

# Celebrating Vestal's 190th Anniversary 1823-2013

## No. 8—Of Mules and Iron Horses



1866 Map Showing Dotted Line of Proposed Chenango Canal Extension

Debate concerning the construction of the Chenango Canal began as early as 1823 and continued until the "Construction of the Chenango Canal" became law in February 1833. Completed in October of 1836, just before winter froze the prism, it would be 1837 before the Chenango Canal was put in use. The following year on April 4<sup>th</sup> the New York State Legislature voted to extend the Chenango and Susquehanna Rivers to the state line near Athens, Pennsylvania. Three routes were surveyed in 1838, two on the north side of the river and a third on the south side.

It was believed by some that the Chenango Canal Extension would revive the use of the state's canals and promote commerce. The Chenango Junction Canal Company was incorporated in 1846 to build the Extension but never accomplished any work.

The southern route was resurveyed in 1859 under the direction of State Engineer and Surveyor Van R. Richmond. His report in January of 1860 recommended the 38.48 mile southern route because a railroad had already located on the north side of the Susquehanna. The original estimate for the southern route had increased from \$770,467.35 to \$829,488.21. On April 9, 1863 the extension was authorized "as funds were appropriated". The act did not provide any money so nothing was done until the Legislature of 1864 imposed a tax out of which \$550,000 would be used for constructing the canal.

The plan called for a dam (Rockbottom Dam) across the Susquehanna to produce a pool which would allow boats to cross the Susquehanna in order to enter the Extension on the south bank. The extension was to follow the river from just east of the Washington Street Bridge westward along the Susquehanna, crossing the Binghamton-Vestal line behind what is now Rivercrest then wrap around the base of Round Top Hill. The specifications for the extension were the same as the Chenango Canal...a prism 42 feet wide at the top and 26 feet at the bottom with a depth of 4 feet. Locks were to be laid up of stone with wooden fenders. The 10 foot wide tow path, two feet above water level, could accommodate horses, mules and drivers. Bridges would span roads and connect properties split by the canal. Aqueducts would carry the canal over natural waterways.

The canal was built in sections with contracts being let for each, but not necessarily in sequential order. In June of 1865 ten miles were finally placed under contract. An 1866 article in *The Observer* reports that "Section 13 of the extension has been completed and accepted by the State Engineer". A total of thirty miles were under contract by 1867 when funds were exhausted and work was suspended. Actual costs were skyrocketing and in 1867 the *Albany Evening Journal* published charts for four of the Extension's sections which all showed serious cost overruns. Some valid overruns were the result of encountering unexpected areas of quicksand or poor soil but in many instances charges were made for work not completed.

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The Canal Board held an investigation, hearing testimony from engineers about their inspections of the work completed. Work resumed only to be suspended again in June of 1870. It is interesting to note that the 1870 Federal census lists 27 men living in Vestal who gave their occupation as canal laborers. All but eight were of Irish descent and most likely stone masons by trade. An appropriation in May of 1871 was designated for the 23 mile portion between Binghamton and Owego. The appropriation was deemed insufficient and when the work was finally suspended, it was estimated that another \$160,000 would be needed to complete the Extension between the Chenango Canal and Owego.

Property owners whose land had been taken for the construction of the canal submitted claims to the state on December 31, 1869 for reimbursement of damages to their farms. Jacob Kimble's claim for \$2926.99 included the use of 3.478 acres, a borrowing pit, fencing, 4 trees destroyed, moving a store house, severing the farm, and a bridge approach...plus one year of interest.



