

Teamsters, Dock Wallopers and Child Captains



The first of Port Henry's many iron furnaces was erected just west of here in 1822. Throughout the 19th century new furnaces, crushers, concentrating plants, and casting houses were added to increase production.

The key to the success of Port Henry's waterborne commerce of heavy freight was that the boats arriving with holds of anthracite coal from the south could be reloaded with iron ore. Travelling with full loads in both directions allowed canal boats to remain competitive after the railroad arrived in Port Henry in 1875. The ore and the fuel for the furnaces were transported by canal boats, which often were docked here by the hundreds.

Iron ore required iron men to move it about. On the plank road from the ore beds, teamsters sweated to brake and steer their horses, who pulled 7-or-8 ton loads. "Dock wallopers" maneuvered 500-pound wheelbarrows loaded with ore up gangways to dump their load into the canal boat holds. Four men loaded two 100-ton boats a day.

Following a decades-long decline in traffic on the Champlain Canal, the State of New York tried to make it more competitive by enlarging it. The Champlain Barge Canal opened in 1916 with modern locks that necessitated larger piers for the massive steam tug-pulled barge trains of the 20th century.



Bay State Iron Company and Port Henry Furnaces, circa 1867, courtesy of the Moriah Historical Society.



Chained to the Deck for his own Good

Life on a canal boat was part glamour, part grit. The small cabin contained the barest of amenities. There were no toilets aboard. Generally speaking, sleeping space in the cabin was at a premium, so some of the crew bunked under awnings on deck. Young children were often tied on deck to prevent them from falling into the canal or lake. Boys worked with their fathers until they were old enough to operate their own boat, and teenage captains were not unheard of. (Courtesy of the C&O Canal National Historical Park.)



Walter C. Witherbee

Successfully managing the technologically complex and financially mercurial workings of an iron business required the toughness of the canal boat captain, teamster, or dock worker. Walter C. Witherbee was one of the three generations of his family who steered the Witherbee-Sherman Company. (Courtesy of Special Collections, Feinberg Library, SUNY Plattsburgh.)