

From Mules to Mud to Recreation *Renaissance of the Canal in Perinton*

By Keith Boas

One hundred six years ago, the New York State Barge Canal was finally a reality, at least in some sections, which included Perinton's village of Fairport and hamlet of Bushnell's Basin. By May of 1915, 160 miles of the new, enlarged Barge Canal were in operation. During the previous summer, in August of 1914, the Fairport lift bridge was finished and functioning. Also completed—new concrete retaining walls on both the north and south shorelines between the Parker Street bridge and just west of the new lift bridge.

But mud prevailed nearly everywhere, the result of all the digging to extensively widen the trench. It would take several years for the mess to completely settle.

Mules and horses were no longer allowed to pull the boats, as animal power was replaced with smoke-billowing tugs and the occasional steamboat. Sadly, the need for the towpath had passed into history.

As the mud settled, not all was well among many Perinton residents and others who lived in similar canal-side communities. The state had promised that there would be increased canal traffic, which would bring plenty of new business. But that promise, mostly because of competition with the railroad, was far from being met. The following article, stating the editor's displeasure, appeared in the April 22, 1915 issue of the *Monroe County Mail*:

♦ ♦ ♦

State Superintendent Weatherspoon announces that the Erie canal will "open for business" on May 15th, but unless things are considerably different from the last few years, there will be mighty little business. Canal traffic was rapidly declining when work in the barge canal began, and the interruptions and delays since then have caused a further slump.

Before and After: The Fairport section of the new Barge Canal was a massive, muddy ditch in 1913, when major work began to widen it along the south side and replace the Main Street Bridge. The photo below shows the old bridge and, on the left, a temporary foot bridge. The photo was taken from the southeast side of the canal.



Above photo from the archives of the Town of Perinton



Photo taken 103 years later, in August of 2016, during the Fairport Music Festival



Greetings from your President

June 16, 2021:

What a wonderful evening at the museum last night for our annual meeting and open house. The only downside was there were no lemon bars, which I enjoy consuming at the picnic. However, the cookies by

~ **Bob Hunt** ~

“Cookies in a Wink” were delicious and a nice substitute.

The first order of business was the election of PHS board directors for the September 2021-August 2024 term. Jane DeMeis, Jim Unckless and Linda Wiener were elected for the new three-year term. Thanks for your time and support of PHS, it is appreciated. David Wild will continue serving as an honorary board member.

There were many interesting activities at the open house. Local authors Don Shilling and Karen Shughart displayed and sold signed copies of their books. Don writes about local history, while Karen’s specialty is mysteries. At another table near our beautiful backyard gardens were our friends from the Greenbrier Garden Club. They have lovingly and creatively maintained our gardens for over thirty years. While volunteering at the prize bidding table, I heard members state “my goodness, how beautiful, I’ve never been back here before.”

Also in the garden was a great PHS friend and member, local artist Susan Prener. She demonstrated plein-air painting, the French style of painting outdoors in the open air. Susan created a watercolor featuring the purple bench in the garden, along with the surrounding flowering plants. Now that you know it is back there, you can visit the pleasant spot to sit and relax for a spell.

There was a table of items from the past which challenged visitors as to what they were and how they were used. The one I missed was the rug beater. I thought it was a naughty boy beater, which I had been threatened with, but not used on by my mother during my youth, way back in the last millennium. Finally, the last outside table was where members could put in their names into vases in hopes of winning donated prizes. I must say, the ice cream and wine baskets seemed to be the most popular. Some said they used wine when cooking and that on occasion the wine ends up in the food.

Inside the museum, members were treated to patriotic songs by WWII veteran Pete Dupre, known around the world as “Harmonica Pete.” He has played at events far and wide, and his audience has included U.S. presidents. Lastly, for several years I have been hoped to hear someone play the museum’s pump organ. A couple of years back an Eastman

School technician completely overhauled and repaired the organ. I was thrilled to hear Bev Crawford beautifully play tunes from the past, as members sang along.

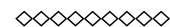
Thanks go out to all members and volunteers for a great event. It may be the new format for our annual meeting. I will have to get my lemon bars at another event.