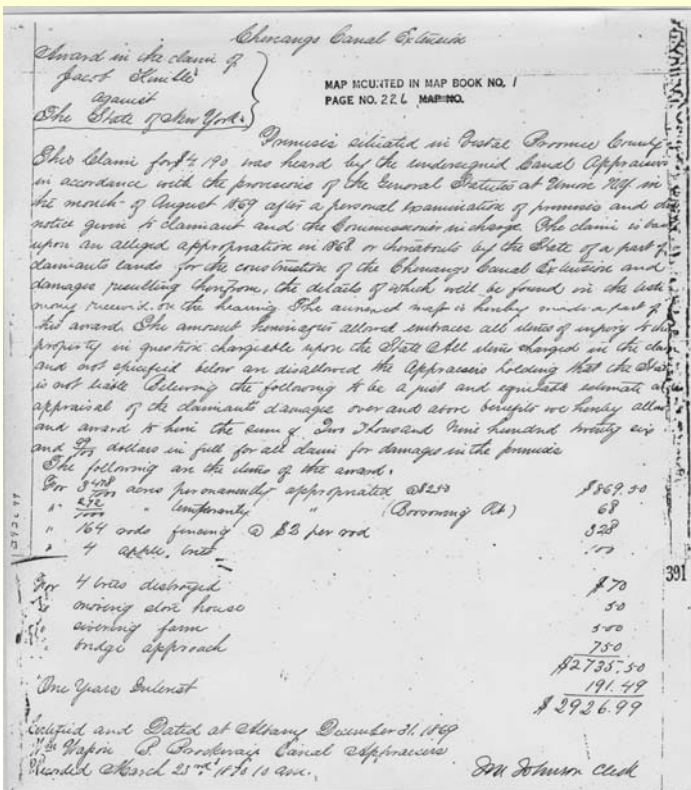
Marker at Bank of Canal—Front Street Memorial Park



Chenango Canal Extension at Rt. 201 Bridge

Seven years and \$1,700,581.87 later, the prism would remain dry and mules would never walk the tow path. Both the Chenango Canal and the incomplete Extension were officially abandoned in 1878.

Remnants of the Chenango Canal Extension prism and tow path still exist and can be seen along the river behind Rivercrest, under the Route 201 Bridge, and in Apalachin, Tioga County.



Jacob Kimble's Canal Claim



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It is still possible to discern a portion of the canal from south Main to Willow Street between Front St. and Kimball Road. Aerial photos from 1937 also show small portions.

Residents on the south side of the Susquehanna would not hear the braying of mules along the tow path but would soon hear the rhythmic cadence produced by iron horses on the rails.

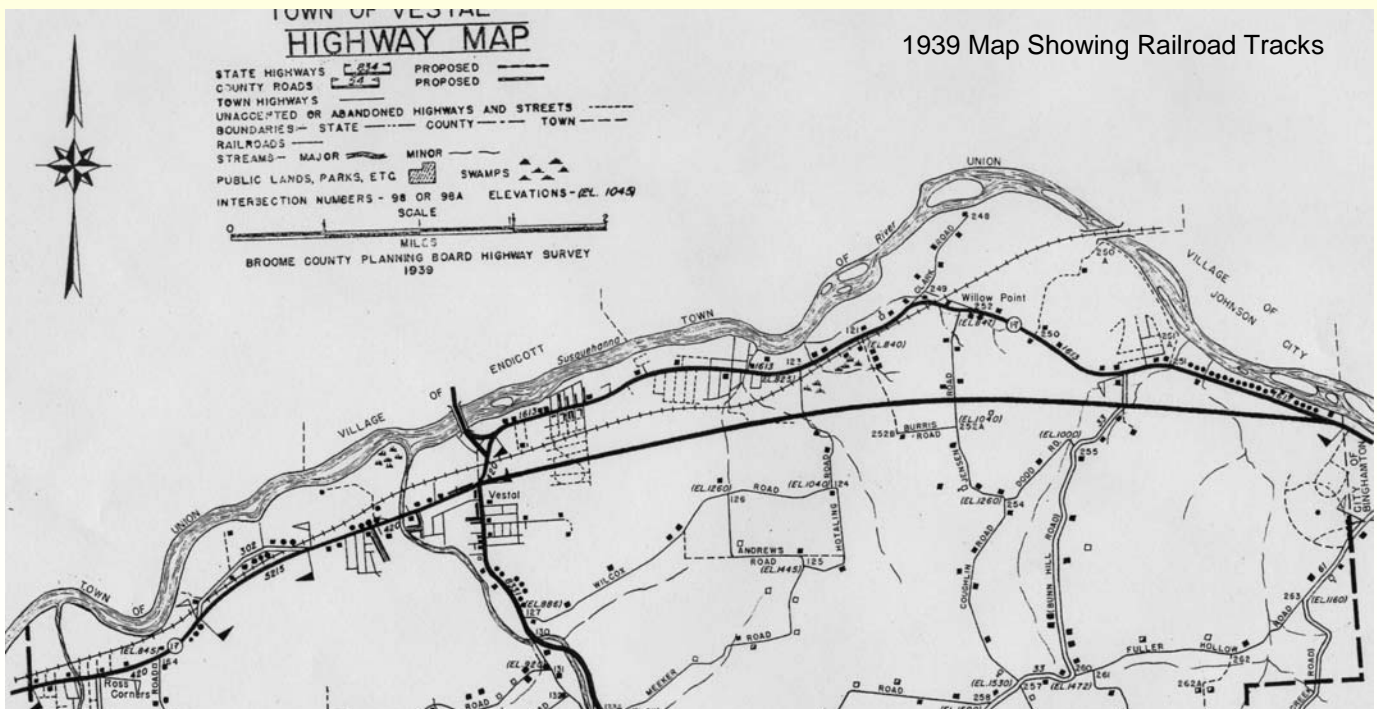
A bill introduced in the Assembly in 1873 permitted the proposed Dushore and Williamsport Railroad Company to construct a railroad upon the tow path of the Chenango Canal Extension. Provisions in the bill included, among others, maintaining embankments and structures as well as all farm crossings, paying taxes on the land used, and removing the tracks in the event of the completion of the canal. When the company did not comply with the condition requiring that work commence within two years, the property remained under the state's control.

