

Hidden Perspectives

Women's Lives on the Erie Canal





Family Life on the Canal

Family life for women who lived on canal boats was similar yet different than that of the women who lived in towns along the canal. Caring for the needs of their families was much the same for all women. Where and how it was done set the canal boat women apart. The need for creative pursuits and female friendships were similar as well but those opportunities presented distinct challenges for women on the canal boats that were constantly moving from May through November.



CS2016.2.01 Sunday on the Canal, by Paul Frenzeny (October 18, 1873; Harper's Weekly)
The Canal was central to the lives of many families, as shown in this cheerful print of a wood engraving.



Top Left: 00.1249 Girls with Canal Boat
This cheerful scene features well-dressed girls and a small pleasure craft alongside the Erie Canal.

Left: CN187 Jumping Onto a Canal Bridge
There were ways to spice up a long canal trip! This photo shows some young people jumping up onto a canal bridge, with the goal of running across the bridge and jumping back onto the boat before it passes!

Women on the canal boats cooked meals for their families and any passengers who might be aboard. Feeding passengers brought in extra money as a higher fare could then be charged. Passengers provided news, conversation, and entertainment to those on board the boat. Women also took advantage of the time spent going through the locks to visit with the Locktender's family or make a quick trip to town to purchase fresh produce and other items needed on the boat. Occasionally several boats might tie up together, affording the women on those boats the opportunity to visit with each other and exchange news from other parts of the canal.



00.2881 Mother and Child on a Canal Boat

Mrs. Bertha Grimes and her child on a canal boat. Boats could be a dangerous place for children, and mothers would often tie a young child such as this one to her using the strings of her apron.

00.2927 Mother and Children
This woman is teaching her children onboard the canal boat Paddy McLoughlin. Canal families often lived on their boats, and children would learn during the winter, when the Canal was closed. The task of teaching them often fell to their mothers.



81.31.5 Ice Skating in Rochester
The Canal wasn't passable in winter, but was a source of recreation for families.

Women on the Canal cared for their children and the young mule drivers that were needed to guide the animals pulling the boat. Caring for a family on the canal was a constant fear. Women often tied the children to a post on the boat to prevent them from falling overboard, but sometimes it wasn't enough. In 1897, so many children were drowning in Forestport, cards were issued describing resuscitation techniques. Older children could take advantage of the time they weren't needed to help on the boat by playing on shore. The speed limit for the boats was slow enough that they could easily keep up with it as it moved along the canal and the presence of bridges every mile along the canal gave them ample opportunity to reboard the boat. They might also use this time to hunt small game, like rabbits, to have for dinner.



PC 88.12.153 Family Traveling Under Bascule Bridge
This Rochester photo shows a family on a canal boat enjoying the sights!

Below: 62.14.2 Shanties Along the Canal
A woman stands in front of a shanty house between the Canal and the Seneca River at Baldwinsville.

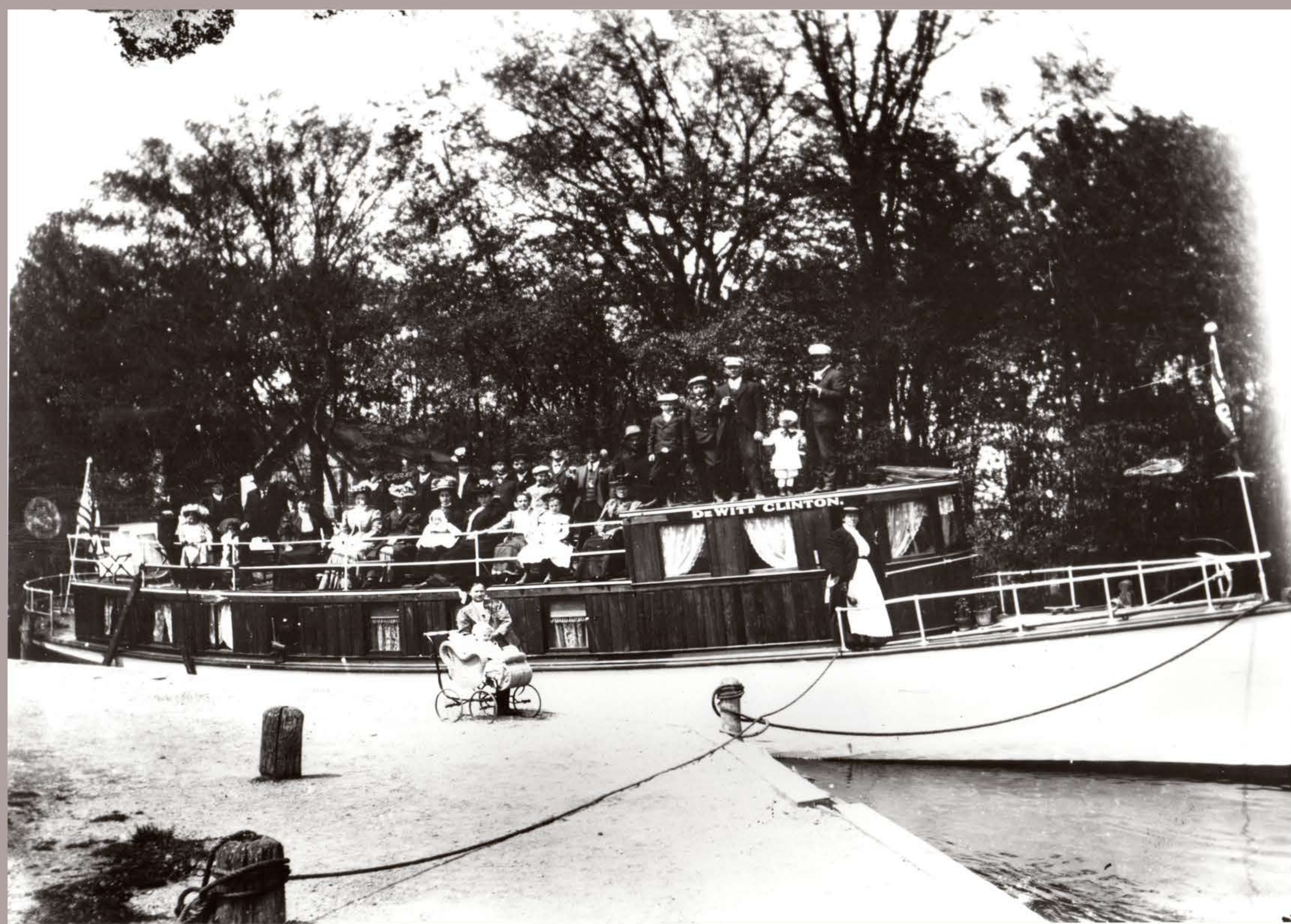


PC 88.12.140 Picnic Alongside the Richmond Aqueduct
A nice day for a picnic! This 1890s photograph was taken at the Richmond Aqueduct, which carried the Erie Canal over the Seneca River.

Family life for some women in the towns along the Canal changed during the 19th century. As the Industrial Revolution grew, less work was done in the homes. Servants and apprentices, who had lived under the same roof as the family they served, found their own accommodations elsewhere. Household responsibilities changed, giving women time for activism and other pursuits. There are no records detailing how many people called the Canal itself home during the days of the mule drawn boats but today, 85% of New York State's population lives within 25 miles of the Erie Canal. The lives of women and families along the Canal has changed since those early days, but there is no doubt that the Canal remains an influence in their transportation, communication, and recreation.



