

Canal to Rail to Greenway

by Marion M. Dumond

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

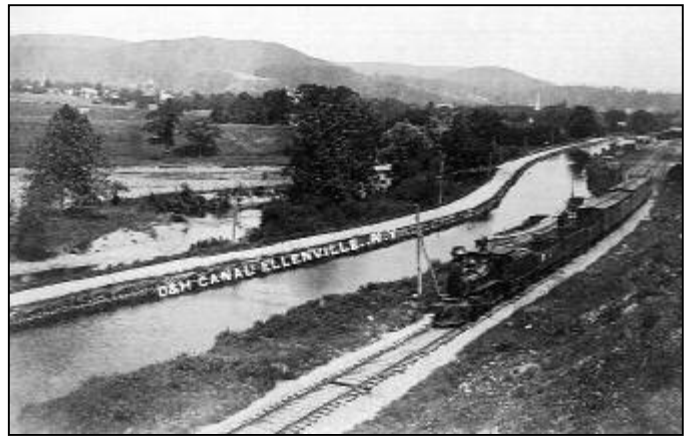
Worries about the cost and availability of energy are nothing new to America. Let's go back almost two hundred years to the beginning of the 19th century when the supplies of bituminous coal, the most popular heating source, were dwindling. At that time in our history, a large percentage of that "soft" coal came from England, but we were at war with England (War of 1812) and shipments were blockaded.

A different kind of coal, "hard" coal or anthracite, was available in the eastern states, principally Pennsylvania, but transportation between the coal fields and New York City, the major population center even then, was almost nonexistent, especially from the Scranton/Carbondale area. A proposal to build a canal from Pennsylvania to the Hudson River, on which the coal could be moved to markets in New York and Albany surfaced in 1823. The **Delaware & Hudson Canal and Gravity Railroad** was the result of that proposal.

The *D&H Canal Company's* plans to transport coal from Carbondale, Pennsylvania, to Kingston, New York, hit a snag very early in the planning process. Crossing the Moosic Mountains between Carbondale and Honesdale would involve too many locks and require more water than available at the summit, so a "gravity railroad" was designed, using a series of inclined planes and steam engines up and over the mountain, and gravity being the basis for the descent.

The canal began at the boat basin in Honesdale, followed the banks of the Lackawaxen River to the Delaware, crossed the Delaware at Lackawaxen and paralleled the Delaware to Port Jervis. At Port Jervis, the canal turned to follow the Neversink and Rondout Creeks to the Hudson, where the coal was transported by steamship to market. This route involved 108 miles, a net change in altitude of 972 feet, and 108 locks, varying from eight to twelve feet in rise and fall. Fifteen of those locks fell within the boundaries of the relatively new Town of Wawarsing (such as the Kerhonkson Lock #24, in the photo below), a wonderful need caused by the terrain, because wherever there was a lock, there was business, and communities grew rapidly.

The **Delaware & Hudson Canal Company** was incorporated on April 23, 1823, reputedly the first canal in this nation built as a private enterprise. In 1823, the route of the canal was surveyed, and construction began in July



1825. Engineers experienced in planning and building the Erie Canal were employed, including John B. Jervis, who is credited with the design of the gravity railroad as well as the canal proper. Chief promoters of the canal were Maurice and William Wurts, Philadelphians who owned some of the coal fields near Carbondale. Philip Hone of New York was the first president of the company and John Bolton was treasurer, but soon to be the second president. (Do you see the connection between these men and communities along the canal named Port Jervis, Wurtsboro, Honesdale, and Bolton Basin near the Hawk's Nest area?)

Water for the canal came from major streams by feeders and by damming the smaller streams to form lakes that would ensure a steady season-long water supply.

Although the canal was originally planned to be 32 feet across the top, 20 feet at the bottom, and four feet deep, the engineers soon planned enlargements to accommodate larger boats and heavier cargoes.

As part of later improvement programs beginning in 1842, four suspension aqueducts (Delaware, Lackawaxen, High Falls, and Neversink) were constructed, all designed by John Roebling, later designer of the Brooklyn Bridge. The Delaware Aqueduct is especially significant in the history of engineering, according to Aqueduct historian Robert M. Vogel, as "the oldest suspension bridge that retains its original elements and the earliest extant example of Roebling's engineering genius."

The **D&H Canal** affected life throughout the region. Irish and German immigrants who dug, built, and enlarged the canal brought their cultures and their religion to an area previously populated mostly by Dutch and English. Often, wives and children lived on the canal boats with the boatmen, working the sunrise to sunset hours, and beyond. New businesses flourished to meet the needs generated by operation of the canal. The use of horses (later mules) to tow the boats required harness makers, mule barns, hay and feed dealers, and related suppliers. Provisions were a necessity, so general stores abounded. The *Cox Brothers* of Ellenville operated six boats transporting cordwood to brickyards on the Hudson River. The Merchant Tanner Line operated boats in merchandise and local freight from canal points to New York City.

Ellenville was the busiest port between Rondout and Port Jervis. Between 1840 and 1850, the population of the Town of Wawarsing grew by 64%, an increase of 2,500 to just over 6,400. By 1865, the town's population had grown another 2,000... 1,000 of whom had settled in Ellenville.

That is not to say that other communities in the town had not grown. Napanoch, already a busy hamlet, saw enlargement of the 1754 grist mill, the founding of an axe factory, a tannery, a blast furnace and a combined forge and rolling mill.

