

## GALA DAY IN 1828 AT BERWICK AS GROUND BROKEN FOR CANAL

Notables here on July 4 for Celebration.

Canal Filled Big Place for half Century

But Was Not Paying Venture and Passed to Railroad.

*Introduction: The state of Pennsylvania undertook an ambitious canal building program beginning in the 1820s. Its advocates argued that a canal system was needed to stimulate economic growth and development. The present day equivalent to this internal improvement project would be our interstate highway program that began in the 1950s.*

*The Wikes-Barre area was a major proponent for a canal along the Susquehanna River, known as the North Branch Canal. Finally, after nearly four years of aggressive lobbying and political maneuvering, the legislature appropriated funds to start the construction of the canal that would run from Northumberland the New York border. Daniel Montgomery of Danville served as the President of the Board of Commissioners. It was at Berwick on July 4, 1818, that a ground-breaking ceremony took place on July 4, 1828, to start the construction of the canal. The following article that appeared in the Berwick Enterprise on June 26, 1935, provides an account of the event and a brief history of the canal.*

It was on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1828 at Berwick that ground was broken for the construction of the North Branch canal, or Pennsylvania canal, that was put into operation to remain in use until 1901, when it gave way to more modern and efficient methods of transportation.

The canal boat and canal boating figured largely in the development of the small town. Beach Haven, Lime Ridge, and Espy were particularly centers for boatmen, and had their basins, as did Berwick, where the boats would be tied up for the winter when the water was left out of the canal. There are in Berwick and in most towns today many old boatmen who sailed the "ragin canal."

An incidental by-product of the canal was the fact that it furnished the means for Young America to learn to swim, skate, and along its grassy banks, perhaps to play cards and smoke cigarettes.

Was Gala Event

General Daniel Montgomery of Danville, and Judge Hollenback, of the well-known Wilkes-Barre family threw out the first shovelfull of earth on the canal

The occasion was one with gala ceremonies and of statewide importance. A great parade brought out all the societies and organizations of the town and many from visiting cities. An early account gives the following description:

"The procession was headed by Colonel N. Hurtbut, of Wilkes-Barre and marshalls. It paraded the streets towards the destination, the point near the river bank selected for the first operations of digging. First came Dr. William G. Hurley of Bloomsburg, and Wipple, the chief engineer of the work with two assistants. Next Nathan Beach of Beach Grove, holding the handles of a plow, the oxen dragging it being driven by John Lockhart, of Salem, Pa. Then followed Reese Bowman, of Briar Creek, and John L. Butler, of Wilkes-Barre, pushing wheelbarrows; Alexander Jamison, of Salem, and Arnold Colt, of Wilkes-Barre, carrying spades. The Berwick Infantry, under Col. John Snyder, and the Luzerne County Cornet Band, followed.

After the ceremonies and the throwing out of the first earth, it was intended to have a dinner on the river bank for all the crowd but a severe downpour prevented this so the repast was served in the Cross-Keys tavern. Only part of the assembly being provided for although the rooms of the tavern were crowded to the utmost.

The building of the canal did much to increase the growth of Berwick but it scarcely improved its moral tone, for in 1830, when the first boat passed through, there were fourteen drinking places in the village, an early historian comments.

After the opening of the canal many of the workmen who had assisted in the construction remained and made their homes in Berwick, thus adding a large Irish strain to the German and Quaker of the early settlers.

The canal provided a new method of transportation and had a decided influence on the section but it was not to prove a paying venture and was soon to meet a rival in the railroads, soon to be eclipsed as a method of transportation and then to pass out of the picture. Its memories remain in the scenic beauty it imparted along its course, as the "swimming hole" of Berwickians of another generation and for the picnic and excursion parties on the "ragin canal."

The explosion of the steamboat "Susquehanna" in the Berwick falls in May, 1826, is given credit with sounding the death knell to hopes of navigation the Susquehanna river. There had been proposals if dams in the river and the use of light weight boats known as the Durham boats. Attention to canal construction was stimulated.

The North Branch Canal Company was organized to construct a canal from Northumberland to the New York state line. It was in 1831 that the first boats were operated on the canal to pass Berwick. It was not until 1856 that the canal was entirely completed and after many vicissitudes, from Pittston to Elmira.

### Canal Tolls

That the canal did a heavy business in the transportation of coal and other merchandise, and as a passenger route between Northumberland, is indicated by the following statement of tolls.

The *Columbia Enquirer* of June 6, 1844, has the record of tools received and a comment of the toll collector:

#### COLLECTOR'S OFFICE

Berwick, Pa., June 1, 1844

The following shows the collection of canal tolls at this office for the present season, viz-

Month of April- \$2,838.62.

Month of May- \$7,629.45.

Total amount- \$10,468.07.

Headley's man Friday, upon the first day of last June made the following publication:

#### COLLECTOR'S OFFICE

Berwick, June 1, 1843

The canal tolls received at this office up to last evening amounted to \$936.13.

A. M. Gangwere, collector.

Here is the handsome increase over that reported last year of nine thousand, five hundred and thirty one dollars and ninety-four cents. A friend the other day on noting the above returns jocularly remarks: That McReynolds, the present collector, is a queer man. Why, said another. Because I believe he returns all the money he receives.

The entire canal systems in this section of the state was sold in 1858 to the Sunbury and Erie Railroad company and by them to the North Branch Canal Company which operated the section from Northumberland to Wilkes-Barre, a distance of 65 miles. In 1869, it was sold to the Pennsylvania Canal Company. The company, composed of Pennsylvania Railroad stockholders, owned in all 338 miles of canals in the state.

After the 80's, the business of the canal steadily declined but continued until it was abandoned in 1901.

When the canal was finally abandoned, the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad Company purchased it. In 1904 filled up much of the bed, covering the old locks of stone near the point of the present D. L. & W. station completely. The Shingler home is the old lock house. It is interesting to conjecture the opinions of explorers of some coming century who may uncover these stone remains and find the old corner stone at the bottoms of a deep excavation.

Today, the memories of the canal and the trips to Havre De Gras, and even to New York City by a series of canals, are kept alive by the Boatmen's Association. Annual reunions are held at Rolling Green Park, near Selinsgrove, and the loyal boatmen look forward to the reunion and the tales of other days. The number of the boatmen is rapidly diminishing.