

Conewago Canal

Charles Stambaugh 3/18/25 update

Historical Significance

A State Commission was appointed to explore foundry roads and rivers. The last 50 miles of the Susquehanna River to the bay was too rocky. It required 30-40 men pulling the boats. In 1792, a contract was made between the State and the Conewago Canal Company to build a canal. The locks were opened in 1797 by the Governor. This being the first canal to open in PA, it was the catalyst and model for hundreds of miles of canals which created tremendous economic growth locally and for the early State. One of the most notable events in the early history of internal improvements in PA was the opening of canals which inaugurated a great system of artificial navigation. The earliest canal was around Conewago Falls, on the west side of the Susquehanna River.

Expanded Significance

A PA Commission was appointed to view and explore foundry roads and waters. They were to review the Susquehanna River. Their report was given to the Governor and Legislatures in 1791. In 1792, a contract was made between the State and the Conewago Canal Company, PA investors led by Robert Morris, to build the canal. James Brindley was the engineer.

The last 50 miles of the Susquehanna to Chesapeake Bay was too fast, shallow, and rocky. It required 30-40 men most of the day, with the process required jumping from rock to rock, pulling the boats. Until the completion of the Canal, most boats stopped at Middletown, unloading cargoes for shipment to Philadelphia over 100 miles of poor roads. With this faster efficient travel, shipping barrels of flour was less expensive than shipping unmill loads of wheat. The first boat through the canal reached Baltimore docks for export in record time. This created a boom in industrial and agricultural growth not only locally but also for western and northern Pa.

The Conewago locks were opened in 1797 with the review by Governor Mifflin. The year the Canal totally stopped being used is not recorded. There are Canal accounting books up to 1815. Phineas Davis's Codorus steamboat was wintered at the canal, in 1826. It is shown on an 1827 PA Archive map. Joshua Scott map of Lancaster County of 1858 shows the layout of the canal. Vessels "in the shape of an ark" were beginning to successfully pass over the Conewago Falls even before the canal was open. The Hopkin's Canal was built on the shore opposite in 1819. By 1850, steam engine locomotives with sufficient power to move freight began displacing canals as the preferred method of transportation. In 1885, the York Haven Paper Company use the canal headrace for its water turbines with the 1901 York Haven Hydropower (one of the oldest still operating plant) to produce electricity power to industries in PA.

This being the first canal to open in PA, it was the catalyst and model for hundreds of miles of canals which caused tremendous economic growth for the early State.

“And whereas a contract and articles of agreement were made and entered into on the third day of July, in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and ninety-two, between Thomas Mifflin, Governor of the commonwealth of Pennsylvania, on behalf of the state, of the one part, and Robert Morris, William Smith, Walter Stewart, Samuel Meredith, John , Francis, John Nicholson, John Donaldson, Samuel Miles, Timothy Matlack, David Rittenhouse, Samuel Powel, Alexander James Dallas, William Bingham, Henry Miller, Abraham and Robert Harris, all of the state of Pennsylvania, of the other part, as a company, by the name of The Conewago company, for opening and improving that part of the river Susquehanna, from Wright's ferry to the mouth of Swatara creek, inclusive, agreeably to the true intent, meaning and design of the Legislature, whereby the said Robert Morris and others, as a company, and each of them, did agree, undertake, and contract, to and with the said Thomas Mifflin, and his successors, Governors of the said commonwealth, that they, the said company, will well and truly open and improve the navigation of the said river Susquehanna, between Wright's ferry and the mouth of Swatara aforesaid, agreeably to the true intention of the Legislature, in the manner set forth in the said contract, reference being thereto had at large; and, particularly, that at the Conewago falls they will cut, establish and a canal, of a sufficient and convenient width, not less than forty feet, of a length sufficient to pass and extend beyond all obstructions created in the navigation of the said river by means of the said Conewago Falls and of a depth sufficient at all times to contain and convey, through the whole distance of the said canal, a body of water, at least four feet deep; and that they will also erect and maintain on the said canal a sufficient number of safe and commodious locks, not less than two, for the benefit of navigation; and that the said canal and locks, and the works thereunto belonging, shall be forever kept and maintained in good and perfect order and repair, by them, they said contractors, their heirs, executors, administrators, and assigns, at the proper cost of them, and every of them, and opened as a public highway and for public use forever, so that all persons whosoever, with boats, rafts, and other suitable vessels, and their freights, may thenceforth, at all seasons when the navigation of the said river Susquehanna is not rendered impracticable by ice, pass and repass in the said canal, and use and enjoy the benefit of the said locks, free of toll, and any and every other charge whatsoever, a freely as if the said canal and locks, were made and established by the public and duly declared by law to be a public highway.”

GERARDUS WYNKOOP, Speaker of the House of Representatives.

SAMUEL POWEL, Speaker of the Senate.

THOMAS MIFFLIN, Governor of the commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Approved, April the tenth, 1793.

[2], xvi, 80 p., [1] folded leaf of plates : 1 col. map ; 21 cm. (4to)●Philadelphia: :●Printed by Zachariah Poulson, Junior, number eighty, Chestnut-Street.,●MDCCXCV. [1795]

<https://artflsrv04.uchicago.edu/philologic4.7/EVANS/navigate/4061/7>

“They will cut, establish and maintain a canal, of a sufficient and convenient width, not less than forty feet, of a length sufficient to pass and extend beyond all obstructions created in the navigation of the said river by means of the said Conewago falls, and of a depth sufficient; at all times to contain and convey, through the whole distance of the said canal, a body of water, at least four feet deep; and that they will also erect and maintain on the said canal a sufficient number of safe and commodious locks, not less than two, for the benefit of navigation; and that the said canal and locks, and the works thereunto belonging, Shall be forever kept and maintained in good and perfect order and repair, by them, the contractors.” Page 3,4 The Act for Incorporating the Company

“In the year 1789, among the Commissioners appointed to view and explore foundry roads and waters in different parts of the state; Samuel Boyd, Bartram Galbraith and Thomas Ruling, were commissioned by the President and supreme executive Council to view and explore the Susquehanna and Juniata rivers, and ascertain the expenses, in their opinion, necessary for removing the different obstructions in said rivers; and made their Report as follows, so far as respects that part of Susquehanna (including the Conewago Falls) from the mouth of Swatara to Wright's ferry.” Page 1 Account of

