

35 Years of Excellence

1962-1997



At the request of the Board of Trustees, Janet Besse graciously agreed to present a brief history of the Erie Canal Museum at the November 6, 1996 Board meeting. Her presentation is summarized below for the benefit of all Museum members.

A Brief History of the Formation of the Erie Canal Museum

by Janet Besse

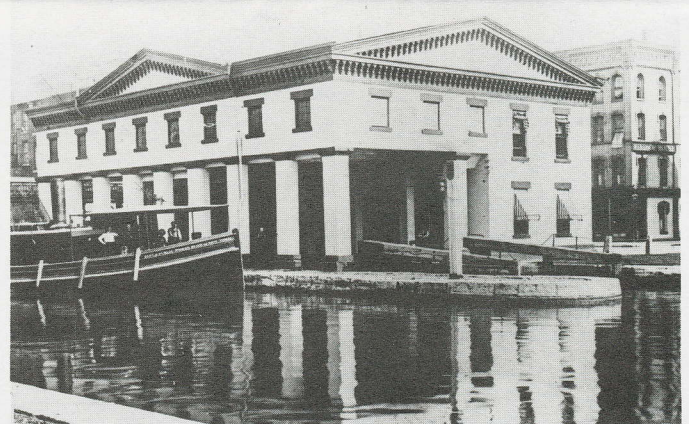
When the Erie Canal Museum opened its doors on October 25, 1962, it celebrated and preserved the life of the last remaining Weighlock Building in America. This Greek revival building stands as a monument to the importance of the canal to the history of the United States.

In 1945 and 1946, the Onondaga Historical Society started its effort to have the building, which was being used by the NYS Department of Public Works (DPW), turned over to the NYS Department of Education. The DPW sandblasted off 16 layers of paint in 1952 but then moved into the new State Office Building across the street in 1954, making the Weighlock Building available for other uses.

By 1956, the NYS Canal Society was formed by Richard Wright, and two members, John Hughes and Phillip Chase, sponsored State legislation to give the building to the NYS Department of Education. In a surprise move, Governor Harriman vetoed the legislation over the almost unanimous vote of the legislature saying that a future highway interchange might interfere.

At this point, the Junior League of Syracuse (Peggy Lou Feldmeier, President; Janet Besse, Project Chairman) took notice and was shocked to find drawings at the DPW showing Route 81 going right over the Weighlock Building and City Hall! The Junior League and the OHA went into high lobbying gear, with intense letter writing and phone calls to Albany legislators and John Mulroy (Chairman of the Board of Supervisors). By 1958, Gov. Harriman approved a new interchange plan to divert

Route 81 to the East, and the now Department of Transportation offered to turn the Weighlock Building over to the Bureau of Standards and Purchase. However, the Junior League persuaded Mr. Mulroy and the Board of Supervisors to accept the Weighlock Building on behalf of Onondaga County. The transfer from the State was authorized by the State Legislature and signed into law by Governor Rockefeller.



Weighlock Building, 1903

A list of representatives of the various groups interested in the preservation of the Weighlock Building was compiled by Donald M. Mawhinney, Jr., a member of the Buildings and Grounds Committee of the Board of Supervisors. The resulting Resolution named twenty-one area citizens to the first Board of Trustees of the Canal Museum. This resolution, in part, provided:

"Resolved, That said Board of Trustees shall have the authority and obligation to operate a museum open to the public for the collection, preservation and dis-
continued on next page

A Brief History of the Formation of the Erie Canal Museum

from previous page

play of items of historical value with special emphasis on the Erie Canal and to encourage and promote the interest of the public in the preservation of such records, sites, relics and remains as shall be found educational, instructive, or historically valuable; and for this purpose, said Board of Trustees shall have the full use of the County property in the City of Syracuse, known as the "Weighlock Building."



1962 Board of Trustees, (L-R) Peggy Feldmeier, Marie Cady, Janet Besse, Robert Clark, Frank Thomson, Don Mawhinney, Ann Bruns, Anna Ryan.

Following the adoption of this resolution on December 4, 1961, an organizational meeting was held at which different views were expressed by the Trustees on how to establish and operate the new museum. One group wanted it to be a teaching museum, the other, a repository of canal artifacts for historical preservation. This difference of opinion resulted in the resignation of several members representing the Onondaga Historical Society and the Canal Society, who also withdrew their support and exhibit material.



Frank Thomson giving a tour to Cub Scouts.

The first officers that were elected included Robert T. Clark, President; Peggy Lou Feldmeier, First Vice President; Janet Besse, Second Vice President; Marie Cady, Secretary; and Jonathan Bates, Treasurer.

