

Perinton's Erie Canal History

The Erie Canal played a critical role in the development and settlement of the Town of Perinton. Construction of the Erie Canal progressed westward from eastern New York, creating a way for farmers to export their products. This commerce route resulted in a booming canal town and port leading to industrial development in the Village of Fairport and Town of Perinton. The rise of Fairport and wealth generated during its growth and prosperity radiated outward to benefit those living outside the Village. Fairport became a central marketplace for goods grown and produced within the Town, and the Canal and railroad provided a broad reach to large markets such as New York City and Buffalo. Over time, the Erie Canal has evolved from its purpose as an economic and industrial driver to a recreational and scenic experience contributing to a high quality of life for residents and tourism opportunities for visitors.

Historic and Cultural Resources

Perinton boasts a number of historic and cultural resources associated with the Erie Canal. The contribution of each of the resources described below contribute to the Town's identity, heritage, and community character.

New York State Erie Canal Barge Historic District

The Erie Canal Barge Historic District expands 450 miles across New York State and includes the four branches of the state's canal system. The district covers the extent of the Erie Canal within the Town of Perinton, which is approximately seven miles in length. The district also recognizes the Erie Canal as a nationally significant, historic transportation icon that contributed to New York State's rise as a leader in industry and commerce. The Erie Canal, including the stretch located within the Town of Perinton and Village of Fairport, is considered a protected historic resource by the State Office of Historic Preservation.

Bushnell Basin's Historic District

The Bushnell's Basin Historic District extends south of Route 96 to the I-490 interchange. This area is the former terminus of the Erie Canal in Perinton and has a rich history as a former warehouse district. It also is home to Richardson's Tavern (described in greater detail below).

Richardson's Tavern

The only National Register Historic Place in Perinton is Richardson's Tavern, located at 1474 Marsh Road in the Bushnell's Basin Historic District. This building was listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places in 1980. The tavern is a two-and-a-half story rectangular structure incorporating features of Federal and Greek Revival architecture. According to the tavern's historic nomination document, the building is the last remaining Erie Canal inn in New York State still situated on the Canal waters.

The Oxbow

The Oxbow, located between Fairport Road and Ayrault Road on the Erie Canal, came into existence in the early expansions of the man-made waterway, most likely in the 1850s. When the Canal was first constructed, the four-foot deep ditch took many twists and turns to avoid changes in elevation and obstacles along the way. During projects to widen and deepen the Canal, it was often straightened, and in Perinton, this resulted in the Oxbow, which today is a remnant of the original 1825 Canal.

Over the next five decades, the Oxbow became home to a small number of boathouses and cottages. The area also became a popular spot for local businesses and organizations to have picnics and baseball games. Early in the 20th century more cottages were built, and the trend accelerated with the Barge Canal construction project. By 1918, the Oxbow was a full-fledged vacation spot for people from Perinton, East Rochester, Penfield and beyond. Many of the simple cottages were constructed from the lumber of dismantled railroad box cars. Evidence of this can be seen in early photographs in which the cottage's vertical boards display stenciling from their former life on the rails. Cottages dotted the shore of the Oxbow in 1915. The small lake created by the straightening of the Canal was filled in by decades of canal dredging. With the Great Depression came a dramatic change at the Oxbow, as rustic vacation cottages became year-round homes, on land leased from New York State.

Natural Resources

Water Quality

The Federal Clean Water Act requires that states periodically assess and report on the quality of waters in their state. In New York State a database known as the Waterbody Inventory/Priority Waterbodies List (WI/PWL) is used to compile water quality assessment information and is maintained by the NYS DEC. This statewide inventory of all waterbodies includes evaluations of the degree to which specific water uses in a waterbody are supported (use support) and the most current overall assessment of the water quality (waterbody assessment). New York waterbodies are assigned a "best use" classification, as follows:

- Class AA and A - water used for drinking water
- Class B - water safe for public swimming and contact recreation activities
- Class C - water safe for fishing and non-contact activities
- Class D - water does not support any of the uses listed above (this classification is rarely used)

The extent of the Erie Canal through the Town of Perinton are classified as Class B waters.

Wetlands

There are NYS DEC protected wetlands located in proximity to the Erie Canal extending from State Street in the Village of Fairport to the eastern Town of Perinton municipal line. These wetlands include approximately 200 acres of Class 2 wetlands and about 190 acres of Class 1 wetlands. Class 1 wetlands are the most valuable wetlands designated by the DEC and are subject to the most stringent regulations.

Flood Zones

Flooding is a common natural hazard across the United States and can pose a significant threat to people and property. Flood Insurance Maps are produced by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which identify flood prone areas throughout the United States. The full extent of the Erie Canal in the Town is classified as Flood Zone A. The canal edges define the approximate flooding boundaries during a one-percent annual chance flood event. No detailed studies have been performed to determine base flood elevations along the Erie Canal.

Endangered and Threatened Species

According to New York State, Endangered and Threatened Species are defined as follows:

- Endangered species are any native species in immediate danger of extirpation or extinction in New York or any species federally listed as endangered.
- Threatened species are defined as native species that may become endangered in the foreseeable future in New York or are federally listed as threatened.

Notable NYS-listed threatened animal species in the vicinity of the Town's Erie Canal corridor include the pied-billed grebe and sedge wren. The pied-billed grebe is a small waterbird in New York State. It breeds in freshwater to brackish seasonal and permanent ponds and requires dense stands of deep-water vegetation for nesting and cover. The sedge wren is a rare and local bird found in wet fields and marshes. The biggest threat to sedge wren populations is the loss of breeding habitat due to the draining of wetlands; therefore, protection of local wetlands and habitats are critical to their well-being.