CN247 Steam Packet DeWitt Clinton
The steam packet boat DeWitt Clinton, with a full complement of well-dressed passengers, tied up at a dock in Jordan.



81.31.5 Ice Skating in Rochester



Below: 00.1259 Maintenance Boat Near Weedsport
Mrs. Minnie Manwaring (with her hands on her hips) was the cook on this maintenance boat, which is posed at the Caywood Farm. This photo was taken around 1908.



Religion

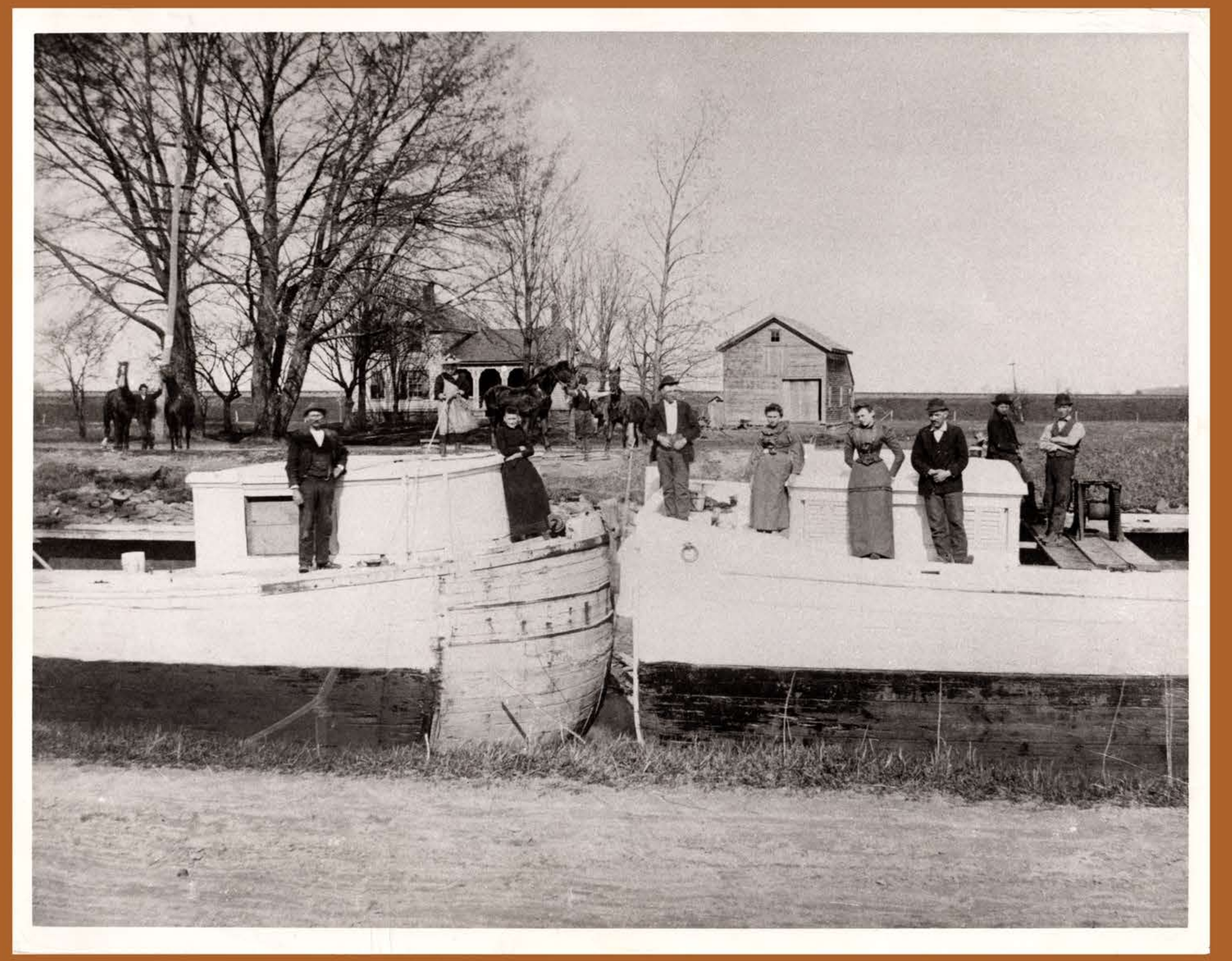


In the early 1800s, business leaders in Rochester were concerned about their community. The Canal had brought prosperity to the area but with it came behaviors that resulted from people with time on their hands, money to spend and a lack of moral bearing. In an effort to address those issues, the men and women of Rochester reached out to Charles Grandison Finney, a minister who was leading revivals in upstate New York. As a result, the Second Great Awakening found its roots in Western New York spreading its influence and religious fervor along the Erie Canal with fiery preachers, including many women who were encouraged by Finney's admonition that "the Church that silences the woman is shorn of half its power." Women were responsible for the morality of the home. They were responsible for raising good and moral children. They promoted church attendance, taught Sunday School, encouraged piety, and advocated temperance.

Above: PC 85.15.2 Melvin P. Brown at Pleasant Beach
The steamer "Melvin P. Brown" (built in Baldwinsville)
at Onondaga Lake, off Pleasant Beach.

Right: 69.9.2 The Wm. B. Kirk appears in this photo
as well, but filled to the brim with people! Many of
the ladies on the top deck are equipped with um-
brellas. Packet boats like this were usually very
well-appointed, with a dining room, a library, and
nicely furnished sleeping quarters.





00.1252 Rescue Life Boat "Good News"

Men and women posed on the deck of the "Good News" as it passes Syracuse City Hall. The "Good News" was owned by the Syracuse Rescue Mission, an organization founded as an outreach to Canal workers. During Canal Days, the Rescue Mission sought to spread Christianity and perform humanitarian services. The "Good News" was supported entirely by voluntary contributions of money and foodstuffs, and cost about \$1,200 per year to operate.

68.20 Wm. B. Kirk Docked for Baptist Picnic

This photo, which dates to around 1894, depicts a large group on a canal boat for a Baptist picnic. There are at least two photos of the Wm. B. Kirk in the Erie Canal Museum's collection.



65.69.5 Posing on Canal Boats

Men and women posed on two canal boats at Canastota.

Many women claimed Finney's idea and made their presence known as "exhorters" sharing the word of God and calling on New Yorkers to turn away from sinful behaviors and live godly lives. Julia Foote, an early evangelist in the A.M.E. church, encountered racial abuse on a canal packet boat as she journeyed to Troy to preach. Foote believed that Christianity made men and women equal. Antoinette Brown Blackwell believed that too. Brown Blackwell found her calling in the ministry after hearing Finney preach. She began preaching at the age of 16 and went on to receive formal theological training at seminary. Brown Blackwell embodied the intersection of the Reform movements taking place along the Canal's route as she also wrote for Frederick Douglass' The North Star abolitionist paper and spoke on behalf of women's suffrage. Today women make up 40% of the women authorized for ministry in New York State in the denomination that supported Blackwell.

From Millerites Sojourner Truth and Olive Maria Rice to Latter Day Saint Lucy Mack Smith and evangelist Nancy Towle, women spread the word of God across New York and beyond. Their stories have found an "awakening" of their own recently after being hidden from the history of the church in America. Their perspective that men AND WOMEN could be called by God echoed that of colonial leaders such as Anne Hutchinson and reflected the ideals of democracy that were spreading through the country in the Jacksonian era.