“This report being communicated by the Governor to the Legislature, an appropriation was made, April 13th, 1791. For Susquehanna from Wright's ferry to the mouth of Swatara creek inclusive, falling of the estimate, and no provision was made for the purchase of the ground, (about a mile in length) necessary for the Canal. This expenses it seems had escaped the notice of the Commissioners as well as the Legislature, in their eliminate, on the plan of a Canal to be dug along shore, clear of the bed of the river; for in that case considerable trespass must in foundry places be made upon the adjacent ground, dividing the 19 Feet Fall equally through the whole length : Or probably it was considered as a matter of course, that the Legislature would provide the means for obtaining the ground, either by contact with the owners, or by condemning the same by a jury, according to law.” Page 2,3 Account of the Conewago Canal

“1. It is one mile in length, wanting a few perches. 2. It is everywhere 40 feet in width, at bottom, and 4 feet deep, in some places more, when filled only within 20 inches of the top of its banks or towing-path; all which is completely agreeable to the contract. 3. The locks are indeed a grand work, constructed in the most masterly manner, of the soft; solid materials, brick and hewn stone. The two locks at the lower end are 80 feet each in length, and 12 feet in breadth or width, and in the lowed state of the river three feet six inches in depth, over the main fills of each lock gate.” Page 13 Account of the Conewago Canal

WILLIAM YOUNG, Bookseller, No. 52, Second Street, Corner of Chestnut Street,
PHILADELPHIA 1778 University of Pittsburgh Library DAR RM TC625 C7A1
http://www.neychip.com/York_Haven54.pdf



James Brindley 1795

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/90296b0f-dd38-af0c-e040-e00a180667bb>

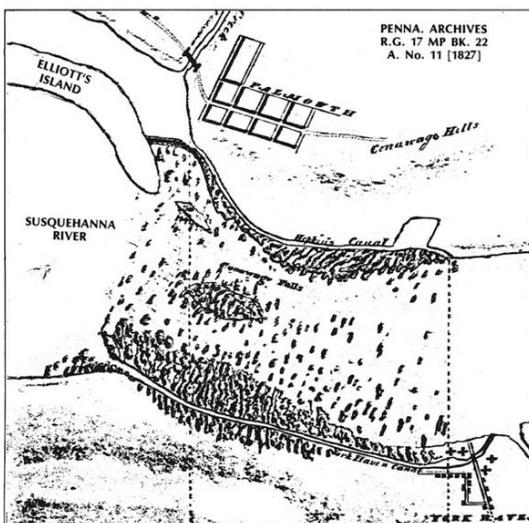


<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/90296b0f-dd39-af0c-e040-e00a180667bb>

Creator	Conewago Canal Company
Call number	MssCol 624
Physical description	4.5 linear feet (26 boxes)
Preferred Citation	Conewago Canal Company records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library
Repository	Manuscripts and Archives Division
Access to materials	Request an in-person research appointment.

“The Conewago Canal Company was founded in 1792 by a group of seventeen Pennsylvanian investors led by Robert Morris on the Susquehanna River at Conewago Falls Pennsylvania. Other founders included William Bingham, Alexander James Dallas, John Donaldman, Tench Francis, Henry Miller, Timothy Matlack, Samuel Meredith, and William Smith. The proposal to build a canal stemmed from the realization that the growth of commerce and industry and the opening of the western lands depended upon the making of improvements in roads and inland navigation. The Conewago Canal was the first venture of its kind to have the support of the State Legislature.”

<https://www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/archivalcollections/pdf/conewagocanal.pdf>



Scott Joshua 1858

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3823l.la000763/?r=0.055,0.33,0.063,0.02,0>

HOPKINS' CANAL AT CONEWAGO FALLS

by EARL J. HEYDINGER

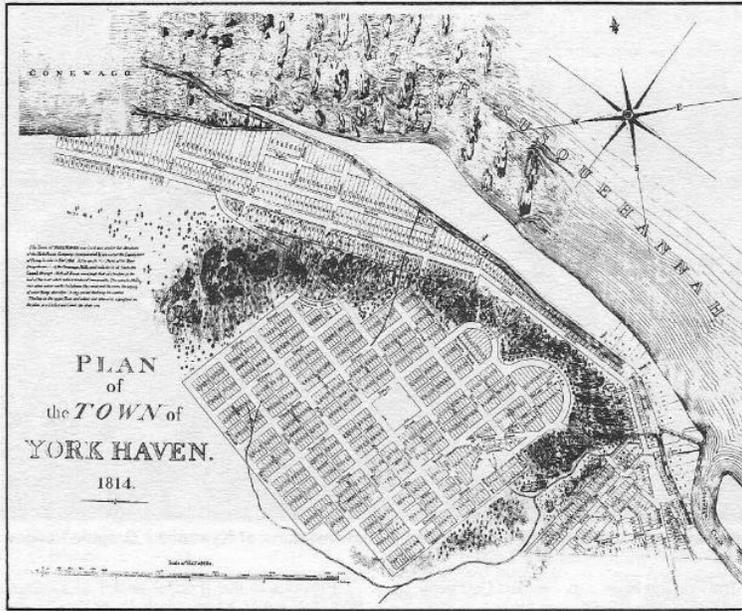
Canal Currents Issue 057 Winter 1982 pages 4-5

That Pennsylvania's first canal operated at Conewago Falls on the west shore of the Susquehanna in York County is little known. (Even our *Canal Currents* despite its long York connections has not mentioned this pioneer Pennsylvania canal operation.) Its corporate life began on April 10, 1793, and it survives today as the York Haven hydrogenerating plant of Metropolitan Edison. Its very early story is told by its own history, *An Account of the Conewago-Canal, on the Susquehanna River. To which is prefixed the Act for Incorporating the Company.* (Phila., 1798). This is available to you through Interlibrary Loan. *Histories of York County* tell the complete story. Naturally, as a canal, its use was greatly diminished with the opening of the Main Line along the opposite shore. But its waterpower kept it "living."

waterpower kept it living.