A Broome Republican article in September of 1880 titled "A Rumor" disclosed that the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western railroad had proposed a new extension from the Binghamton depot to a point nearly opposite Round Top Hill at Willow Point.

That same year the railroad approached land owners to purchase property from Willow Point to the Tioga County line. Amounts paid for a right of way were reported in part as \$308 to Daniel Mersereau, \$525 to Esther Murdock and \$750 to Richard D. Harrington. Hearings were held to decide the compensation to be paid to Gozen R. Eldredge, Jacob L. Rounds, and Hanna and Sarah Willis for their properties.

Work progressed rapidly in 1880 on the iron railroad bridge across the Susquehanna between Johnson City and Willow Point. Damage to one of the stone piers from a February ice jam was quickly repaired and work progressed on laying the oak timbers that would hold the tracks or rails. At the same time property cases were settled and grading began in preparation for laying track.

The rails pushed westward through what would become Twin Orchards toward North Main Street. A portion of the track would be on or near the former Extension tow path but as you can see in the diagram, the railroad forged its own path through Vestal. A Broome Republican article in September 1881 said work on the Vestal and Apalachin depots was being pushed. Fayette L. Rounds would become the first stationmaster of the pagoda style depot built on a portion of his property.



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The Broome Republican announced the printing of a new timetable on October 5, 1881. It announced that two passenger trains would run daily between Binghamton and Owego, stopping at Willow Point, Vestal and Apalachin. Westbound trains were scheduled to leave Binghamton at 4:30 and 9:00 p.m. Eastbound trains were to arrive in Binghamton at 6:55 a.m. and 1:40 p.m. Willow Point had a "shelter station", a small building without an agent, while Vestal and Apalachin had full size depots.

In 1901 the iron bridge was replaced by a steel bridge supported by concrete piers. An editorial at the time urged the old bridge to be used for wagon and pedestrian traffic. Safely crossing the tracks became a growing problem as vehicle ownership increased. At grade crossings at Vestal Road in Willow Point, African Road, and Sycamore Road saw numerous accidents. One solution was to create an underpass on the heavily traveled Vestal-Binghamton Highway, aka Vestal Road. So in September 1923 ground was broken for a 26 foot wide underpass that would be located about 410 feet west of the existing at grade crossing.

Crossing the tracks near the Vestal Depot came in two forms...pedestrians and vehicles. In 1929 proposals were offered that would create an overhead bridge for pedestrians at the present crossing. A suggestion recommended a study be made for providing an underground pedestrian passage. Construction of a viaduct for vehicles began in 1933 and by the summer of 1934 the excavation and concrete foundation for an underground passage were complete.

The DL&W Railroad would merge with the Erie to become the Erie Lackawanna Railroad until the 1960's when the state bought the right-of-way west of the depot for the new Route 17 Expressway and the tracks east of the depot were used as a siding operation. Just like the canal, the railroad was history. Today hundreds of people walk the Rail Trail where iron horses once thundered by.

A future article will cover the Vestal Depot in more depth. The Chenango Canal Extension and the D.L.& W. Railroad are expansive subjects that can only be touched upon in this article. To learn more, or review the sources used, visit the Historian's office.