Mussel Screening Streams

The NYS DEC screens streams throughout the state for imperial mussels. These screens provide information on vulnerable species and trigger consultation and potential permitting with the NYS DEC if there are plans to disturb the bed or banks of the waterbody. The Erie Canal is identified as a screening stream for imperial mussels and proposed disturbance to the area around the Canal requires coordination with the DEC prior to initiation.

Recreational Resources

Parks and Open Spaces

The alignment of the Erie Canal corridor in the Town of Perinton places it in close proximity to several parks and open spaces, which provide scenic views, public access points, and recreational opportunities for residents and visitors. Key parks include Kreag Road Park and Perinton Park.

Kreag Road Park

Kreag Road Park is a 9-acre park adjacent to the Erie Canal in the western portion of the Town. This Park provides a number of recreational facilities for users, including tennis courts, pickleball courts, softball fields, a picnic shelter, and a playground. This Park also provides access to the Erie Canal via boating docks and access to trails that run along and in areas adjacent to the Canal.

Perinton Park

Perinton Park is a 15-acre park located off Fairport Road and Church Street, with entrances from O'Connor Road, in the northwest quadrant of the Town. It provides residents and visitors recreational opportunities, including basketball, beach volleyball, tennis, playgrounds, and passive picnic areas. This Park provides access to the Erie Canal via boating docks and trailhead facilities to the Erie Canalway Trail along the water.

Water Transportation / Public Access Points

Perinton provides facilities for both motorized and non-motorized watercraft to access the Town's seven-mile stretch of the Erie Canal. Boat launches are located off Ayrault Road and at Kreag Road Park. Overnight docking facilities can be found at Bushnell's Basin and Perinton Park.

Bushnell's Basin, which is located off Pittsford-Victor Road, is a one-acre public boat dock area on the Erie Canal. Amenities at this location include fishing spots, camping facilities, restroom and showering facilities, overnight docks, and access to the multi-use trail network.

Trails

Approximately nine miles of the State-owned Erie Canal Heritage Trail run along the north bank of the Canal through the Town. This segment helps to make Perinton a regional recreation destination and connects the Town into the larger Empire State Trail, which extends from Buffalo to Albany to New York City. Additionally, the Crescent Trail provides over 35 miles of natural hiking trails through the Town that are actively maintained by volunteers from the Crescent Trail Hiking Association (CTHA). This trail system runs adjacent to the Erie Canal in the western portion of the Town and provides scenic views of the landscape and water.

Key Erie Canal Nodes

During the comprehensive planning process in 2020, community members expressed their desire to protect and expand the recreational opportunities provided by the Erie Canal. Several 'nodes' were identified along the Canal as locations to strengthen tourism and visitation of this resource. Nodes included amenities, such as pocket parks, small craft boat launches, and general public access points at various intervals along the Canal.

Scenic Views and Vegetation

Man-made and natural landscapes provide the community with special views that enhance quality of life and livability. Special views and vistas can be enjoyed from roadways, waterways and unique spaces enhancing the recreational experience for those driving, walking, cycling or boating along resources, such as the Erie Canal. For this reason, scenic views of the Erie Canal should be identified and protected. The entire length of the Erie Canal can be regarded as a public scenic viewshed due to the Erie Canalway Trail that runs along the north side of the Canal. Additional public viewshed locations along the Erie Canal within the Town include major roadways traveling along the waterbody, bridge crossings over the Canal, and park spaces. Private viewsheds also exist in the rear of privately-owned homes that back up to the Canal.

The scenic quality of the Erie Canal viewshed has evolved over time and is now known for its extensive tree and vegetation growth along the embankment. The existing mature vegetation along the Canal significantly contributes to the aesthetic and environmental quality of the area.

Key Takeaways

The importance of the Erie Canal to the Town of Perinton cannot be overstated. The Erie Canal's presence and influence has changed over time, beginning as a key contributor in the Town's establishment as a transportation and industrial hub. Today, residents in the Village and the Town not only benefit from the Erie Canal in terms of its historic legacy, but this central feature has transformed into a cultural resource of the Town. The Erie Canal supports a wide range of recreational activities, provides tourism opportunities, contributes to the integrity and health of wildlife and natural systems, and provides unmatched scenic viewing locations for all. The conservation and protection of the Erie Canal and its adjacent lands is critical to the Town's future and sustainability. Preservation measures, including potential regulatory mechanisms and organizational partnerships, should be explored and implemented to maintain the integrity of the Canal and preserve its value for future generations. In order to accomplish this, the Town will need to address a wide range of impacts and activities along the Canal; including but not limited to:

- Ensuring all activities within the Erie Canal Scenic and Conservation Corridor receive a higher level of review and public engagement opportunities due to the critical importance of this area to Perinton's community character. Activities within the corridor shall not harm the natural environment, introduce excessive noise levels, or emit noxious fumes.
- Prohibiting inappropriate development that is out of scale or out of character with surrounding land uses and the Canal's historic context.
- Limiting the removal of vegetation and the placement of inappropriate landscaping treatments along the Canal.

There are also several policy and regulatory tools for the Town to consider, such as the completion of a local Erie Canal Corridor Plan, a New York State Local Waterfront Revitalization Program, or the adoption of a Scenic and Cultural Conservation District. These options would provide the ability to perform a higher level of review and engage in a greater public dialogue before selected activities could occur. Perinton shall balance individual and private sector interests with the community's goal of preserving the role of the Canal.