Recall that the Susquehanna ports of Middletown (York Haven traffic went to Baltimore), Falmouth, and Marietta had the handicap of wagoning all their receipts over the high Conewago Hills. This York Haven Canal passed keel boat traffic only, since its 12 x 80' pair of locks were too small for arks and lumber rafts. With the Conewago Canal's 22 Nov. 1797 opening, Columbia then prospered on keel boat traffic because its wagon-link had no hills to cross! Middletown went "to pot" as the main Susquehanna port! Kryder's 1796 ark taught all farmers how to get top prices at Baltimore. (His passing at Columbia was recognized and reported by the *Penna. Gazette of Philadelphia.*) Middletown went "to ruin" and Philadelphia suffered a great decline in wheat and flour exports, losing heavily in the Susquehanna traffic! Check statistics in Livingood's *Phila-Baltimore Trade Rivalry*. Page 24 shows the decline from \$18,000,000 of 1796 to \$8,000,000 in two years! Baltimore climbed from \$9 to \$12,000,000 in the same time! The ark had really wrecked Middletown and Philadelphia. "Baltimore (*Liv p 38*) was immediately recognized as the natural seaport" for central Penna and southern N.Y. The Conewago Canal was privately financed by the same Phila. group who "built" the Susquehanna and Schuylkill, the Delaware and Schuylkill Canals and the Lancaster Turnpike. Robert Morris was most prominent in all these internal improvements.

THE CONEWAGO CANAL



An 1814 map of York Haven, showing the Conewago Canal. The map is the property of, and is reproduced through the courtesy of, The Historical Society of York County.

by George Thomas

[This report is based on an 1802 "Letter to William Penrose, Esq, Chairman of the Committee to Whom was Referred the Petition of Thomas W. Francis for a Toll on the Conewago Canal and Locks on the River Susquehanna." The letter was discovered by the author in the microfilm files of the Stanford University library.]

A letter from Thomas W. Francis to a committee of the Pennsylvania legislature, requesting permission to charge a toll of two dollars per boat, provides an interesting glimpse into the problems that beset one of Pennsylvania's earliest canals, the Conewago Canal. Writing in 1802, Francis, shareholder and treasurer of the Conewago Canal Company, was faced with trying to recover a \$105,000 construction cost overrun. His plight will be discussed following the presentation of some background information.

Creating a Canal

In the colonial Pennsylvania of 1771, navigation on the Susquehanna was difficult owing to the presence of obstructions and fast moving water. One particularly treacherous location was Conewago Falls, a stretch of rocks and rapids 14 miles north of Wrights Ferry (Columbia). All goods traveling between Philadelphia and the northern settlements along the Susquehanna had to be loaded and unloaded north of the falls in the town of Middletown. If goods could be diverted further south to the Kings Highway, which stretched from Lancaster to Philadelphia, trade would be improved and shipping costs reduced.

On the 9th of March, 1771, by act of the General Assembly, commissioners were appointed to clear

obstructions from the Susquehanna north of Wrights Ferry. Upon examination, however, the job proved too challenging, and the funds appropriated were spent on other improvements. Efforts were renewed after the Revolution, and in 1789 a meeting was held with 26 leading Pennsylvanians, resulting in the appointment of three commissioners "to view and explore the Susquehanna and Juniata rivers, and ascertain the expense, in their opinion, necessary for removing the different obstructions in said rivers."

Their report on January 30th, 1790 called Conewago Falls "the great obstruction and barr to the wealth and population of our western country . . ." They suggested building a canal 306 perches [rods] long by 33 feet wide, with a drop of 19 feet, rather than attempting to clear obstructions. This canal would be suitable for boats carrying 35 tons with a 20-inch displacement. (They were probably referring to Durham boats, but have overstated their load capacity.) Total cost was estimated at £5,000 for the canal, plus £300 to clear the ripples near the canal entrances.

About a year later, a general appropriation of £5,250 was made by the legislature "For Susquehanna, from Wrights Ferry to the mouth of Swatara. . . ." with no provision for land purchase along the canal right-of-way. The commissioners visualized a canal which followed the edge of the river. On July 3, 1792, Governor Thomas Mifflin contracted with 17 individuals, who formed "The Conewago Canal Company."

If this canal initiative is put into perspective with other events that were occurring in the state, it appears that the granting of this contract was part of a larger plan to improve transportation. Three months earlier, the Philadelphia and Lancaster Turnpike was chartered to build the first hard-surface road in the country. Also, a charter was granted in 1792 to construct a navigable water-

way between the Schuylkill and Susquehanna rivers. This undertaking was a short-lived predecessor to the Union Canal, which completed the connection in 1828.

Governor Mifflin inspected the finished Conewago Canal on November 22, 1797, in the company of James Brindley, engineer and superintendent of the works, and other canal company representatives. An appointee, charged with assessing whether the contract had been properly executed, described the weather as particularly severe that day, with ice on the canal and snow in the air. He continued with a description of the ceremonies.

Preceding the official tour of the canal, a quick trip was made by several rafts and a boat up and down the canal to break up the ice. The first locks raised the boat nine feet in eight minutes and subsequently the second lock was passed in two-and-one-half minutes. The difference in time was attributed to unbroken ice in the first lock. The boat was poled through the canal by five people in 17 minutes, three minutes to pass the regulating lock, and five more minutes to make the river entrance above the falls. The official party descended back to the double locks, where the governor landed to a gathering of 500 people. No less than three times, the governor was saluted by the canal workmen, who bored "their artillery out of the hardest rocks" and fired salvos as he passed on the canal. [Since the canal workmen did not have a cannon or other means of making a loud noise to commemorate the visit by the governor, they bored holes in the rocks above the canal, loaded them with powder, and detonated them.]