Slavery and The Underground Railroad

On July 4, 1827, ten years after the first shovel of dirt was turned for the Erie Canal, slavery was finally abolished in New York State. However, the Fugitive Slave Laws meant that the threat of enslavement was still real even for those who had been emancipated. Many freedom seekers escaping slavery in the South found their way to Canada via the Erie Canal. Their stories are both triumphant and tragic. Free African Americans like Catherine Harris, along with her infant daughter and husband William, traveled the Canal during this time. The Harris family was mistreated and threatened by the crew and passengers of the boat on which they traveled. Fearing for their safety and freedom, Catherine took her daughter and jumped into the Canal to avoid being turned over to slave catchers; her husband cut his throat. Catherine's daughter drowned but she and her husband survived in freedom.

Abolitionists in towns and cities along the Canal spoke out against slavery at rallies and conventions throughout the region. They operated networks of Underground Railroad stations to provide shelter for these freedom seekers. One such Freedom Seeker was Harriet Powell, a young woman enslaved to the Davenport family from Mississippi. Harriet came to Syracuse with the Davenports in 1839. While staying in a local hotel, she received a message that she could be taken to freedom if she choose. Harriet took advantage of that opportunity becoming a passenger on the Underground Railroad through Central New York and eventually north to Canada.



Madonna of the Canal by Elizabeth Leader
Images of African-Americans working and living along the Erie Canal are rare. Artist Elizabeth Leader painted this image of Catherine Harris and her child after their leap into the Canal from a boat in 1850. Their story is told in the text on this panel.



66.32 Lockport on the Erie Canal

The Erie Canal reshaped both the ideological and physical landscape of New York State. The history of the Canal is linked to the spread of new ideas, such as abolition of slavery, religious revivals, and voting rights for women.

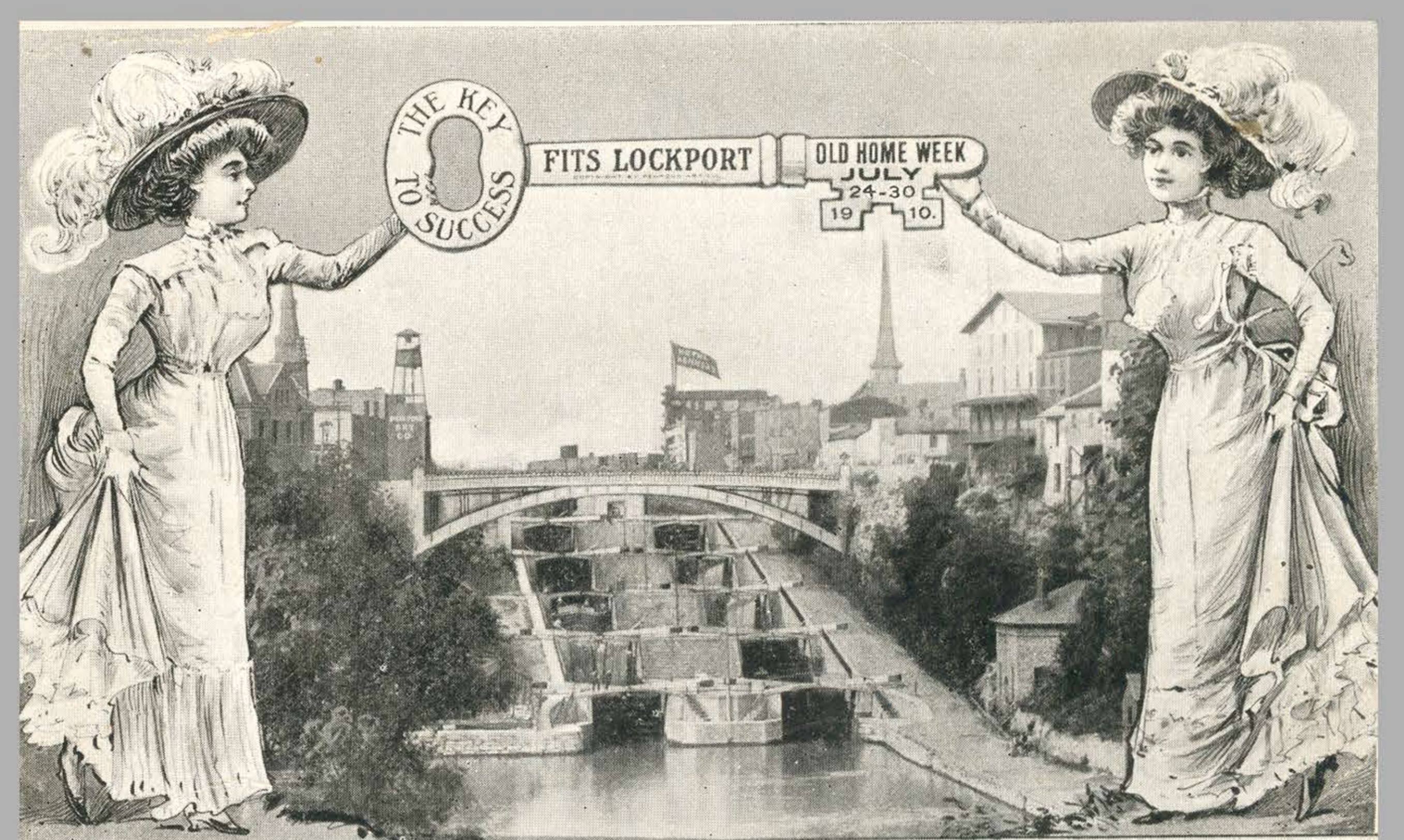
The story of female abolitionists is closely woven with that of the suffragists. And while a choice between the vote for all men, regardless of race, and universal suffrage for all citizens, including women, would ultimately divide the two causes, many of the suffragists would maintain their commitment to the abolition of slavery. Harriet Tubman of Auburn, Matilda Joslyn Gage of Fayetteville, Ann Fitzhugh Smith of Peterboro, Olivia Lewis Langdon, and Clarissa Bundy Andrus of Elmira would all use their influence and position to further the cause of abolition and aid Freedom Seekers traveling the Underground Railroad along the Erie Canal and through New York State.

Industry



Women have always worked. From prehistoric hunter-gatherers to present day CEOs, women have used their knowledge and skills to support their families and contribute to the larger community. Women on the Erie Canal were no different. Census records from the 19th century reveal little about the occupations of women along the Canal. They are recorded as being domestic servants, milliners, teachers, seamstresses, housekeepers, or having no occupation at all. However, we know that women had a greater presence from the artifacts of the day. Photographs attest to their work on the boats; playbills and broadsides are evidence of their artistic and theatrical performances; newspapers confirm their actions as labor leaders, business owners, and factory workers. From these objects, we pieced together the hidden perspective of the working woman on the Erie Canal.