To conclude my comments this month, I will mention a little excursion Cindy and I took June 4th and 5th. Thursday night, June 3rd, Cindy said, “Let’s go out to dinner tomorrow night, but let’s not stay in Fairport as it may be a bit hectic and busy because of the Canal Days weekend.” So, I said, “Okay, let’s go to Manchester,” which caused a look of confusion on her face as she responded, “Where?” I said, “Manchester, Vermont, to spend the night at the Equinox Hotel and dine in the Marsh Tavern.”



She said I was crazy. So I had to explain that my main reason to return to Manchester was to revisit Hildene, Robert Todd Lincoln’s summer home and view the 1000+ peonies his wife Mary had planted in the gardens. During our visit they were not quite fully in bloom but still great to see. It was a nice nine hour round trip for a Friday night dinner away from Fairport. This is a trip you need to put on your bucket list. I will go into more history on Robert Todd Lincoln in my next column.

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HISTORIGRAM

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Perinton Historical Society*

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Production & Distribution: Jim Unckless
Proofreading: Irene Poray

Open for Visitors

The Fairport Historical Museum is once again open to visitors! Stop by to see our new exhibits. The museum is open Sundays and Tuesdays from 2:00–4:00 pm. and Saturdays from 9:00 am.–1:00 pm.



Enter-to-Win Baskets



Congratulations to the following members whose names were drawn for the *Enter-to-Win* baskets at our June 15 museum open house.

KATHIE MURRAY

Wine basket donated by Lucy McCormick

WAYNE BECKWITH

Ice cream basket donated by Suzanne Lee

CAROL BOAS

Garden basket donated by Sue and Dave Scheirer

CAROL CHRISTENSEN

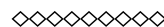
Quilt donated by Cheri Branca

ANN PARKS

Bird basket donated by Vicki Masters Profitt

Save the Date

On Tuesday, September 21st, we will return to in-person programming at the Fairport Historical Museum for the first time since February 2020, when Rose O’Keefe presented “Frederick and Anna Douglass in Rochester.” The September issue of the *Historigram* will have information about upcoming presentations and events in the 2021–2022 program season. (Remember: We do not publish the *Historigram* in August.)



Two recent visits to the museum by bicycle-riding middle school students from Allendale Columbia School are evidence of life getting back to normal. Town historian Bill Poray met each group along the Erie Canalway Trail in Pittsford and shared bits and pieces of history with the groups as they peddled to Fairport. Museum director Vicki Profitt welcomed the students and provided a special tour.

Perinton Historical Society

Mission

To promote interest in preserving and sharing local history through education and accessibility.

Another article appeared in the *Mail's* June 3rd issue, reprinted from the *Skaneateles Free Press*. It read in part,

"The fact that a direct state tax of \$19,000,000 must be levied this year (for the canal) is an indication that we are traveling fast on financial shoals. And then it must be remembered that next fall the voters will be called upon to express their views as to the issue of \$27,000,000 state bonds for the completion of the Barge canal, an elephant that must be fed perpetually at big expense, with practically no benefit to anybody in the Empire State..."

In November of that same year, 1915, the expensive proposition passed, primarily with the help of Buffalo and Rochester voters, not citizens from small canal towns.

In a November 1915 issue of the *Monroe County Mail*, editor Will Greene wrote *"We have made a mental note that State Engineer Williams says the Barge Canal will be fully completed within two years. Let's see, what was the time given by the engineers when the work was commenced, some eight years ago? They were going to have it completed in three or four years and it has been fully twice that already and the end is not yet in sight by any means. It will be...like some of the state roads, by the time the last end is finished, the first end has to be repaired."*

In another November issue, Mr. Greene stated that *"When a real, 1,000-ton barge passes through Fairport, it will be some occasion, and we hope to live to see it, but we are not over optimistic."*

Additionally, many New Yorkers continued to protest that the canal, in its entirety, should be drained and filled in because commerce on it had become a joke due to the success of the railroad. Canal wall leaks from muskrats and general upkeep expenses were also creating a huge financial challenge, while rats, insects and filthy water—a health threat.

