to miss this great lineup of speakers