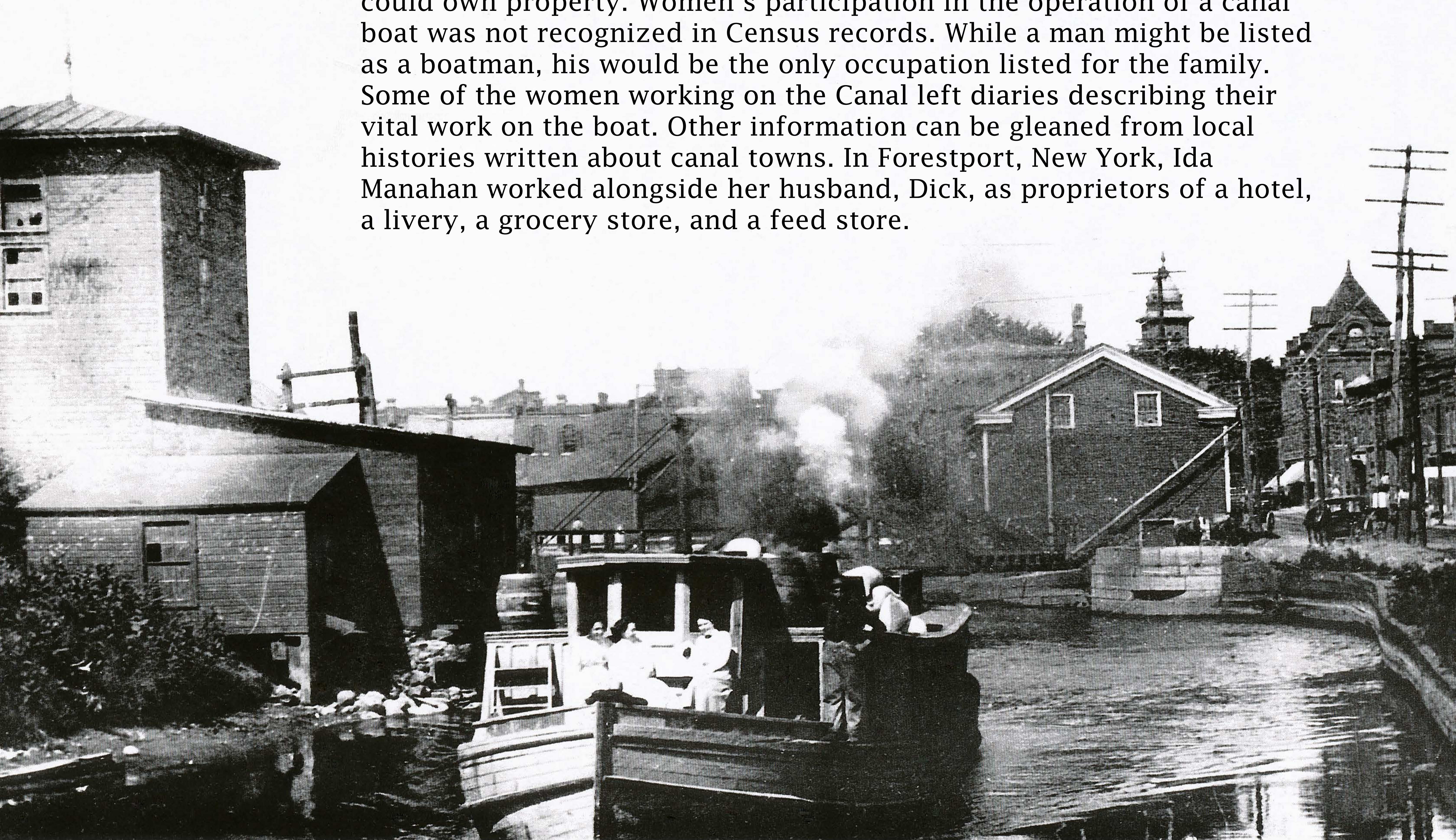
Above: Clinton Square sans telegraph
The commercial center of Canal era Syracuse, Clinton Square.



Top: 00.1535 Hops Pickers
The brewing industry exploded as a result of the Canal, and many women found employment. These people are working as hops pickers in Pine Woods.

Bottom: 63.23.59 Keys to Lockport
This neat postcard image shows two women in Victorian era dress and advertises Old Home Week in 1910. Old Home Week began that year, and was intended to showcase all that Lockport had to offer its citizens and visitors.

Opportunities for women to work in the early 19th century were limited without the support and “protection” of their husbands, fathers, or brothers. Married women in New York State did not receive property rights until 1848, and prior to that widows were they only women who could own property. Women’s participation in the operation of a canal boat was not recognized in Census records. While a man might be listed as a boatman, his would be the only occupation listed for the family. Some of the women working on the Canal left diaries describing their vital work on the boat. Other information can be gleaned from local histories written about canal towns. In Forestport, New York, Ida Manahan worked alongside her husband, Dick, as proprietors of a hotel, a livery, a grocery store, and a feed store.



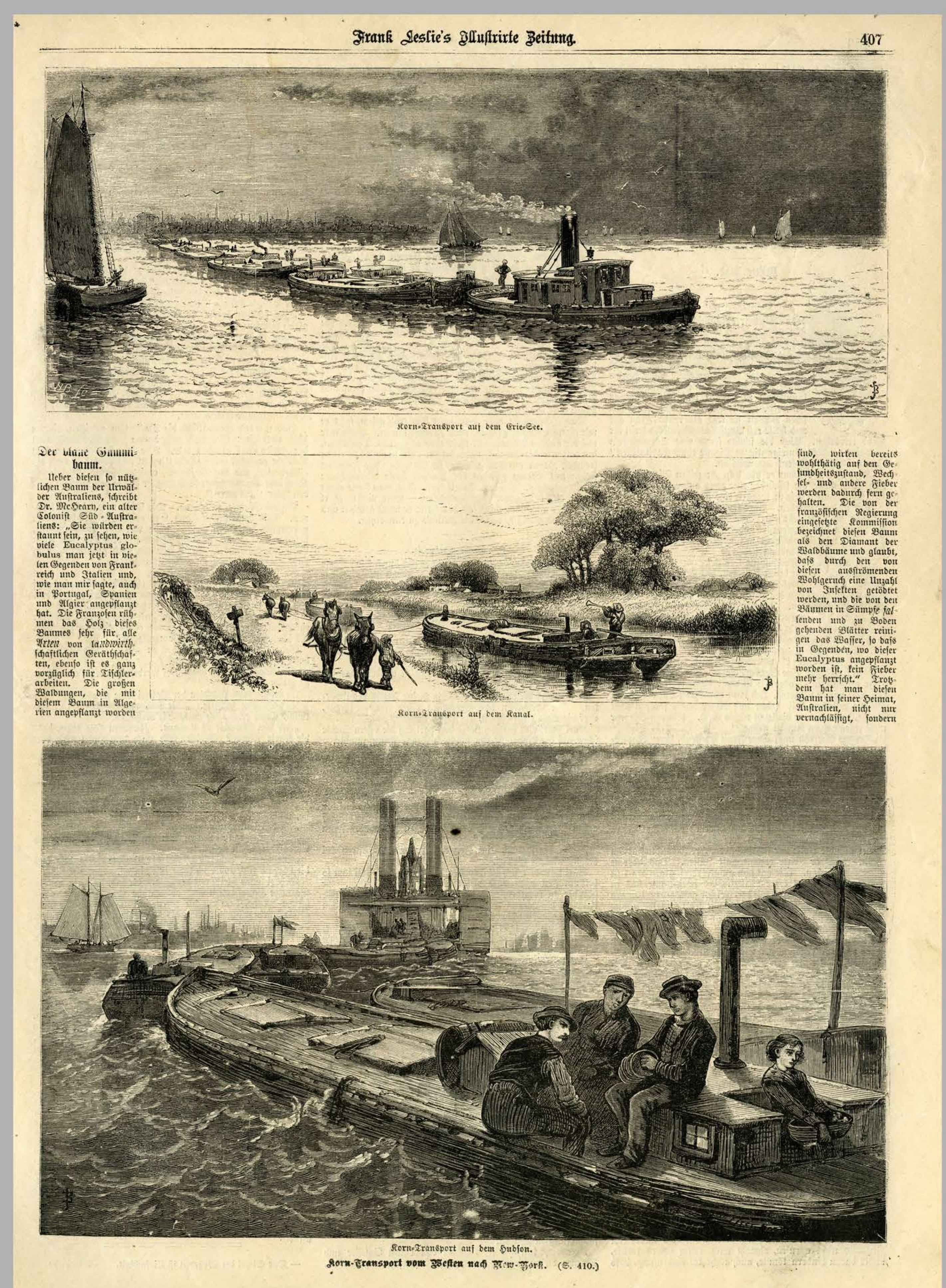
00.1292 Steamboat Tucker En Route to Syracuse