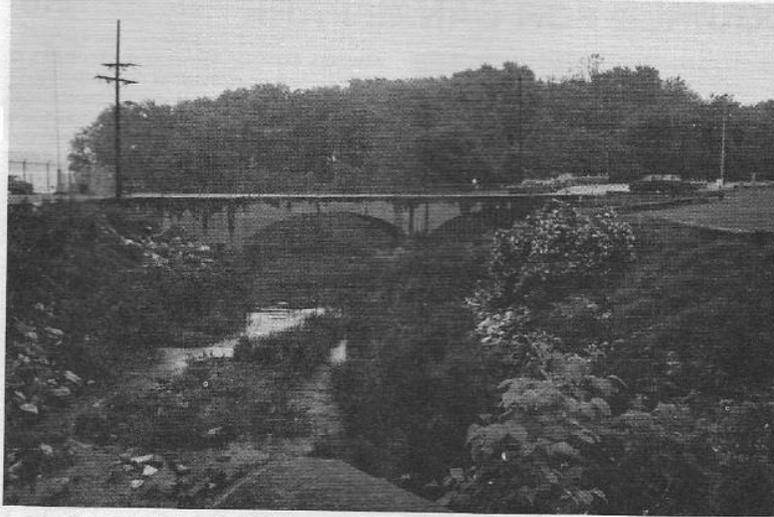
The following physical description of the canal is included: It is just short of one mile long; it is 40 feet wide at the bottom; it is four feet deep when filled to within 20 inches of the top; The locks are constructed mostly of brick and stone; Each of the lower double locks is 80 feet long by 12 feet wide.

The appointee mentions the cost overrun in his report and advises the governor to consider the canal completed as contracted for £5,000.

The \$100,000 Misunderstanding

The plight of Mr. Francis and his associates may now be considered. The financial problems of the Conewago Canal began with the original survey in 1789 by commissioners who had no experience in canal construction. Their £5,000 proposal was to dig a sluice canal around the falls and let the water run through the channel unchecked. The only technical research they did was to ask local boatmen, who assured them that a 19-foot drop would present no problems. When work began on the canal, this approach was considered impractical because the water velocity would have undermined the canal wall and made navigation nearly impossible. The maximum practical descent according to authorities of the day was 500:1 in the length to the drop, or 10.1 feet in 306 perches. The Conewago Falls descent was nearly double that limit. Applying hydraulic principles as recommended by Mr. Francis (although he never did the calculation) suggests the water velocity would be 24 miles per hour. Actual measurements by the canal engineer, Mr. Brindley, show a speed of 12-15 miles per hour, based on the timed descent of a raft at five minutes and of large logs at four-and-one-half minutes.

Considering the reverse case of taking a boat against the current developed in the proposed sluice canal, Mr. Francis proposed using the prin-



Site of double locks looking southeast; this is currently a drainage ditch.

... ciple of the inclined plane to calculate how many 180-pound men would be needed. The inclined plane does not seem to be the correct analysis for the situation, but again he offers two analogies based on actual experience:

To bring an empty boat up the Schuylkill Falls, which is three-and-one-half feet in 30 perches (495 feet), requires an hour's hard work by 12 to 15 men. The cost was \$2-3 in drink, with no mention of wages.

The few times a boat was brought up the Conewago, 30-40 men were required for most of a day and cost £5-6. The process required the men to jump from rock to rock, pulling the boat. The actions must have been humorous to the local people, since the men were referred to as "blackbirds." Apparently, horses could not be used because of the rocks and uneven shoreline.

With this justification, the canal company rejected the sluice canal concept, as well as one running farther inland which would have required extra digging. The only acceptable alternative was to build a level canal with the total drop taken out with locks. The company chose to build on the west side of the river because it had more water flow and fewer rocks. They agreed that "digging a canal on either side will be a great and expensive work, probably far exceeding the sum allowed by the public"

The final accounting of the canal expenses follows:

Ground purchase and cutting of canal	\$56,726
Locks and regulating gates	45,274
Miscellaneous	17,000
Total cost	\$119,000
Amount received from legislature	- 14,000
Cost overrun	\$105,000

This concludes Mr. Francis's plea for more money. It appears from the outset that the canal company expected to overspend the allotted sum of £5,250. The fact that construction continued must have been due to the enthusiasm and/or significant borrowing power of the shareholders. Since this was one of the first canals in the country, investors were probably not wary of the cost overruns that would plague subsequent canal projects. The amount of the overrun can be seen in its true light when it is compared to the salary of the lockkeeper that was set in the same report at \$200 per year.

The Outcome

Mr. Francis was only partially successful with his petition. According to the *History of Lancaster County* (1883), the legislature authorized a fee of 50 cents per boat for passing through the canal. The company continued to operate the canal at least up to 1814, building a flour mill and operating a ferry next to the canal. The Conewago Canal became less important when the Schuylkill was connected to the Susquehanna at Middletown in 1828, but the last year of canal operation is unknown. In 1886, the *History of York County* reported a papermill was being constructed from the excellent-quality bricks taken from the canal.

Currently, the site of the canal is occupied by a park next to the Pennsylvania Power and Light Company hydro-electric plant. Part of the original canal right-of-way has been lost to railroad tracks and to the water backed up by the power plant dam, but some of the original bed can still be traced. The location of the two lower locks is a ditch used to direct water from a large drain pipe back into the river.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conewago_Canal

Because of the state's underlying geology, the Susquehanna River and its tributaries above Conewago Falls were more navigable than the lower river. Upstream, keelboats and Durham boats could transport cargo on these streams, but the Susquehanna's last 50 miles (80 km) or so to the Chesapeake Bay were fast, shallow, and rocky. Until the completion of the Conewago Canal, most boats stopped at Middletown, unloading cargoes of lumber, wheat, and iron for shipment to Philadelphia over 100 miles (161 km) of poor road. Middletown, on the east bank of the river, and York Haven on the west bank became important flour milling centers because shipping barrels of flour in wagons from the Susquehanna Valley to Philadelphia or Baltimore was less expensive than shipping unmill loads of wheat. In 1791, the Pennsylvania legislature authorized funds to improve navigation on the Susquehanna River above Columbia to enhance trade to and from Philadelphia. Though privately funded, the Conewago Canal became part of these general plans. *Livingood, James Weston (1970). [The Philadelphia-Baltimore Trade Rivalry, 1780–1860](#). Philadelphia: Ayer Publishing. pp. 28–31.*

HISTORY
OF
YORK COUNTY
PENNSYLVANIA.

