

Photo of Washed Out Canal Bridge Reveals Little-Known Canal Break

By Bill Poray, Perinton Town Historian

While studying a collection of historic photos related to canal breaks in our vicinity, an inconsistency emerged. It is well known that several breaks have occurred in or near Bushnell's Basin, specifically, in 1911, 1912, and 1974. But several photos of a washed out canal bridge attributed to the 1911 canal break didn't add up. The reason is that the bridge carrying Marsh Road over the canal in Bushnell's Basin in 1911 looked nothing like the bridge in these photos, even though they had been attributed to that canal break many decades ago.



The photo at left is of the bridge that carried Marsh Road over the canal at Bushnell's Basin, taken prior to it being washed out during the canal break of May, 1911. The photo at right shows the collapse of a different bridge due to a break in the canal. The photo was long ago attributed to the 1911 Bushnell's Basin break, but it is obviously a different bridge than the one pictured on the left. (Photos from the collection of the Perinton Historical Society)

In an effort to unearth the identity and location of the mystery bridge, additional research led to a little-known canal break on May 26, 1908. As reported in the Monroe County Mail, "The break occurred just at the north end of the Wapping Road Bridge, the first bridge southwest of the Oxbow and about a half mile beyond it. The towpath is entirely carried away for a distance of about one hundred feet and the bed of the canal badly washed out for half of its width. The bridge is a total wreck." The western portion of Ayrault Road was once called Wapping Road.

The destroyed bridge was replaced in 1909 by a single lane bridge of steel construction, which was replaced in 1989 by the current bridge. A chart created by a New York State agency with information on all the canal bridges in our area confirmed that the replacement bridge was built in 1909. This is two to three years before other canal bridges in our area were replaced as

part of the Barge Canal project. And now we know the reason. The previous bridge was washed away in 1908, in a canal break that had mostly disappeared from our collective memory.

As for the cause of the break, as with other similar incidents, a burrowing muskrat was suspected to have compromised the integrity of the canal's bank. No specific muskrat stepped forward to accept responsibility for the damage, and no charges were ever filed.



A view looking south at the collapsed Wapping Road Bridge on May 26, 1908. The western portion of Ayrault Road was once called Wapping Road. The bridge was replaced with a Double Warren truss bridge of steel construction the following year.