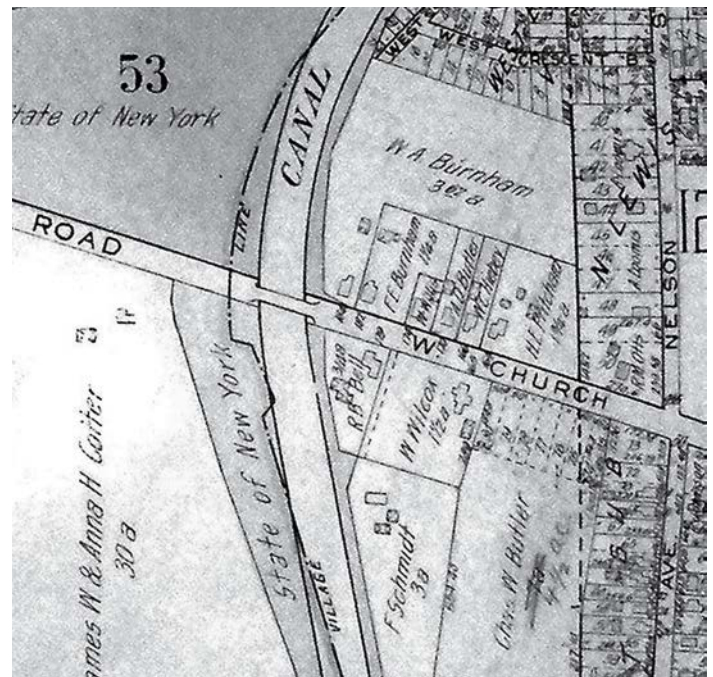
And then there was the bypassed section of the old canal trench, which paralleled the new Barge Canal on the west side of the village. The ditch ran from a few hundred feet north of the Route 31F (Fullamtown) bridge to a like distance south of the bridge. The abandoned, partly filled canal bed had become a haven for trash and a breeding swamp for mosquitoes. Other than money allocated by the state to do some filling of the original (old Erie) trench back in 1892, there was little hope for further state funds to do any more.

From the *Monroe County Mail*, March 24, 1892: *"The Assembly has passed a bill, approving \$2,000 for removing a bank of the canal between it and the unused and abandoned (old Erie) canal in the western part of the village."*

And from the *Fairport Herald*, April 8, 1914: *"At the April meeting of the Chamber of Commerce...F. E. Barnham mentioned abandoned (the Enlarged Erie) Canal lands near Fullamtown, with the suggestion that steps be made toward securing a park there, and the matter was referred to the village improvement committee."*



This December 1912 photo shows the Erie Canal on the right, with the new Barge Canal, still under construction, on the left. Both new and old Fullamtown bridges are pictured in the distance.



This 1924 map shows the Barge Canal going under the Fullamtown Bridge. On the west side, to the left of the bridge, are large shaded areas—state land where the old Enlarged Erie Canal was—much of it still to be filled in.

The Canal Digger's Lament

We are digging the Ditch through the mire;
Through the mud and the slime and the mire, by heck!
And the mud is our principal hire;
Up our pants, in our shirts, down our neck, by heck!
We are digging the Ditch through the gravel,
So the people and freight can travel.

As heard on the CD, ***Songs of the Erie Canal***
by the Daddy Bothers in the year 2000

Changing Horses and Mules

“The east-bound canal boats sounded their horns at Fullam’s Basin, the number of blasts denoting the number of fresh horses needed at the boat barns of Fairport.”*

From the book, *The Towpath*, by Arch Merrill

* Fullam’s Basin, also known as Fullamtown, was an early rival of Fairport. From this settlement, western-bound canal passengers often took the stage to Rochester.

Both horses and mules were used on the Erie Canal towpath. After the Civil War, however, mules became the animals of choice. The Army had little need for them anymore to haul wagons and cannons, so it sold many, at attractive prices, to thrifty canallers. (Workers on canal boats and boat owners were referred to as canallers.) Mules became war surplus and as such—inexpensive. They were also found to be more sure-footed and less prone to illness and injury than horses.