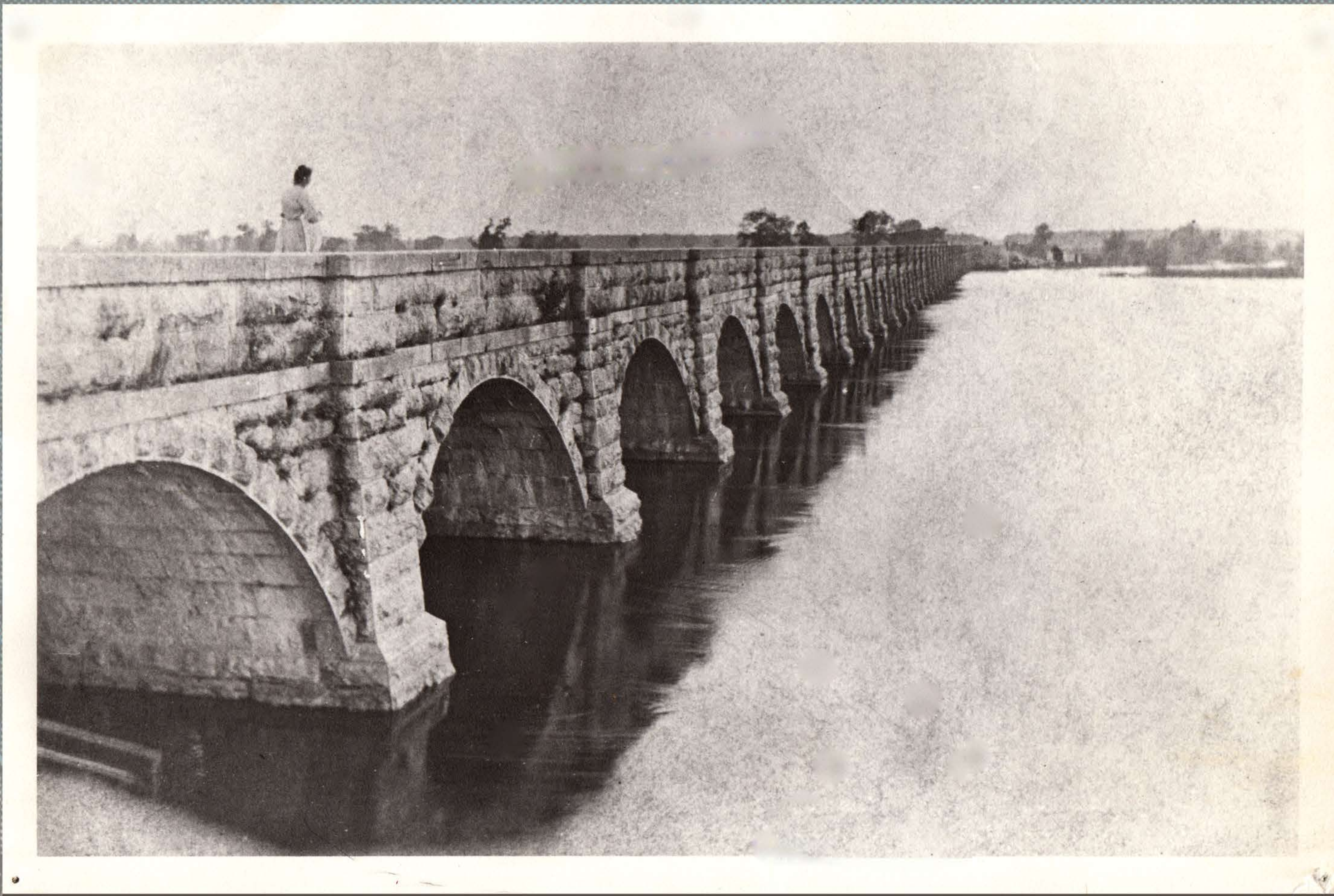
These ladies are traveling on the steamboat “Tucker” on the Baldwin Canal, which ran parallel to E. Genesee Street in Baldwinsville. This canal was 0.6 miles in length and opened in 1809 to bypass waterfalls on the Seneca River.

The opening of the Erie Canal coincided with the early days of the Industrial Revolution in the United States. Water power was first harnessed in Pawtucket, Rhode Island to power a mill that spun cotton from the South into thread that could be woven into cloth. Until the development of weaving mills, women were hired to weave that cloth in their homes in early cottage industries. The personal stories of these women are hidden as the value of their labor was attributed to their husbands or other male family members. As industrial technology spread, mills sprang up along the length of the canal. Mill workers would join the ranks of employed women toward the latter part of the 19th century when the Erie Canal had been enlarged and water power was used to power the cotton, knitting, and flour mills that dotted the canal from Troy to Buffalo.

