

From Telegraph to Internet

by Marion M. Dumond

*Former Town of Wawarsing Historian
and Ellenville Public Library Director (Retired)*

Most historians attribute the commercial growth of the Village of Ellenville during the 19th century to the existence of the **Delaware & Hudson Canal**, constructed solely to carry coal from Pennsylvania to the Hudson River. Very soon after its first full year of operation in 1829, the **D&H Canal** began carrying cargo of all kinds, from raw materials to finished manufactured goods.

Because there was a difference of about 1,000 feet in elevation from one end of the canal to the other, a series of locks was required to transfer the boats from one level to the next. Wherever there was a lock, there was business activity.

Ellenville was the busiest port between Rondout and Port Jervis, and it became the commercial center for the Town of Wawarsing and neighboring Sullivan County. The town's population grew as new communities developed where locks were installed. Men who came to the area to help dig the canal stayed and brought their families here.

There are many reminders of the **D&H Canal**, from street names to historical markers commemorating manufacturing concerns. Snubbing posts, bearing the scars from ropes rubbing against the stone, have been moved to the lawns of the public library and the school to remind us of the boats that were moored at our locks.

One of the few **D&H Canal** structures still in service is the small building near the intersection of **Canal Street (Route 52)** and **Berne Road** – now the office of the **Ellenville-Wawarsing Chamber of Commerce**. It was built in the mid-part of the 1800s (some say 1860), to serve as the district superintendent's office, business office, and telegraph office of the canal company in this area. Several pictures in the historical collection of the **Ellenville Public Library & Museum** show it as a small building with columns, located next to the superintendent's house, facing Lock #31. It was moved when the canal closed at the end of the century, and turned 90° to the north.

According to an interview with Town Historian Katharine T. Terwilliger in 1973, the telegraph was, for the residents of Ellenville, the only quick means of communication with "the outside world." At the time of the interview, the building was owned by Harry Kass of Ellenville, who was selling the property to the Village, and the building was scheduled for demolition.

Thanks to the efforts of Miss Terwilliger and Ben Miller of Ellenville, the Village of Ellenville and the Town of Wawarsing agreed to help save the building. Kass donated the structure, and, with the combined efforts of the Town, the Village, **Ellenville Wired TV**, New York Telephone, Central Hudson, and the professional services of Kross House Movers, the old



Above, the old D&H Canal / Telegraph Office, now the Chamber of Commerce Office; below, detail from an 1887 panoramic map of Ellenville, looking west, as might have been seen from the mountain, showing the office's location (circled) by the canal.



telegraph office was moved in September 1974 to the Berne Road site owned by the Village. Construction of a block foundation for the building was funded by Morris Kanfer, a Greenfield Park native who had aided other local historic preservation efforts.

The telegraph/canal office subsequently stood empty for more than twenty years after its move. Restoration efforts by a CETA crew were followed by vandalism, which required more restoration. Though it presently serves as the **Chamber of Commerce** meeting area and tourist information site, there has been official discussion as recently as 1997 that the building might well serve as a potential home for an interpretive center for the **D&H Canal Trail** or the **Shawangunk Ridge Trails**.

Visit the Chamber office to see this historic building and then go to the **Ellenville Public Library & Museum** to look at the files from the local history collection. Read "Coal Boats To Tidewater" by Manville B. Wakefield for more information about the **D&H Canal**; C. G. Hine's "The Old Mine Road" for a colorful legend involving a missing telegraph operator and death; and Pat Clinton's **Underground Museum** column with the title "A Romance That Clicked," a spooky story involving unrequited love, abduction, mysterious telegraph messages, and a "damsel in distress," all related in one way or another to this simple building which still serves the area's business and tourist needs after almost 150 years. ♡