Mule and horse barns, were stationed every few miles by packetboat companies, so tired teams could be quickly changed to keep boats moving day and night. The barn pictured below, near the Mitchell Road bridge in the town of Pittsford, might have been used for this purpose.



Photo taken in March of 2017

Other canallers brought their animals along with them. Many boats had on-board stables where animals would live (rest) while waiting their turn to tow again on the towpath.

Filling the Old Ditch

Fortunately for area residents, the abandoned, Enlarged Erie Canal ditch was eventually filled in by the early 1930s. The local government, probably motivated by the Chamber of Commerce and its suggestion dating back to 1914, finished off the pile of dirt on the northside of the Fullamtown Bridge, creating a picnic/recreation area called Fairport Park. But, because of the Depression, no funds were available to do much to beautify and maintain the site. The park had little use and became overgrown. It wasn’t until the 1950s that major improvements were made by the Town of Perinton, giving the



Each July in most years, a group of 500+ cyclists ride the towpath through Perinton on their way from Buffalo to Albany. The event is called *Cycle the Erie Canal*. In 2020, it was canceled because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This year, the number of cyclists allowed has been reduced to 300, also because of the pandemic. The dates for this year’s event, which is sold out, are July 11–18. Cyclists will be passing through our area throughout the day on July 13th.

Photo taken in Perinton Park, July, 2013

park a fresh look and new name—Perinton Park—with tennis courts, basketball court, baseball field (now a parking lot), playground equipment and enclosed pavilion. On the south side of Route 31F, the old, now filled-in, canal ditch became home for a bowling alley (Fairview Lanes) and the Fairport Crew Club’s clubhouse.

New Life

Now, more than a century since the widening of the canal, Perinton inhabitants are treated with new docks, parks, festivals, gift shops, restaurants, breweries, and variety of nautical recreational opportunities. In addition, classy condos are springing up along the waterway, most of which make the community more desirable for residents and visitors.

Instead of tolerating a steady stream of tugs and barges, locals and their guests now can enjoy seeing plush, pleasure craft motoring by. Many of the boaters dock overnight, spending money at Fairport’s cozy gift shops, restaurants and ice cream parlors. For exercise, people can rent a paddle boat or kayak along the canal, which has become much cleaner than in the past. And if water sports don’t appeal, a popular alternative is biking or just strolling along the towpath, now named the Erie Canalway Trail, a major section of the new Empire State Trail.

Goodbye to the mules and mud. Welcome to the scenic and recreational waterway that’s right here in our neighborhood, the enviable Erie Canal of the 21st century.

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EDITOR’S NOTE: Although not a boater, the author enjoys the canal and its countless, year-round photo opportunities. Keith’s images depict an idyllic waterway, booming with recreation and matchless pictorial surroundings. *Photos by the author, except where noted*



PHS trustee Lucy McCormick created a notebook of reflections on the pandemic for display at the museum. *Photo by Keith Boas*

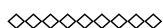
Pandemic Perspectives and Village Developments

By Lucy McCormick

The coronavirus pandemic certainly shook up our worlds. The perspectives of many in our community coping with this challenge are included in a notebook now on display at the Fairport Historical Museum: *The Impact of the 2020–2021 Coronavirus Pandemic on Fairport and Perinton*. This collection of reflections, text and photos, is the work of a PHS committee capturing an array of experiences from adults and youth, the Village of Fairport, the Town of Perinton and local organizations and businesses.

Organized by PHS volunteer coordinator John Laurence, the team reached out to the community to capture a variety of experiences. Many delightful and endearing photographs also help tell stories of remarkable resilience. Submissions for this ongoing project are welcome and can be e-mailed to history@perintonhistoricalsociety.org or sent/brought to the museum in printed form.

Another new notebook on display is Fairport's Evolving Landscape, photos and articles on recent developments in the village. This work in progress includes the lift bridge renovation, improvements to the banks of the canal, the train viewing platform, housing developments, and the latest addition, the remote-control car track on Cobb's Lane.