FROM THE EARLIEST PERIOD TO THE PRESENT TIME, DIVIDED INTO GENERAL,
SPECIAL, TOWNSHIP AND BOROUGH HISTORIES, WITH A
BIOGRAPHICAL DEPARTMENT
APPENDED.

JOHN GIBSON, LL. D., GENERAL EDITOR.

9877

ILLUSTRATED.

was established and Augustus G. Weiser appointed keeper. The first dividend was declared November 9, 1870. The 28th day of August, 1871, toll gate No. 2 was erected and Charles Kessey, appointed keeper. Five and one-half miles were completed the same year, and the work was discontinued until 1879, when one-half mile more was added. Peter Grim kept gate No. 1 for many years; in March, 1885, Michael Grim succeeded him. Henry Stabley is present keeper of gate No. 2. The present capital of the company is \$40,120 or 2,056 shares. Z. K. Loucks is president, Jere Carl, secretary and treasurer, Jacob Loucks, N. Lehmayr, Jonathan Jessop, William E. Patterson and John B. Sayers, managers.

RIVER AND CANAL NAVIGATION.

THE CONEWAGO CANAL.

One of the most notable events in the history of internal improvements in the State of Pennsylvania was the opening of a navigable canal around the Conewago Falls, on the west side of the Susquehanna River at the point, since the year 1814, known as York Haven. It was the first canal built in this State, and, so far as definite records go, the first in the United States. Its history antedates the history of York Haven many years. It was the initiatory step which inaugurated a great system of artificial navigation and internal improvement in our State.

Early River Navigation—The original mode of transportation on the Susquehanna, as on many other rivers, was with the "dug outs." They were made in imitation of the Indian canoe, and consisted of a log, usually of pine, with a portion of it dug out like a trough. The Indian traders used them to convey furs and other products down the stream. The "lattoes," a sort of flat-boat was used next, and was considered of great value to early settlers and traders along the Susquehanna. But for river navigation on a more extended scale, the "keel boats" were of great importance in the transportation of goods and products. Many thousands of bushels of rye, oats, corn, wheat and potatoes were brought down the river in them. They obtained their name from the fact that the lowest piece of timber in them, named a keel, ran the whole length of the boat from the lower part of the stem to the stern-post, and supported the whole boat. Sometimes two keels were used. On account of the rapids or falls at the mouth of the Conewago creek, these boats could not pass down the

river further than Middletown, which, until 1797, was a great port for them. It was about the time of the close of the Revolutionary war, in 1783, possibly, earlier, that the "dug outs" were succeeded by the "keel boats." The former were no longer considered adequate to the business. The latter were generally built in the valuable wooded districts up the Susquehanna and its branches, and floated down with the current, bearing from five to thirty tons of produce.

Middletown, at the mouth of the Swatara, was the lowest port of entry. Here the produce was transferred to the shore and transported overland, by means of wagons, to the Eastern markets. The return trip of these boats was more difficult. They were forced up the current with "set poles," and contained usually a light load of groceries, hardware and other merchandise. Boatmen would start at the head of the boat and set their poles on the bottom of the river, and then walk down what was called "runs," thus forcing the boat up the stream as fast as a person could walk. Many thousands of bushels of wheat, corn and potatoes were thus conveyed down the stream and unloaded at Middletown. The business interests of the town became very important. On account of the increase of the business, some boats were landed on the west side of the Susquehanna above the Conewago Falls which was the great barrier to further navigation of keel boats. The products from these boats were conveyed to the city of Baltimore. The town of Falmouth was then laid out on the east side of the river, opposite the site of York Haven, by James Hopkins, Thomas Bailey, James Keys and John Greer. But the expense of overland transportation of goods from Middletown, Falmouth and the port of entry on the York County side of the river, was too great to afford merchants much profit on account of competition from other sources.

Plans to extend Navigation and remove Obstacles.—Enterprising business men then began to consider the great question and devise some plan by means of which the obstacles to navigation at Conewago Falls might be avoided, and a passage down the Susquehanna River to its mouth be accomplished. Bertram Galbreath, a prominent land surveyor, who lived at Bainbridge, Lancaster County, and other influential citizens were appointed by the State authorities a committee to explore the river and report some feasible plan of avoiding the obstructions. The Revolutionary war prevented further action immediately, and the matter was deferred. In the year 1789, Thomas

Hulings, Bertram Galbreath and Samuel Boyd were appointed commissioners to explore the Susquehanna and Juniata Rivers. On the 30th of January, 1790, they reported: "The Conewago Falls, about fourteen miles above Wright's Ferry, was the great obstruction and bar to the wealth and population of our western country." They urged that a canal should be built around them. This proposition was encouraged by all enterprising citizens who were directly or indirectly interested, and the legislature of Pennsylvania was soon petitioned to furnish aid. It became an important subject of discussion among legislators. On which side of the river to construct the proposed canal was a subject which caused considerable debate. The commissioners appointed to view the obstructions recommended that a canal be built one mile long, thirty-three feet wide and nine feet deep, with a fall of nineteen feet. They did not recommend locks to raise the boats to a level with the head of the falls. Gov. Thomas Mifflin, who was elected in 1790, and was a great advocate of furthering any enterprise that encouraged internal improvement, called to his counsel some of the most skillful civil engineers of the time. They decided that nineteen feet fall in one mile would make it impossible for a keel boat to ascend it against the rapid current.

