

A Brief History of the Utica Harbor

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Introduction

In 1992, the Barge Canal was renamed the New York State Canal System and each of the canals in the system were, in a sense, given back ancestral names; Erie, Oswego, Cayuga-Seneca, and Champlain. The official name change created a new avenue for tourism by strengthening a connection to the historic and fabled "Old Erie Canal," which is very much responsible for the rapid growth of Utica in the 19th Century. However, the reuse of the Erie name, on the east-west portion of the Canal System, may have unintentionally diminished what was one of the most remarkable engineering feats of the 20th Century, the industrial-age construction of the Barge Canal, which gave us the Utica Harbor. In 2014, the Barge Canal was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

State Engineers Schenck and Williams

In the book History of the Mohawk Valley: Gateway to the West 1614-1925, edited by Nelson Greene and first published in 1925, the idea of the Barge Canal is attributed to Martin Schenck, a Palatine Bridge, NY native. Schenck served in the now defunct State cabinet position of New York State Engineer and Surveyor in 1892 and 1893. Greene writes that Schenck was the "first to advocate publicly a Barge Canal of a definite type, allied to the present undertaking" and cites a 1892 report by Schenck which states that the "practical canal of the future, connecting Lake Erie and the Hudson River, ought to be one capable of bearing barges 250 feet in length by 25 feet breadth of beam.." Construction of the Barge Canal commenced in 1905.

After Schenck, there was a series of State Engineers who were responsible for the design and construction of the Barge Canal, among them, and probably the most associated with the project was Frank M. Williams of nearby Durhamville who served in the office in 1909, 1910, and from 1915-1922, longer than anyone in that post.

Utterly Marooned

During the same time period of the Barge Canal's construction, a large project was completed in 1907 that straightened the Mohawk River through the City; removing an oxbow that extended from North Utica to Baggs Square. This project created the straight run that exists today through North Utica. For years, Uticans assumed that the State would utilize the straightened section of the Mohawk River through Utica as the canal. Many Uticans were furious to find out the alignment had changed and now the canal would run north, and parallel to the straightened river section, in what was then Deerfield. "They saw - through commercial eyeglasses - Utica, in fact, cut off from the canal - utterly marooned." (Utica Sunday Tribune, March 14, 1909)

Baxter's Plan for a Great Harbor

In 1909, Frank Williams came to Utica on a snowy day in December to hear from the City leaders on a harbor in Utica. As reported in Utica Herald Dispatch (December 18, 1909), City leaders strongly advocated

for a branch that would bring a harbor close to businesses in the City rather than building dockage between the canal and the river in Deerfield:

The visitors found the snowstorm rather baffling to their efforts to see clearly all they were taken out to see but they did get an impressive view of the extent of Utica's great industries in West Utica and a very clear idea of the inaccessibility of the barge canal to Utica commercial men, unless a big harbor branch be constructed to a point that will bring the canal nearer the business section than its proposed route will.

One of the presenters that day representing Utica's interests was a John R. Baxter, a well-known local civil engineer and contractor of the time period. Baxter was the first to propose the historic solution of using a segment of the former oxbow as a harbor branch:

Engineer John R Baxter had hung a big map he had prepared of his plan of a barge canal harbor at the western junction of the new river channel and the old river bend, to be located in the old southerly arm of the river, now abandoned. He pointed out on the map that this slanting river arm would be ideal for a canal branch and harbor. The idea is to bring the harbor down to within 300 feet of the New York Central tracks, near the gas works. A channel could be cut from the canal, through the new river channel to the old river arm.

Whether Frank Williams was moved by the arguments that day or was motivated by his local ties, the 1911 report issued by the NYS Barge Canal Terminal Commission completely adopted the Baxter plan.

The Terminal Commission's 1911 report spent a consider amount of resources studying canals in Europe with entire chapters devoted to canal systems in Great Britain, France, Belgium, Holland, and Germany. The language in the section of the report concerning Utica used such lofty language to lead the Utica Herald Observer (March 1, 1911) to declare the "recommendations which, if approved by the Legislature, will cause the construction in this city of a great harbor at an estimated cost of \$695,000." According to the Commission's report, the Utica Harbor would be "similar to those which have been so successfully operated by various cities of Europe" and "no other city on the line of the barge canal has so favorable an opportunity for such an enterprise."

A Unique and Historic Landmark

The construction of the Utica Harbor and the Barge Canal, in its entirety, was completed in 1918. John R. Baxter served as supervising engineer for the work at the Utica Harbor. In the end, Utica was one of about a dozen canal locations to receive a terminal but Utica's harbor would be very unique. The lock at Utica is the only one in the Canal System that is outside the main canal channel, serving only the branch channel that leads to the harbor. The branch channel travels a lengthy three quarters of a mile before reaching its terminus at the harbor, creating its recognizable spatula shape. Most importantly, it is only a quarter mile from downtown.