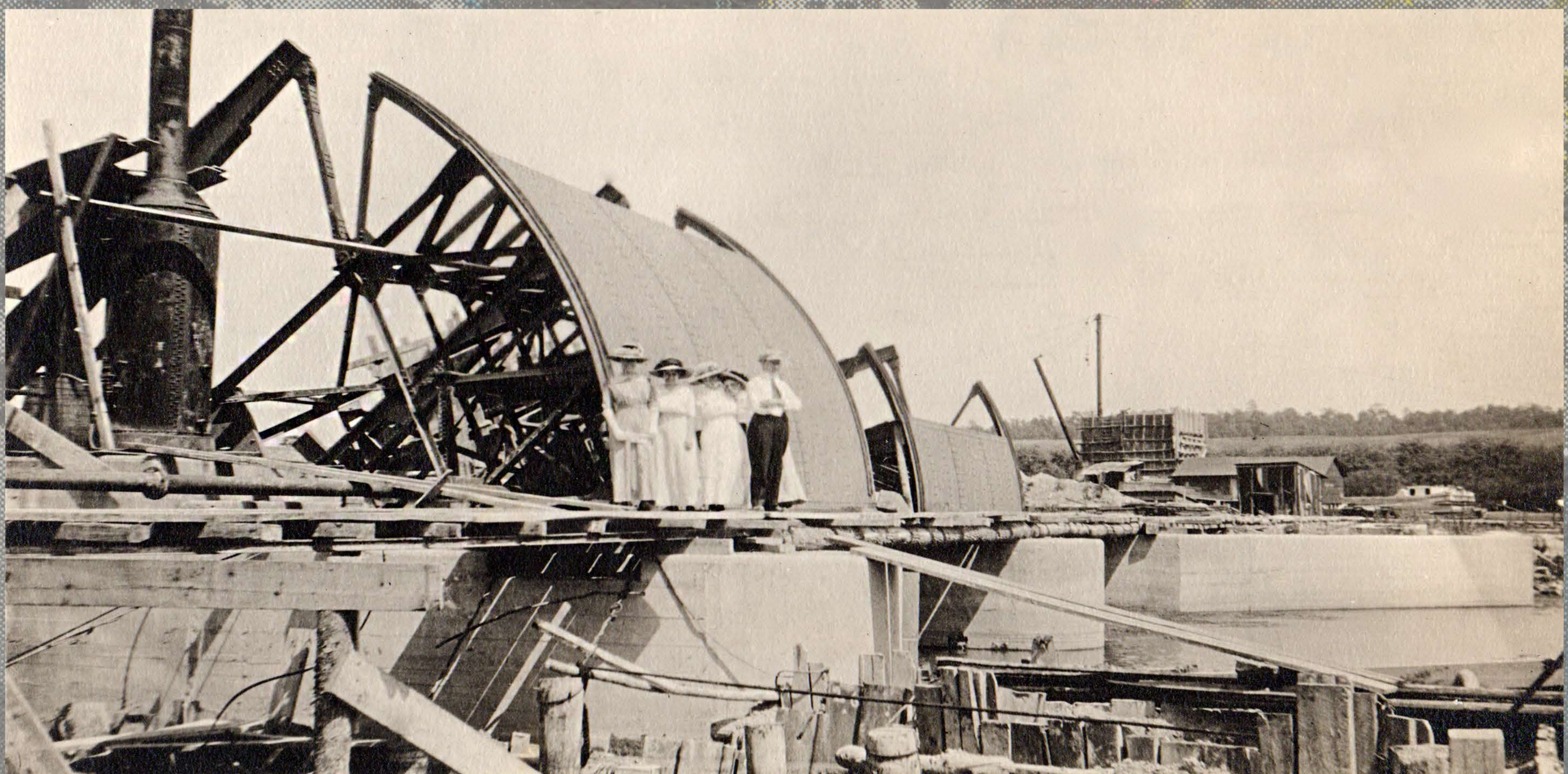
CS1993.1.11

Images from Harper’s Weekly show the commercial development that surrounded the Erie Canal.





00.2983 Minnie Manwaring on the Montezuma Aqueduct



67.1.119 Jaintor Dam Construction
One man and four women standing in front of Jaintor Dam during its construction.

In 2015, 47% of the American workforce was made up of women. They worked as waitresses, teachers, doctors, nurses, maids, lawyers, managers, office clerks, and administrators. They served in the military, owned businesses, ran major corporations and held offices at every level of government. Many of the stories of the women who powered the Erie Canal remain hidden, but they left a legacy of hard work and democratic values that serves to inspire us today.



69.945 Steam Packet at Syracuse City Hall
Two well-dressed ladies are among the passengers on this steam packet boat traveling through Syracuse on the Canal. At the time of this photo, City Hall had just been completed and was standing empty.

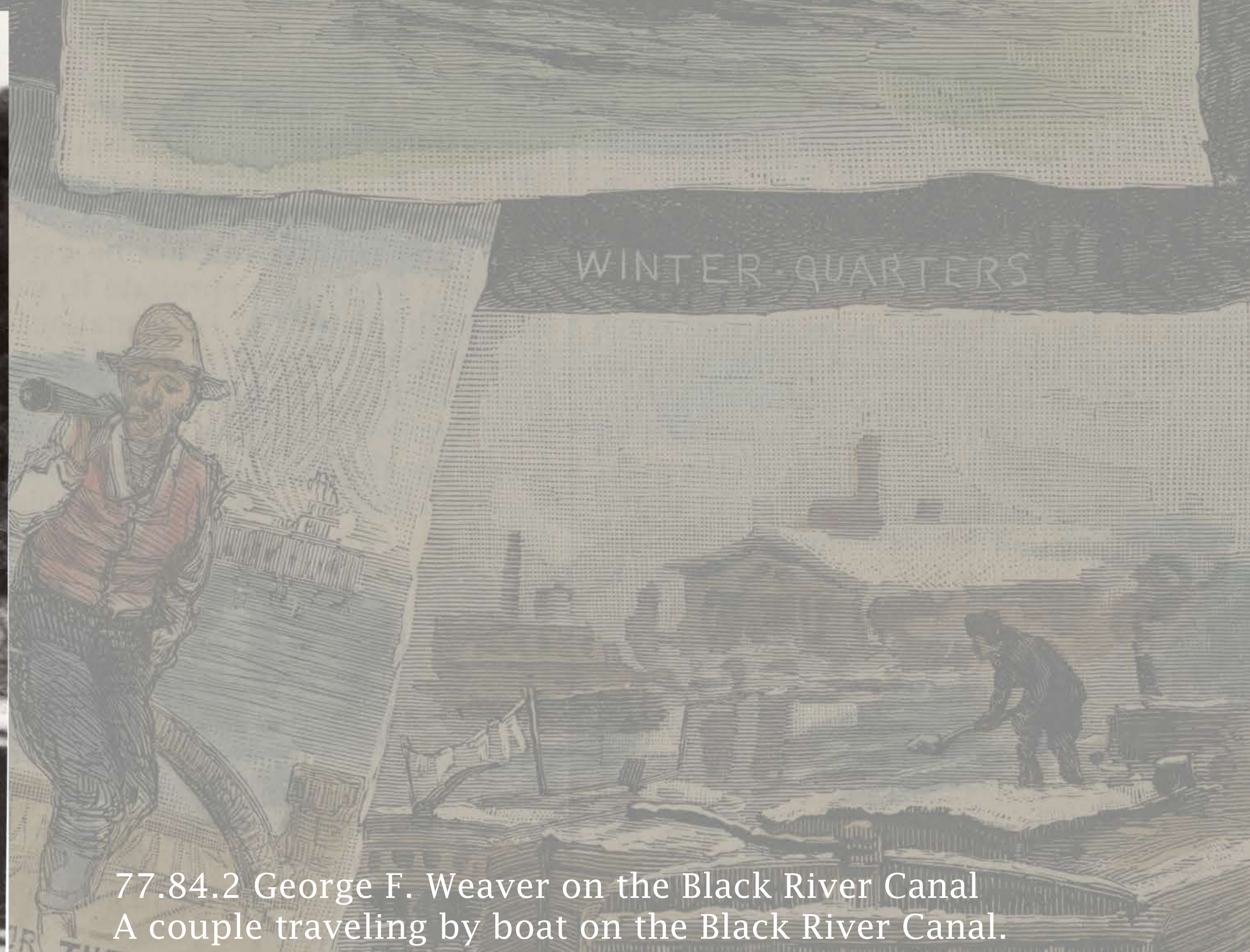
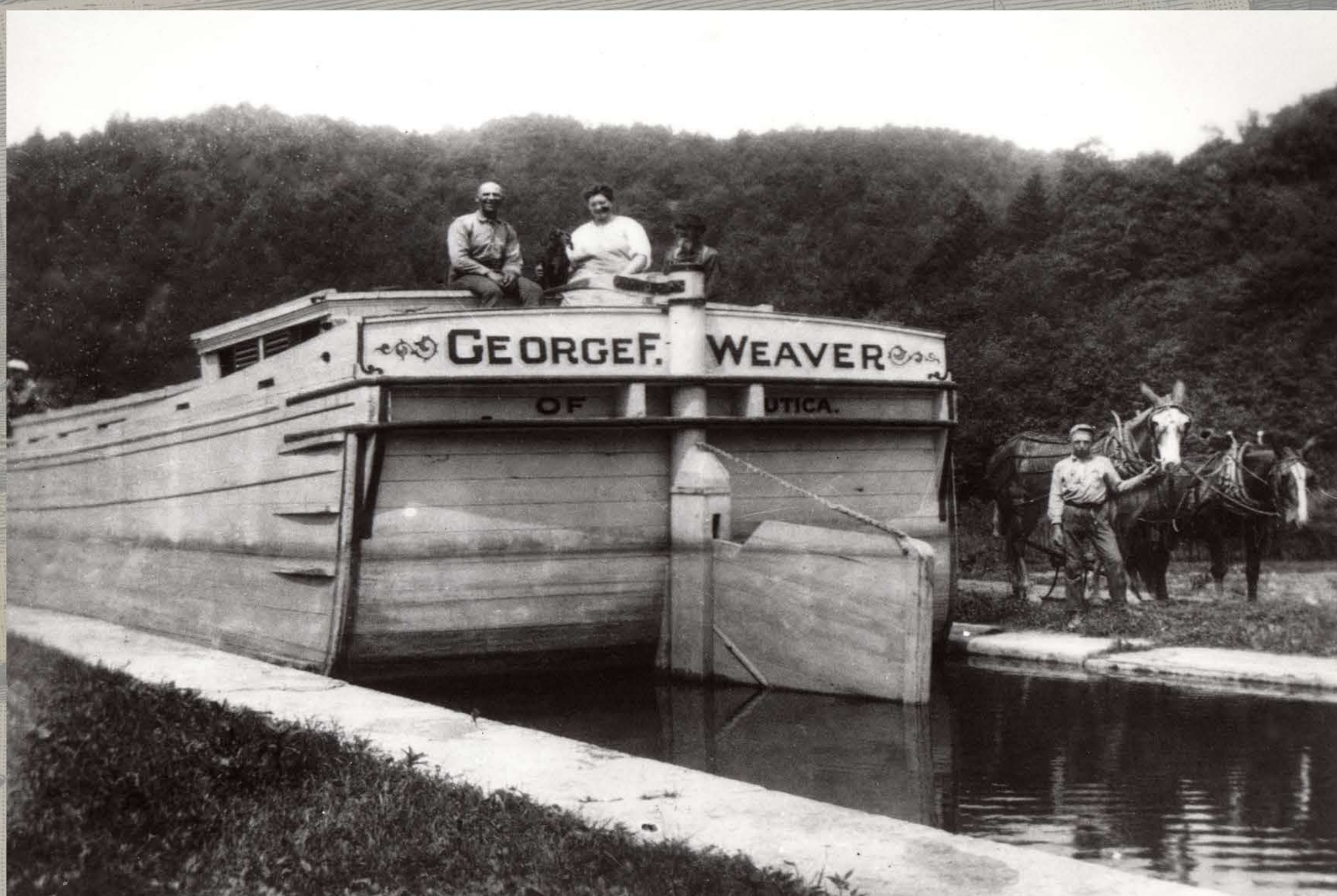