State Aid Received and Canal Constructed.—On April 13, 1791, the legislature of Pennsylvania appropriated £5,250 "to improve the Susquehanna River from Wright's ferry, to the mouth of the Swatara." One hundred and fifty pounds of this sum were spent at Chickie's Falls, and £100 at Hadleman's rifles. On the 5th of July, 1792, a contract was entered into by Gov. Mifflin on the part of the State of Pennsylvania and a number of prominent citizens of the commonwealth, most of them from Philadelphia, as follows: Robert Morris (the great financier of the Revolution), William Smith, Walter Stewart, Samuel More-dith, John Steinmetz, Tench Francis, John Nicholson, Samuel Miles, Timothy Matlock, David Rittenhouse, Samuel Powell, Alexander James Dallas, William Bingham, Henry Miller, Abram Witmer and Dr. Robert Harris. These gentlemen were appointed a committee to construct a canal forty feet wide and four feet deep around Conewago Falls. James Brindley, their engineer, seems to have estimated the entire cost of the canal at \$20,000. The State appropriated one-half of this amount. The company found, however, that by the time it was completed \$102,000 were expended. It was well constructed, the work being excellently done

and the canal substantially built. The bricks used are still in an excellent state of preservation, and are now again being put to practical use by the paper-mill company, which is erecting works there. They were made from clay found in the vicinity, the pits being still visible.

The canal, when completed, was about one mile long, and contained substantial locks. It was finally completed in 1795 or 1796. It was a great event to the interests of the interior of the State, and became a great center of attraction.

Interesting Events at the Opening of the Canal.—Governor Mifflin Present.—The significance of this improvement was shown from the importance attached to celebrating its completion and the opening of it. This occurred on the 22d of November, 1797. Thomas Mifflin, one of the projectors of it, and who was still governor of the State, and a number of distinguished attendants arrived on horseback at the foot of the falls on the Lancaster County side. A large concourse of people from York and the vicinity, had congregated along the canal. The commissioners and the Rev. Dr. Smith had already crossed the river to the York County side. Some of the ingenious workmen began to drill holes in the adjoining rocks, which they filled with powder. The governor and his party came across the river in flat-boats, amid the sleet and snow, fully determined, even though the weather was inclement, to fulfill their intentions. Just as he set foot on the York County shore, there was one grand triumphant cheer from the gathered crowd, and a loud explosion from the amateur cannon as a significant salute. The dignified officer, who had been a general in the Revolutionary Army, and under whom some of the mingled multitude had bravely fought in the battle of Brandywine, was thrice welcome to again set foot on the soil of York County. As he passed up and down the canal in a flat boat, a number of salutes were fired in order to enliven the occasion. The canal had two locks at the lower end, each eighty feet long and twelve feet wide. When the distinguished guests arrived, they were placed on flat-boats prepared for the occasion, and when they entered the chamber of the first lock and the lower gate closed behind them, they were astonished to find that their boats in a few minutes had risen nine feet. Ice had formed on the canal, and it had to be broken with poles to enable the boats to proceed. They passed up the canal amid the exultant cheers of the multitude, and the firing of salutes from the adjoining rocks.

At the head of the canal were several keel boats, that had come down from Middletown. By the time the governor returned to the lower end again, an audience of over 600 people had assembled, awaiting a speech from their honored and worthy chief magistrate. Gov. Mifflin was of Quaker ancestry, and was a gentleman of fine literary attainments, and of handsome appearance. He served nine years as governor of Pennsylvania, and had distinguished himself in other capacities, as a civilian and a soldier of rare distinction. He addressed the delighted audience, congratulating them on the auspicious event, and then departed for the Lancaster County side.

Navigation to Columbia and to Tide Water Opened.—The canal was now completed and opened for free navigation. A German by the name of Kreider, from the Juniata Valley, soon appeared with a boat heavily freighted with flour, which he safely landed three days later at the city of Baltimore. His success became known, and the following year many others did the same and were handsomely paid for their efforts. Many landed at Columbia, and their merchandise from there conveyed to Philadelphia. Just what were the conditions of the venture at first cannot now be accurately told. Experienced pilots had soon after succeeded in guiding large "arks" safely through the falls of the river. By the charter incorporating the company it was to afford free navigation, and just how the canal company was to be remunerated does not at first seem clear, especially if the arks were successful in passing the falls, and disposing of the produce transported on them to any desired market. Many thousands of dollars were at first lost by the company, and they applied to the legislature for relief. Eventually some State relief was received, and a small amount of toll charged for each boat that passed through the canal. From 1797 to 1814, the affairs were managed by the canal company, and proved quite a success. An attempt was made by James Hopkins, a wealthy personage, during this period, to build a canal around the falls on the opposite side of the river, in which venture he lost a large fortune. It was intended as an opposition canal to the one on the York County side, but proved to be a disastrous failure. A flouring mill and other buildings were erected in the immediate vicinity of the canal on the York County side, by the company that controlled it. This property, in 1797, was valued at £1,280 currency, which valuation included 150 acres of land. In 1810 a Philadelphia company, of which Thomas Willing

Francis was president, owned a large merchant mill, ferry, and sundry buildings valued at \$30,000.

The further history of this important business center will be found under the title of York Haven, in the chapter on Newberry Township.

TIDE WATER AND SUSQUEHANNA CANAL.

Causes which led to its Origin.—The Pennsylvania Railroad from Philadelphia to Columbia, and canal to the junction there, thence by the Juniata to Hollidaysburg and Portage road to Johnstown, west of the Alleghany Mountains, and canal to Pittsburgh, constituted what was, in 1831, known as the "Main Line," and as such is still maintained in the system of internal improvement of Pennsylvania, with the exception of the abandonment of a part of the original canal department of the works from Pittsburgh east as far as Huntington, on the Juniata. The canal, from the junction to Northumberland, thence by the North and West Branch to Wilkesbarre and Williamsport respectively, is known as the North and West Branch Division of the system mentioned. Those works were put under contract in the order given, as early as 1825 and 1827. The main line of canal was finished to connect with the Union Canal at Middletown, in 1830, and to Columbia in 1831, the North and West Branch a year or two later. Trade over the line was promptly commenced under the auspices of several transportation companies, conspicuous which were "D. Leech & Co's Transportation Line," "Union Line," "Dougherty's Section Boat Line," and in due time several other lines, besides several packet boat lines running from Columbia in connection with the railroad to and from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, thus making the traveling and freight facilities over the main line, complete at that time, and during the subsequent two years to Northumberland, over the North and West Branch of the Susquehanna, to Wilkesbarre and Williamsport, the two remotest points on the Susquehanna at that time. The packet lines were thus enabled to supplant the "old stage coach" lines, stopping at all the regular stations, and eligible points for the accommodation of the traveling public. The lines were east, and "all aboard," and a blast of the bugle-horn, set them off to the next station, and thus it went on to the close of navigation every fall.