The instrument of conveyance from New York State provided that the property must be used for a "Public Canal Museum." Consequently, at the request of the County, the original Board of Trustees started out to create such a museum. The Board was fortunate to have in its group Frank B. Thomson, a Harvard graduate in museum history. Frank was hired as Director of the Museum and he received promises of exhibit material from all over New York State and so the Board of Trustees forged ahead with the preparation of the building for use as a museum. Under his direction, work began in earnest, mostly with volunteers, to clean, paint and revitalize the interior of the Weighlock Building. Then, Bill Snow, a member of the Board and Commissioner of Buildings and Grounds for the County of Onondaga, stepped in with his County employees and made a significant contribution to the renovation of the building.



Weighlock Building

In September, 1962 the Board of Regents granted a "Provisional Charter" and the formal opening in October was greeted by large, enthusiastic crowds. The incorporators included Robert T. Clark, Margaret L. Feldmeier, Janet S. Besse, Marie M. Cady, B.C. Loveland, Anna J. Ryan, Ann G. Bruns, William L. Snow, Harold W. Presson, Frank B. Thomson, Lewis P. Abrams and Donald M. Mawhinney, Jr. The "Absolute Charter" of the Museum was issued by the Board of Regents on March 29, 1968. The present professional museum, recognized nationally, and the attached "Visitors' Center" is testimony to the work and vision of Frank Thomson and many dedicated people.



Crome Dollase, far right, at the Erie Canal Initiative press conference, held at the Museum. Pictured with (L to R), Mayor Roy Bernardi, Sen. Patrick Moynihan, Sen. Al D'Amato and Andrew Cuomo.

Reflections From the Museum's President: Crome Dollase

The past, the present, and the future ... may I share with you just a few words about each of these Erie Canal Museum time-frames?

The Past:

Vision! Overcoming obstacles! Perseverance! Creativity! Hard work! These factors and more enabled the Erie Canal Museum's founders to succeed almost 35 years ago, as outlined elsewhere on these pages. In a sense (even through on a different scale) the founders endured and succeeded, just as DeWitt Clinton had some 140 years earlier when the Erie Canal itself was conceived and built – forever shaping and speeding the development of the United States.

In the ensuing years, thousands of volunteers and dozens of Museum employees have all contributed to its evolution. It is a unique area-wide treasure serving over 50,000 visitors annually from all over the world. The Museum is housed in the only weighlock building of its type in the world and is the only museum in Central New York accredited by the American Association of Museums and the New York State Board of Regents.

The Present:

1996 was another year of quality, educational programs, historically significant exhibits and special events at the Museum. The permanent exhibits, such as the canal boat, general store, and locktender's garden, continue to have special appeal. The changing exhibits this year included the unique "Circuses on the Canal" exhibition, which family visitors and school tour groups thoroughly enjoyed. And from a management and planning standpoint, we believe the Museum is positioned for still additional growth and success in significant part due to the expertise of our Director and his staff, aided by the major contributions of volunteers (including the Weighlock Guild) and from the Board of Trustees.

The Future:

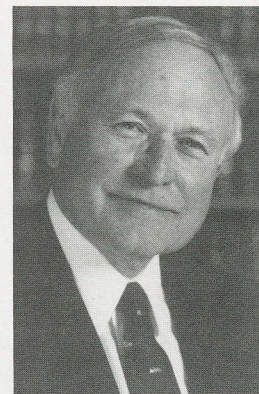
With your continued support, the Erie Canal Museum's future looks bright and exciting!

Our mission as a non-profit educational corporation, is to: (1) develop public appreciation of human history through Erie Ca-

continued on next page

Reflections of Don Mawhinney, Chairman, Erie Canal Museum Board of Trustees

This is an abridged version of Don Mawhinney's article. The article in its entirety is filed in the Erie Canal Museum's Buchanan Library.



It is a great joy of life to be privileged to help create something that, with the help of many others, turns out to be a success and a worthwhile addition to the community. With the benefit of hindsight, the Erie Canal Museum has been established as a recognized and accredited Museum in the United States visited annually by many thousands of visitors from all 50 States and many foreign countries. Such visitors include tourists, as well as scholars of American history interested in the significant contribution made to the early development of our country by the water transportation system provided by the historic Erie Canal.

In reminiscing about my museum memories since its founding in 1961, I realize that it is impossible to do justice to the history of this fine institution in the small space allotted for this article. The following recollections are random, at best, and are not intended to be a complete chronicle. Let me start by saying that the Museum's success has been assured by a few major factors among many others. These include the successful effort made by the Junior League, led by Peggy Lou Feldmeier and Janet Besse, to save the Weighlock Building from demolition.

The opening of the museum on October 25, 1962 was a gala affair at the Weighlock Building preceded by dinner at the Century Club. The Museum was most fortunate to have as its first Director, Frank Thomson, who, along with his wife, Dorothy, and his mother, Cherry, worked diligently to create the original exhibits, make them available for public viewing and to develop related educational programs. This distinguished the Erie Canal Museum from the OHA which emphasized the preservation of historical artifacts.