Special Recognition Level Memberships

As of June 15, 2021

Business (\$100)

Lucien A. Morin II, Partner, McConville Considine Cooman and Morin, Attorneys and Counselors at Law
100 Packetts Landing, Fairport, NY 14450
Phone: 585-223-2170, Web: lmorin@mccmlaw.com

Barranco's Clothing and Shoes

32 North Main Street, Fairport, NY 14450
Phone: 585-388-1270

Fairport Village Inn, Wayne and Patty Beckwith

103 North Main Street, Fairport, NY 14450
Phone: 585-388-0112, Web: thefvi.com

Robert Ruhland (aka Mr. Perinton), Keller Williams Realty

2000 Winton Road S. Bldg. 1, Rochester, NY 14618
Phone: 585-303-6607, Web: bobruhland.yourkwagent.com

Salle d' Escrime of Prescott, AZ, A Fencing Club

Patricia Dodge Waples, Owner

DeLand (\$100-\$249)

Anonymous (1)

Potter (\$250-\$499)

None this month

Perrin (\$500 and above)

Dan & Doreen Spoor
Anonymous (1)



Perinton Historical Society

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

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<i>Vice President</i>	Vicki Profit
<i>Secretary</i>	Suzanne Lee
<i>Treasurer</i>	Linda Wiener
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Keith Boas	Lucy McCormick
John Laurence	Bill Poray
Jim Unckless	Matt Wells
David Wild	

MUSEUM

<i>Director</i>	Vicki Profit
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Pat Beckwith,
Elaina Ginsberg
Joyce Lyle
Yvette Pipes
Emily Webster
Marilyn Longhouse
Jean Hamel

Not pictured:

Kathy Keogh
Marianne Michaud
Kathy Millazo
Eunice Roby
Linda Wentworth



Mary Ruth Smith, organizer of the project to create gardens at the Fairport Historical Museum in 1980.

Photos by Lucy McCormick

Thank You **Greenbrier Garden Club**

By Lucy McCormick

In 1980, the Greenbrier Garden Club created behind the Museum an old-fashioned garden featuring flowers and herbs grown in this area in the mid-1800s. Mary Ruth Smith, still an active Greenbrier member, was the organizer of the project. Research was conducted to select plants, fundraise and solicit plants and materials. The ground was prepared by Boy Scout Troop 209 and by Greenbrier members and their families. Materials were donated by the members of Greenbrier, PHS, the Fairport Home and Garden Center, and Steffen Nurseries.

Forty-one years later, Greenbrier is still on the job, maintaining the museum garden to provide a quiet retreat. In early May, many green thumbs spent a long morning weeding, pruning and planting, one of many mornings garden club members will spend sprucing up the gardens this season. The Perinton Historical Society is grateful for their effort.

Source: Fairport Herald Mail, 9/10/1980

Annual Meeting & Open House

At the Fairport Museum

On the evening of June 15th, PHS members voted on board members, learned about the upcoming virtual house tour, and strolled through the museum garden—maintained by the Greenbrier Garden Club. Members also listened to the music of Bev Crawford on the museum’s pump organ, alternating with a performance by world famous Harmonica Pete Dupre. Also on hand were local authors Karen Shughart and Don Shilling, signing their books, plus artist Susan Prener demonstrating *plein air* painting. For more details, be sure to read Bob Hunt’s and Vicki Profit’s columns in this issue.



During the evening, special discounts were offered in the gift shop.



Artist Susan Prener demonstrated *plein air* painting in the garden.



Proud members of the Greenbrier Garden Club at their table



Local author Don Shilling (seated) with Town of Perinton board members Seana Sartori and David Belaskas



Bev Crawford at the pump organ in the South Gallery



Far left: WWII Vet, 98-year old Harmonica Pete Dupre performed in the North Gallery.

Left: Board member Suzanne Lee at the *What Is It?* table.

Below: Virtual House Tour information table on the front sidewalk.

Photos by Keith Boas



Virtual House Tour 2021 **A View of Perinton's Homes and Gardens**

By Lucy McCormick

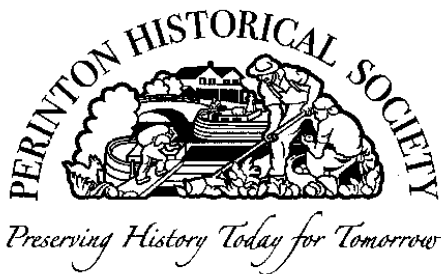
Not wanting to abandon the idea of a tour for the fall of 2021, the House Tour Committee is planning a virtual tour of six homes and gardens located throughout Perinton. Videographer Noah Lucia of Sidekick Films will help the committee showcase these homes by recording the exteriors, some gardens, and a few interiors.