Plans for and Construction of the New Canal.—This route was soon discovered to be too long, tedious and expensive, and a great clamor went forth for a canal from

known as York Haven. It was the first canal built in this state, and so far as definite records go, the first in the United States. Its history antedates the history of York Haven many years. It was the initiatory step which inaugurated a great system of artificial navigation and internal improvement in Pennsylvania.

The original mode of transportation on the Susquehanna, and on many other rivers, was with the "dug out." They were made in imitation of the Indian canoe, and consisted of a log, usually of pine, with a portion of it dug out like a trough. The Indian traders used them to convey furs and other products down the stream. The batteau, a sort of flat boat, was used next, and was considered of great value to early settlers and traders along the Susquehanna.

But for river navigation on a more extended scale, the "keel-boats" were of great importance in the transportation of goods and products. Thousands of bushels of rye, oats, corn, wheat and potatoes were brought down the river in them. They obtained their name from the fact that the lowest piece of timber, named a keel, ran the whole length of the boat, from the lower part of the stem to the stern post, and supported the entire boat. Sometimes two keels were used. On account of the rapids at the mouth of the Conewago creek, these boats could not pass down the river farther than Middletown, which until 1797, was a great port for them. It was about the time of the close of the Revolutionary war, in 1783, possibly earlier, that the "dug outs" were succeeded by the "keel-boats." The former were no longer considered adequate to the business. The latter were generally built in the valuable wooded districts up the Susquehanna and its branches, and floated down the current, bearing from five to thirty tons of produce.

Middletown at the mouth of the Swatara, was the lowest port of entry. Here the produce was transferred to the shore and transported overland by means of wagons, to the eastern markets. The return trip of these boats was more difficult. They were forced up the current with "set poles" and contained usually a light load of groceries, hardware and other merchandise. Boatmen would start at the head of the boat and

set their poles at the bottom of the river, and then walk down what was called "runs," thus forcing the boat up the stream as fast as a man could walk. Thousands of bushels of wheat, corn and potatoes were conveyed down the stream and unloaded at Middletown. The business interests of the town became important.

On account of the increase of the traffic, some boats were landed on the west side of the Susquehanna above the Conewago Falls, a barrier to further navigation of keel-boats. The products from these boats were conveyed in wagons to the city of Baltimore. The town of Falmouth was then laid out on the east side of the river, opposite the site of York Haven, by James Hopkins, Thomas Bailey, James Keys and John Greer. But the expense of overland transportation of goods from Middletown, Falmouth and the port of entry on the York County side of the river, was too great to afford merchants much profit on account of competition from other sources.

Enterprising business men then began to devise plans by means of which the obstacles to navigation at Conewago Falls might be avoided, and a passage down the Susquehanna river to its mouth be accomplished. Bertram Galbreath, a prominent land surveyor, who lived at Bainbridge, Lancaster County, and other influential citizens, were appointed by the state authorities a committee to explore the river and report some feasible plan of avoiding the obstructions. The Revolutionary War prevented further action immediately, and the matter was deferred. In the year 1789, Thomas Hulings, Bertram Galbreath and Samuel Boyd were appointed commissioners to explore the Susquehanna and Juniata rivers. On the 30th of January, 1790, they reported:

"The Conewago Falls, about fourteen miles above Wright's Ferry, is the great obstruction and bar to the wealth and population of our western country." They urged that a canal should be built around these falls or riffles. This proposition was encouraged by all enterprising citizens who were directly or indirectly interested, and the legislature of Pennsylvania was soon petitioned to furnish aid. It became an important subject for discussion in the legislature. On which side of the river to con-

CANALS.

One of the most notable events in the history of internal improvements in the State of Pennsylvania was the opening of a navigable canal around the Conewago Falls, on the west side of the Susquehanna River, at the place since the year 1814,

"History of York County PA" Volume I George R Prowell 1907

<https://archive.org/details/historyofyorkcou01prow/page/n411/mode/2up>

struct the proposed canal was a subject which caused considerable debate. The commissioners appointed to view the obstructions recommended that a canal be built one mile long, thirty-three feet wide and nine feet deep, with a fall of nineteen feet. They did not recommend locks to raise the boats to a level with the head of the falls. Governor Thomas Mifflin, who was elected in 1790, and was a great advocate of furthering any enterprise that encouraged internal improvement, called to his counsel some of the most skillful civil engineers of the time. They decided that nineteen feet fall in one mile would make it impossible for a keel-boat to ascend it against the rapid current.

On April 13, 1791, the legislature of Pennsylvania appropriated \$5,250 Aid. pounds "to improve the Susquehanna river from Wright's Ferry to the mouth of the Swatara." One hundred and fifty pounds of this sum were spent at Chickie's Falls, and 100 pounds at Halde- man's rifles. On the 3rd of July, 1792, a contract was entered into by Governor Mifflin on the part of the State of Pennsylvania and a number of prominent citizens of the commonwealth, most of them from Philadelphia, as follows: Robert Morris (the great financier of the Revolution), William Smith, Walter Stewart, Samuel Meredith, John Steinmetz, Tench Francis, John Nicholson, Samuel Miles, Timothy Matlock, David Rittenhouse, Samuel Powell, Alexander James Dallas, William Bingham, Henry Miller, Abram Witmer and Dr. Robert Harris. These men were appointed a committee to construct a canal forty feet wide and four feet deep around Conewago Falls. James Brindley, their engineer, estimated the entire cost of the canal at \$20,000. The State appropriated one-half of this amount. The company found, however, that by the time it was completed in 1796, the sum of \$102,000 was expended. The canal was about one mile long, and contained locks. This canal was of great importance to Pennsylvania, and became a centre of attraction.