By 1963, the historic Weighlock Building was restored mainly by the County of Onondaga and volunteers from the Museum Board and the Junior League. Thereafter, the Museum Board decided to improve the land just to the west of the building and asked the local architectural firm of Pederson, Hueber, Hares and Glavin to design a restoration of what was to be called the West Plaza. The American Association of Nurserymen later presented an award to the architects and the Museum for this work on October 20, 1971. I remember traveling to Washington D.C. with Frank and Dorothy Thomson and Jim Glavin to receive this award from Pat Nixon in the White House Rose Garden. Since then, the Syracuse Garden Club with the leadership of Trustee Eleanor Cooper, and the Museum have applied for and obtained grants to enhance this area by adding a garden, now known as the Locktender's Garden, that was finished in 1993.

As with most museums, the success of the Erie Canal Museum has also been made possible by the quality of the Executive

continued on next page

nal-related social science, art and technology – by collecting, preserving, researching, exhibiting, and interpreting Erie Canal-related artifacts and archival material, and (2) to operate Syracuse's Visitor Center. Our vision is to broaden the impact of the Museum's programs – to serve more people and from broader areas.

So in the time ahead, your will see:

- * Additional entertaining, unique, quality exhibitions, some including items from other regional and national galleries and museums;
- * Expanded educational programs for adults and children (including some recommended by our new Student Advisory Committee) and a planned kiosk for children of all ages;
- * Broadened publicity, including a new outdoor mural of mammoth proportions and of national import;
- * A membership and public survey to glean the latest thinking of what people are currently expecting from the Museum;
- * Special 35th anniversary events scheduled for later in the year;
- * Expanded financial capability to maintain and increase our offerings to the public at all age levels.

So, with your help, ideas and financial assistance, we are seeking to continue to be visionary, overcome obstacles, persevere, be creative, and work hard – to succeed just as did the Museum's founders and DeWitt Clinton before them.

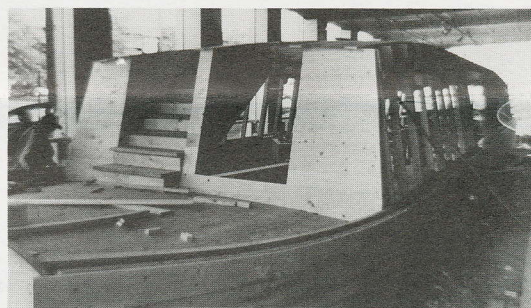
Won't you let us know that you will give a hand? Just pick up the telephone (or use fax or mail) and tell us how. Thanks...and may you and yours enjoy a blessed, healthy 1997!



Directors. I mention two other Directors because of their unique and very special contributions. The first, William Tumbridge, served on a temporary basis but at a critical time in our history. Bill brought the Museum through a difficult period of its growth, supervised the acquisition by the County of the LaManna Building for use by the Museum in 1978 and led the Museum to greater accomplishments. He has been a true leader and generous benefactor of the Museum and continues to serve on the Board of Trustees.

Vicki Ford Quigley served as Museum Director for 11 years, commencing September 3, 1982, and did an outstanding job. Included among Vicki's many achievements are the restoration of the Weighlock in 1985, accreditation by the American Association of Museums in 1987, and the mule driver sculpture, exterior wall mural, and locktender's garden, all of which were completed between 1987 and 1992. In 1992, the Urban Cultural Park Visitors' Center addition was opened. Vicki also livened up the Museum by organizing a "Canal Day" event with costumed people displaying 1880's crafts, games and food on Water Street and in the State parking lot.

For me, the last 35 years with the museum have been a wonderful, rewarding experience and I look forward to more years of expanded growth and development for the Erie Canal Museum.



The Frank B. Thomson under construction in 1985.

Weighlock Guild Continues its Support of Erie Canal Museum

In February 1976, "The Weighlock Guild" became the official name of a group of women interested in working for and promoting interest in the Canal Museum. These women have raised funds for various programs and exhibits. They renovated the kitchen and currently provide merchandise for the Gift Shop, such as cookbooks, tea towels with designs from the Tin Walls of the museum, and note paper with canal related designs. They have presented ECM with Donal, a sculpture of a boy fishing off the roof of the canal boat, the exhibit of the Theater Wing for the Visitors Center, and sponsored publication of "Always Know Your Pal: Children on the Erie Canal." At present, the women are working on another book to be published in 1997.

The Guild meets on the 3rd Thursday of every month except July and August. They currently have a membership of 80 members.

Past Presidents are: Margaret Bynum, Hoppy Wallace, Dianne Frazer, Sally Alden, Margaret Sawmiller, Sally Tuttle, Jane Friedel, June Lindemer, Eleanor Cooper, Lucia Albright, Bee Jay Pulos, Joan Poorman, Donna Haskins and Judy Sjostrom. Officers for 1997 are: President, Martha Heer; Vice President, Connie Weseloh; Secretary, Judy King; and Treasurer Barbara Richardson.