00.1327 Frank E. Gallup Traveling over the Mohawk River
A man and a woman on the canal boat Frank E. Gallup in the spillway of an aqueduct over the Mohawk River.



CS1998.1.11 Laid Up for Winter, by E.J. Meeker (February 16, 1884; Harper's Weekly)
Canal boats waiting out winter in Coenties Slip, East River.

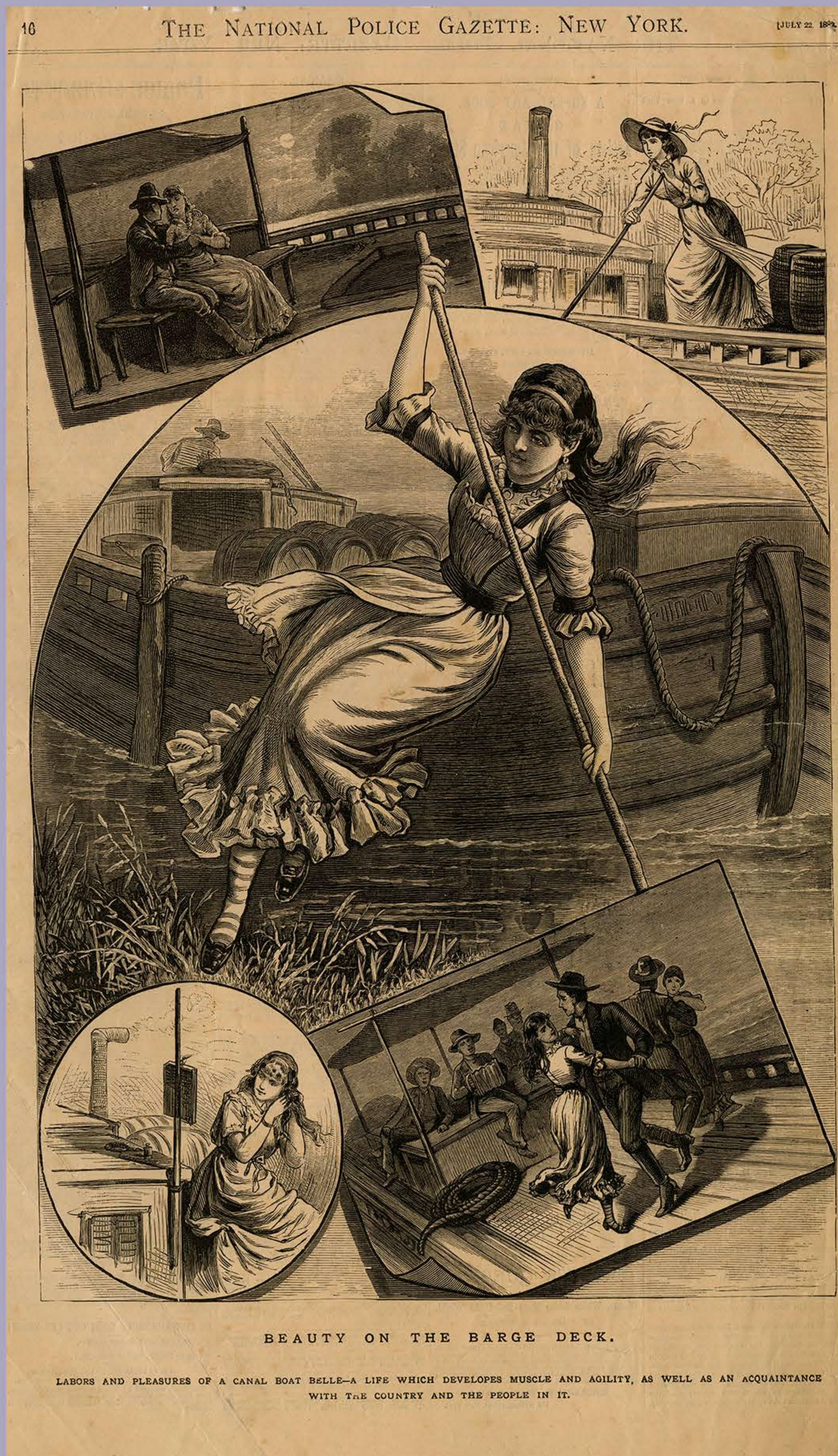
Rear: CS1998.1.03a Canal Life
These images of life on the Canal were drawn by S. G. McCutchen and run in Harper's Weekly, December 20, 1879.



