

A History of the Crooked Lake Outlet

by

Frances Dumas

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In the long stretch of time between the glacier's melting and the American Revolution, the stream that tumbles from Keuka to Seneca Lake did so without much disturbance from humans.

The land was heavily wooded with huge beeches, sugar maples, basswoods, hickories, walnuts and oaks. There were wolves and bears padding down the ravines, moose and elk, even buffalo grazing in the clearings.

When the Senecas settled in the area they called the stream Minneseta. A well-traveled footpath from the Susquehanna up to Canada crossed it not far from its mouth.

Sullivan's raid in 1779 broke the back of Iroquois power in the region; and his soldiers were so impressed by the area's beauty and evident fertility that they carried back glowing reports to the more crowded east. Settlers began to trickle into the country.

They needed land to grow their wheat on and power to move their millwheels.

Sometime in the spring of 1788 seven or eight families, numbering 25 people under the leadership of a man named James Parker entered the country. They were members of a religious sect who wanted to separate themselves from the temptations of the world. Several parties had explored the area during the previous three years and pronounced it suitable.

The pioneers camped beside the east shore of Seneca Lake, it's said, and heard the roar of a waterfall across the lake; and finding the mouth of the stream they explored it.

In any case, there was one white settler already in the area, David Fish, a hunter and fisherman who became in 1782 the first white man to sail a boat on Seneca Lake. He had a cabin at the future site of Dresden, near the mouth of the Outlet.

Parker and his companions decided to found their settlement on the hill a mile south of the stream. By 1790 when the first federal census was taken, 260 people were living there. The town on the knoll known as City Hill was at that time by far the largest in western New York, bigger than Geneva and Canandaigua put together. Its people knew it as Jerusalem, or more simply Friend's Settlement, after the remarkable woman who led them: Jemima Wilkinson, The Publick Universal Friend.

They sowed 12 acres of winter wheat in 1788 and harvested it the following year, meanwhile surviving, as one woman remembered it years later, on milk and boiled nettles.

Being practical people as well as pious ones, the Friend's followers had purchased millstones in New Milford, Connecticut that same first autumn, hauled them upstream on

ox sleds to the falls at the future site of Seneca Mills and completed the first mill in western New York on July 4, 1790. On July 5, ten bushels of new wheat were ground into flour.

The history of Keuka Lake Outlet as a source of industrial power had begun.

Another mill was built on the Outlet in 1795, to serve the new village of Hopeton. By 1820 there were along the length of the Outlet 7 gristmills, 14 sawmills, an oil mill, 4 carding machines, 2 triphammers and several distilleries: all processing local raw materials—wheat, timber, flaxseed, wool and corn.

Other kinds of mills were built over the succeeding few decades, prospered and failed: asheries (which produced potash from hardwood ashes), plaster mills, tanneries. A little later the emphasis turned to more finished goods and factories turned out edged tools, wheel spokes, wooden hoops, handles and shingles. Every available site was taken along the stream's 8-mile length, up to 30 or more operating at any given time.

After the Erie Canal was completed in 1825, canal-building fever seized New York. In 1828 the Outlet was surveyed as a possible canal site and by 1833 the Crooked Lake Canal was ready for navigation, opening markets along the inland water route to Oswego and Albany, thence to New York City. Going south a portage between Catherine's Town (now Montour Falls) at the head of Seneca Lake and Newtown (Elmira) on the Susquehanna watershed provided access to the Pennsylvania markets and the Chesapeake.

The canal never made enough money to meet expenses, and it was abandoned by the state in 1873; though a grain-buying firm in Penn Yan operated it another four years, it had long since fallen into disrepair.

The Crooked Lake Canal literally opened a new world to the local farmers and artisans hungry for markets in which to sell their goods. The Outlet wasn't abandoned as a transportation corridor, either, for in 1884 the Fall Brook Railroad was completed, much of it on the towpath and bed of the canal.

The building of the railroad provided the impetus for still another local industry, the manufacture of paper from straw. A few mills began papermaking as early as the 1860s, but the railroad's capacity to cheaply move large amounts of goods created a real boom. By 1894 it was estimated that 60 tons of paper were shipped from the mills each day; about 300 tons of straw, coal and lime were imported daily, almost all of it by rail.

After 1930 the mills were gradually abandoned. The railroad tracks were so damaged by the flooding in 1972 that they too were abandoned.

But the traces remain of nearly 200 years of activity. The Outlet Trail passes the ruins of the mills and lift locks. It follows the grade of the railroad, along the old towpath and dropping once or twice into the canal bed itself. The canal route is clearly visible most of the way, as well as the beds of vanished millponds.

Progress has left this once-busy place very quiet; the most insistent sound is once again running water.

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<http://keukaoutlettrail.org/>

Or you can also contact us at: Friends of the Outlet, Inc., PO Box 65, Dresden, NY 14441. Please support the Trail and give generously to maintain and develop this beautiful historic and recreational Trail!