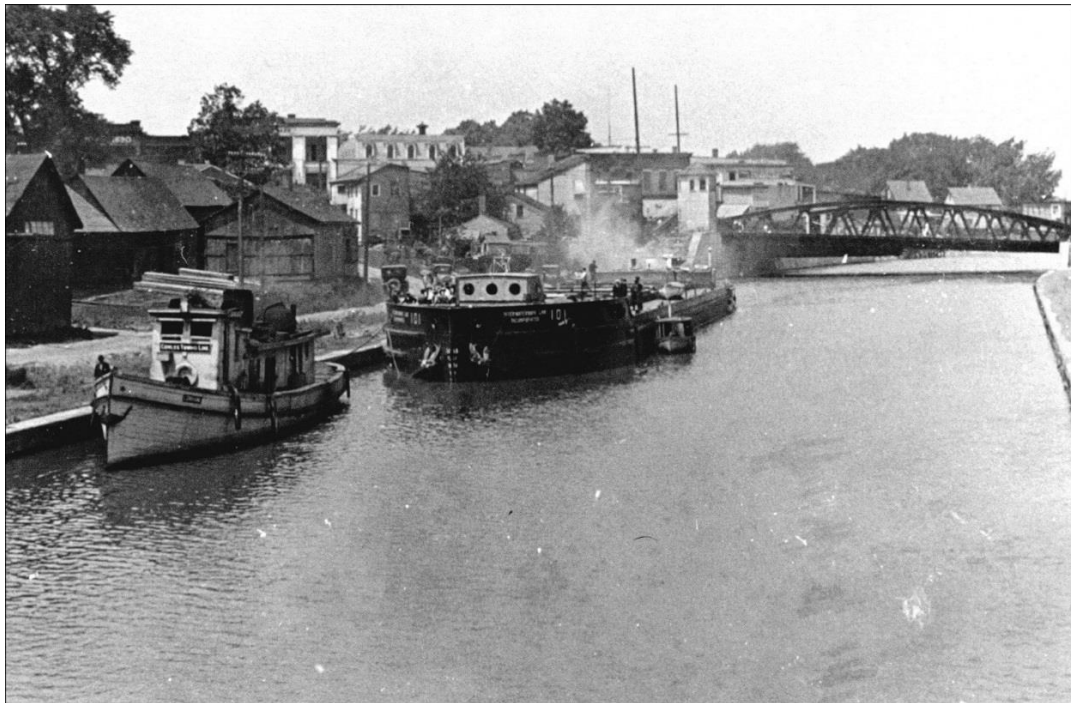


## Electric Mule on the Towpath

By Bill Poray, Perinton Town Historian

Ever since Governor Dewitt Clinton first hitched his mule to the notion of digging a canal across hundreds of New York State miles, there have been detractors, folks that thought it fool-hardy, a waste of money, or simply an impossible task. That didn't change when, seven decades after the canal first opened, preparations began for the biggest expansion in the canal's history, one that would both deepen and widen the waterway greatly. With the Barge Canal in the planning stages in the 1890s, and construction estimates of one hundred million dollars or possibly, much more, the anti-canal lobby was in full force.



*A tug boat, not an electric mule, leads this barge eastward through Fairport in 1921*

The plan to widen and deepen the canal would make the towpath mule obsolete. Since its opening in 1825, mules and horses pulled the canal boats. Of course, that's why we still have a towpath today, used by countless hikers and bikers. Plans for the Barge Canal included boats pulled by tugs, and ultimately boats motivated by their own propulsion systems.

That's where the electric mule comes into the picture. In the fall of 1893, trial tests were conducted near Rochester, of a modified canal boat fitted with a Westinghouse electric motor. Electricity for the test was provided by an overhead trolley wire powered by 500 volts, frantically strung by linemen that day. New York Governor Rosewell P. Flower, the state engineer and superintendent of public works all came to Rochester for the test of the electric

powered boat. Newspapers reported the experiment to be “successful in every particular – the unwieldy vessel was made to walk the waters like a thing of life.”



*Photo taken from behind a mule on the towpath heading east toward the Lyndon Road bridge*

The Erie Canal Traction Company was soon formed, with the promise of utilizing electric power generated at the Niagara River, for electric-powered trolley-boats across the state. What made this plan so attractive to many was the prospect of abandoning the expensive Barge Canal project altogether, and instead bringing electric power to the existing, smaller canal.

For the next ten years, the lure of avoiding most of the one hundred million dollars necessary to enlarge the canal was dangled in front of politicians and taxpayers alike. As late as January of 1905, the New York Sun supported the plan, stating. “Why a new canal? Here’s a scheme to use the old and save millions. Electric towing does it, with better results than a barge canal, at a cost of one-fifteenth... the (electric) motor people are tempting the taxpayers to save \$94,000,000. Their canal could be equipped in two years for more than the capacity of a barge canal, which won’t be done for a dozen years.”

A report written in 1921 on the history of the Barge Canal summarized the electric mule effort as nothing more than a stunt by the anti-canal lobby to squash the investment required for the Barge Canal project. Of course, the “stunt” didn’t work. Today’s Erie Canal, forty feet wider and much deeper than its predecessor, is the proof. Ironically, these days we occasionally see an electric-powered boat cruising down the canal. But no mule is in sight, electric or otherwise.

*Published August 31, 2017 in the Monroe County Post*