77.84.2 George F. Weaver on the Black River Canal
A couple traveling by boat on the Black River Canal.

The Suffrage

Movement



Agricultural products, raw materials, and manufactured goods were not the only things transported along the Erie Canal. The people that accompanied those goods or who used the canal as their personal transportation system carried ideas from one place to another. Elizabeth Smith Miller travelled from New England along the Canal to the home of her parents, Gerrit and Ann Fitzhugh Smith in Peterboro where she showed her cousin, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a new, unconventional outfit she was wearing. Stanton took this wardrobe idea back to Seneca Falls where Amelia Bloomer wrote about it in her newspaper, The Lily, which was distributed to subscribers in the north. In this way, the Canal was used to spread the ideas of democracy and reform throughout New York and further West.

INV1009.91 Beauty on the Barge Deck
Engraving from the National Police Gazette of New York, dated July 22, 1882. Per the caption, the life of a canal boat belle “developes [sic] muscle and agility, as well as an acquaintance with the country and the people in it.”

00.1592 Suffragist March at Fayette Park
This undated photograph was taken at Fayette Park in Syracuse. Syracuse was one of the cities that owed its thriving existence to the Erie Canal.





L81.51.7 Emma Zyssett Fulmer
Emma Zyssett Fulmer looks very relaxed in this Canalside photo.



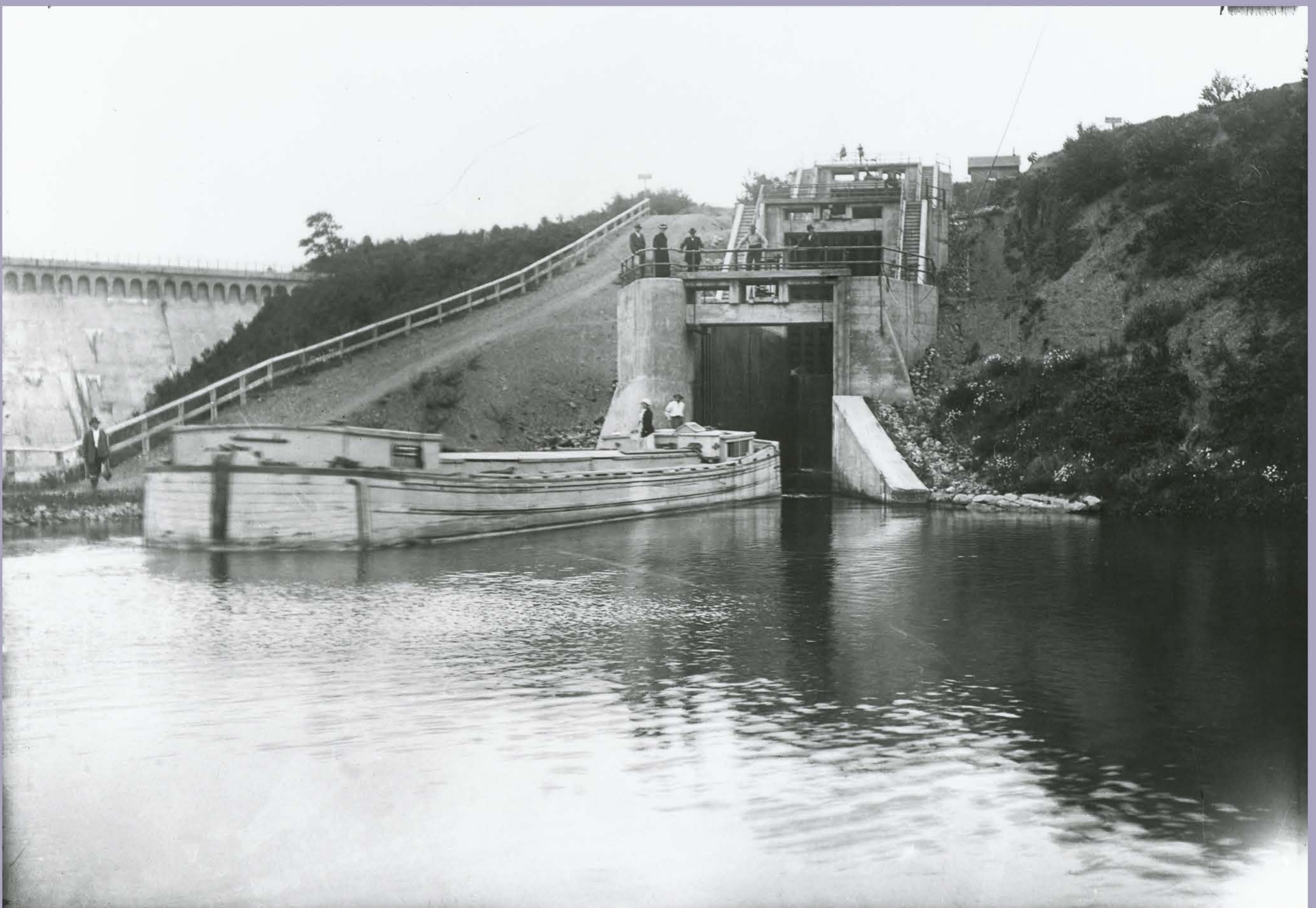
L81.51.6 Ethel Spillet Zysett
View of Ethel Spillet Zysett posed rather cheekily next to a rock with a Canal bridge and a boat in the background.



L81.51.5 Ladies on a Canal Boat
These two well-dressed women are sitting in a small boat tied up along the Erie Canal.

Women's suffrage was not a new idea in the early 19th century when the Erie Canal was transforming the landscape of New York. Abigail Adams had admonished the men meeting in Philadelphia in 1776 to "remember the ladies" or they would "foment a rebellion and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation." In 1848, 72 years later, women traveled along the canals and roads of New York State to meet in Seneca Falls where they would start such a rebellion. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Martha Wright, Jane Hunt, Mary Ann McClintock, and Lucretia Mott organized the Seneca Falls Convention where women's grievances were outlined in the Declaration of Sentiments and the right to vote was claimed. Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joslyn Gage, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Amelia Bloomer would join the cause lending their unique voices to the women's suffrage movement. But it would take another 72 years after that meeting in Seneca Falls for women's voting rights to be guaranteed by the 19th amendment to the United States Constitution.

November 6, 2017 marks the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage in New York State. Today the canal towns of Syracuse, Albany, Lockport, Rochester, and Rome all boast female mayors. Women are office holders on the town, county, and state levels. New York State has had four female Lieutenant Governors, including current office holder Kathy Hochul. On the federal level, nine of New York's representatives to Congress are women, as is one of the two Senators. All three women serving as Associate Justices on the United States Supreme Court, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Elena Kagan, and Sonia Sotomayor, are from New York. And New York State was home to the first woman to run for Vice President (Geraldine Ferraro) and for President (Hillary Clinton) on a major party ticket. Through these women and others like them, the voices of the women from Seneca Falls can be heard along the Canal.



00.1332 Traveling on the Black River Canal

A canal boat leaving locks on the Black River Canal and heading for the aqueduct to cross the Mohawk River. The Erie and its tributaries were the fastest way to travel around the state for a time.