The significance of this improve- ment was shown from the im- portance attached to celebrating its completion. This occurred on the 22nd of November, 1797. Thomas Mif-

flin, one of the projectors of it and who was governor, and a number of distinguished attendants arrived on horseback at the foot of the falls on the Lancaster side. They came from Philadelphia, then the capital of the state. A large concourse of people from York and vicinity had congregated along the canal. The canal commissioners and the Rev. Dr. Smith had already crossed the river to the York County side. Some of the ingenious workmen began to drill holes in the adjoining rocks, which they filled with powder. The governor and his party came across the river in flat-boats, amid the sleet and snow, fully determined, even though the weather was inclement, to fulfil their intentions. Just as he set foot on the York County shore, there was enthusiastic cheering from the gathered crowd, and a loud explosion from the improvised cannon, as a salute. As the Governor passed up and down the canal in a flat-boat, a number of salutes were fired in order to enliven the occasion. The canal had two locks at the lower end, each eighty feet long and twelve feet wide. When the distinguished guests arrived, they were placed on flat-boats prepared for the occasion, and when they entered the chamber of the first lock, and the lower gate closed behind them, they were astonished to find that their boats in a few minutes had risen nine feet. Ice formed on the canal, and it had to be broken with poles to enable the boats to proceed. They passed up the canal amid the cheers of the multitude, and the firing of salutes from the adjoining rocks. At the head of the canal were several keel-boats, which came down from Middletown. By the time the Governor returned to the lower end again, an audience of over 600 people had assembled, awaiting a speech from him. He served nine years as governor of Pennsylvania, and had distinguished himself as a civilian and a soldier. He addressed the audience for half an hour and then left for Lancaster.

The canal was now completed and opened for free navigation. A Ger- man by the name of Kreider, from the Juniata valley, soon appeared with a boat heavily freighted with flour, which he safely landed three days later at the city of Baltimore. His success became known, and the following year many others did the same and were well paid for

their efforts. Boats landed at Columbia, and the merchandise from there conveyed to Philadelphia. Experienced pilots soon afterward succeeded in guiding large "arks" safely through the falls of the river. By the charter incorporating the canal company it was to afford free navigation, and just how the canal company was to be remunerated does not seem clear, especially if the arks were successful in passing the falls, and disposing of the produce transported on them to any desired market. Thousands of dollars were at first lost by the company, and they applied to the legislature for relief. Eventually some state relief was received, and a small amount of toll charged for each boat that passed through the canal. From 1797 to 1814, the affairs were managed by the canal company, and proved quite a success.

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PA Conservation Heritage Project
<https://paconservationheritage.org/stories/the-canal-er...>

The Canal Era in Pennsylvania

The year is 1797, and the very first canal in Pennsylvania, the **Conewago Canal**, is taking riverboats around Conewago Falls on the Susquehanna River near York ...



Yorkblog
<https://yorkblog.com/yorkspast/first-working-canal-...>

First Working Canal in Pennsylvania was in York Haven

Feb 16, 2015 — On November 22, 1797, the **Conewago Canal Company** opened a canal to navigate the **Conewago Falls**. George Prowell's 1907 History of York County ...



NeyChip
<http://www.neychip.com/YorkHaven>

York Haven Borough History

See York's Past York Haven Paper Company. The Conewago Canal, **enabled late 18th and early 19th century river craft** to safely bypass rapids at Conewago Falls.



The New York Public Library
<https://www.nypl.org/archivalcollections/pdf> PDF

Guide to the Conewago Canal Company Records

Canal Carpany was founded in 1792 by a group of seventeen. Pennsylvanian investors led by Robert Morris (1734-1806) on the Susque- hahanna River at Conewago ...

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Harrisburg Magazine
<https://harrisburgmagazine.com/2016>

Did You Know? The Canal Zone

The Pennsylvania Canal System had its origins in 1797 when the **Conewago Canal** was created to carry riverboats around the **Conewago Falls** on the Susquehanna ...

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York Daily Record
<https://www.ydr.com/york-town-square/2006/07/24>

Conewago Canal aided Susquehanna River navigation

Jul 24, 2006 — A canal ... is completed around the **Conewago Falls** in York Haven in 1797. The canal provides boats with a slackwater pool so they could avoid ...

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Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (.gov)
<https://www.phmc.state.pa.us/communities/documents>

Pennsylvania Canals | PHMC > Our Documentary Heritage

The canal era began in Pennsylvania in 1797 with the construction of the **Conewago Canal** that was built below York Haven and enabled boats to circumvent the ...



National Canal Museum
<https://canals.org/Learn>

The Canal Era - Easton

The canal era began in Pennsylvania in 1797 with the **Conewago Canal**, which carried riverboats around **Conewago Falls** on the Susquehanna River near York Haven.

PENNSYLVANIA CANAL SOCIETY

2750 Hugh Moore Park Road
Easton, PA 18042-7120

February 1, 2025

78 John Glenn Drive
Phoenixville, PA 19460-1908
610-955-6436

Mr. Charles Stambaugh
North Eastern York
County History In Preservation

Dear Charles,

The Pennsylvania Canal Society encourages and supports your efforts to obtain approval for and placement of a State Historical Marker at York Haven. The location of this canal, the state's first to be completed and one of the earliest in the country, is more than worthy of your tremendous efforts to have a marker placed there.

The expansion of our knowledge and acknowledgement of our state's history is as fundamental as the study of a person's family ancestry. The Society is encouraged by the efforts of individuals and organizations to support the spread of this knowledge and incredible heritage.

One of our founders and a big proponent of York County's canal history was William H. Shank, P.E. In his book entitled "The Amazing Pennsylvania Canals," he said "In 1797 the Conewago Canal, paralleling the Susquehanna River on its west bank below York Haven and designed to enable boats to avoid the rocks and rapids of Conewago Falls, had been built and declared operable by the state. Its purpose was to link southbound river traffic safely with Columbia, to make connection with the Philadelphia-Lancaster Turnpike." The Conewago Canal and the advancement of Columbia and the Susquehanna River waterway in general would mold and shape the development of transportation in our state, and it would be a strong influence on the development and route of the Main Line of Public Works between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, as well as spawning transportation improvements throughout the state.

Sincerely yours,



Douglas R. Logan, President

PENNSYLVANIA CANAL SOCIETY