The committee will work with Noah to integrate information on the architecture and history of the homes. The result will be a tour PHS members can enjoy on their computer in the comfort and safety of their home. The tour promises many surprises: views from a drone, a peek into the Underground Railroad, and lovely garden flowers so close you can almost smell them. The tour will be available for viewing early in October. For members without computers or with access issues, the tour can be viewed at the museum.

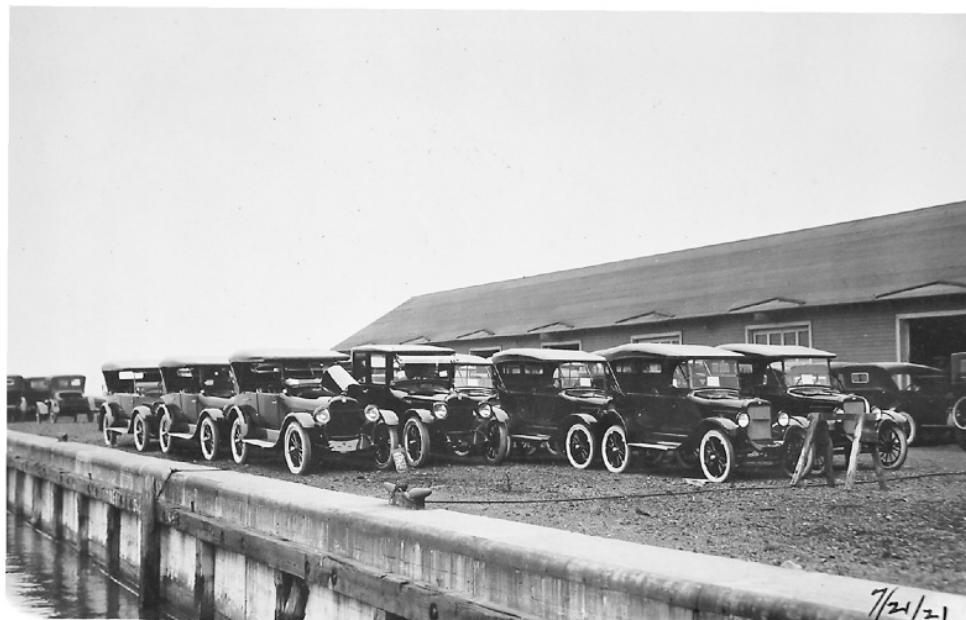
The Virtual House Tour 2021 is a first for the Perinton Historial Society, and the committee is excited to venture into this new format. The COVID pandemic has prompted all of us to find new ways to do many things out of a concern for safety. This virtual tour is one of them. Stay tuned for more details and, rest assured, that actual house tours will return.



A graceful arch welcomes guests to a Loud Road home. *Photo by Vicki Profit*



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410 - Automobiles at Buffalo Terminal - Erie Basin

100 Years Ago This Month

New Maxwells Passed Through Fairport on the Canal

"July, 1921: A shipment of Maxwell automobiles was unloaded from a lake freighter at Buffalo's recently completed Barge Canal terminal at Erie Basin and transferred to barges for delivery to New York City. The steam tug Lilly towed a string of three barges across the length of the Erie Canal—two loaded with Maxwell cars and the third carrying steel railroad rail from the steel mill at Lackawanna."

Sources:

Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor
Photo courtesy NYS Archives, Albany

Fairport Historical Museum, 18 Perrin Street, Fairport, NY 14450

The museum hours are Saturdays from 9:00 a.m.–1:00 p.m. and Sundays and Tuesdays from 2:00–4:00 p.m. Free admission.

Group tours, presentations and special projects are by appointment.

Please call and leave a message at **585-223-3989**. www.PerintonHistoricalSociety.org