

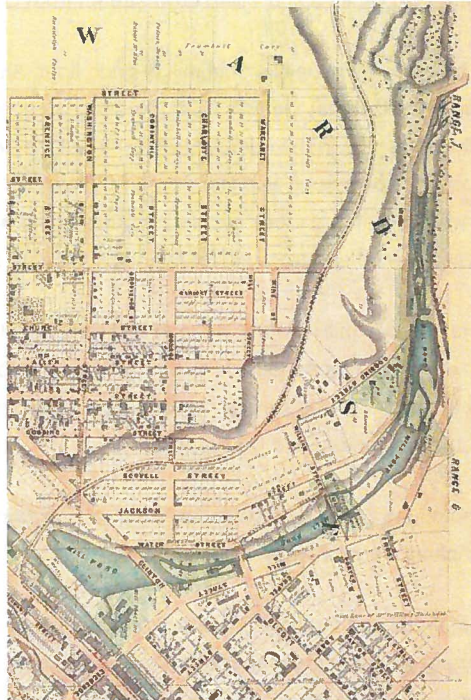
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NIAGARA DISCOVERIES: Creek-powered industry in early Lockport

Ann Marie Linnabery Niagara Discoveries
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COURTESY NIAGARA HISTORY CENTER This section of the 1851 Lockport map shows Eighteen Mile Creek and the mills that were along it. The creek was dammed at certain places and where mill races were built to divert the water into the mills.



Over the past few weeks Niagara Discoveries has looked in on the history and uses of Eighteen Mile Creek beginning at Lake Ontario and moving upstream to Newfane. Now it's time to take a look at the creek and its impact on the development of Lockport.

Looking at historic maps, Eighteen Mile Creek separates into two branches just west of Wrights Corners in the town of Newfane. The East Branch meanders south into the town of Lockport, then turns north again back into Newfane and continues northeast into the town of Hartland. When it reaches the area where Quaker and Ridge roads intersect, the creek takes a southwesterly turn and flows through the town of Royalton and back into Lockport near the intersection of Keck and Chestnut Ridge roads where it had its origin. Although this branch is much longer, it is the West Branch of Eighteen Mile Creek that became the more important of the two.

The West Branch begins north of Ridge Road (Route 104), just west of Wrights Corners and travels south towards what is now the city of Lockport. There is another split in the creek at the foot of Rattlesnake Hill (near the wastewater treatment plant), creating the West Gulf heading toward Upper Mountain Road near the GM plant via Gulf Wilderness Park. At this split, the larger of the two creeks, still the West Branch of Eighteen Mile Creek but referred to as the East Gulf, was eventually chosen as the place where the Flight of Five Locks would be built in the early 1820s (yes, the terms can be

very confusing).

The first person to take advantage of the waters of Eighteen Mile Creek to power a mill was Zeno Comstock, a nephew of the five Comstock brothers who came to this area before the locks were built and are credited with much of the early development of the village of Lockport. This Comstock built a saw mill in either 1816 or 1819 (sources differ) on the creek near what is now Chestnut and Spring streets where a waterfall was located (that portion of the creek is now underground). This mill did not last long but other saw mills were built within a short time downstream from Comstock's.

In most places, the first mill to be built was usually a grist mill to grind flour. Although this was important, in the case of Lockport, the fact that the Erie Canal would be coming through the area and the locks would be constructed somewhere in the nearby vicinity, meant the need for lumber to erect necessary structures took precedence over flour. Van Horn's grist mill was not that far from Lockport. Within a few years, a grist mill was built on the creek by Otis Hathaway near what is now Clinton and Mill streets, before the creek was diverted underground for the building of the canal.

An account of the opening of Hathaway's mill is found in the 1878 History of Niagara County. The villagers were "so elated" they "expressed their gratitude to Mr. Hathaway ... by rolling him in the first meal that was ground." Later that night a "grand jollification" was held which ended with the "jolly crew" arriving at "the Cottage," the first inn opened in Lockport.

From these few mills that pre-dated the building of the locks, the materials necessary for sustaining the residents and thousands of canal workers were supplied.

Once the Flight of Five was completed and the surplus water from the canal was diverted and harnessed, mills of all kinds sprung up along the man-made waterway and the natural creek. But Eighteen Mile Creek in Lockport was drastically changed by the building of the canal. Downstream from the canal, the creek was dammed in several places and mill races were dug alongside the creek to divert water into the mills.

The most obvious change in the course of the creek is that it completely disappears from Clinton Street to near Remick Parkway. Beginning with the building of the canal in the 1820s, and continuing in various stages over the next 100 years, Eighteen Mile Creek was diverted underground through the city of Lockport. As the city spread eastward, the creek was funneled through subterranean culverts to create new residential neighborhoods.

Another negative effect of all the mills and later industries built along the creek was all the chemicals that were dumped into the waterway. After nearly 200 years of contamination, Eighteen Mile Creek was declared a Superfund site and the EPA has begun remediation measures to clean up the creek, allowing fish to return and to expand recreational activities.

Ann Marie Linnabery is the assistant director of the History Center of Niagara.

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