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## Erie Canal Museum: 50 years of remembering the canal that put Syracuse on the map

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By **Dick Case, Post-Standard columnist**



**Enlarge**

**The Post-Standard**

This is 1903 photo of the Weighlock Building in Syracuse. At the time, the Erie Canal was still fully operational in downtown Syracuse. The boat is a steam tug operated by the state Department of Public Works. Courtesy: Erie Canal Museum, Syracuse, NY.

**Erie Canal Museum to celebrate its 50th anniversary** gallery (13 photos)

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Erie Boulevard East.

The Weighlock, built in 1850, is said to be the last remaining building of its kind in the world. It served as a weigh station on the Erie Canal.

The building was saved from demolition by a group of community members and transformed into a museum that shares the remarkable adventure story of the canal. Originally, the Weighlock was in the path of Interstate 81.

When we pass by the **Erie Canal Museum** this month, give the Syracuse Weighlock Building a high five.

The museum is 50 years old in 2012.

The Erie Canal Museum is a tribute to the glory of the Erie Canal and the modern canal system. The original canal made Syracuse. We owe it a salute.

"Before the Erie Canal was built, Syracuse was a swampy village of 250 people," according to Dan Ward, the canal museum's curator. "The Erie Canal made this city possible and prosperous." Syracuse's population grew to 22,000 people in only 25 years.

Dan adds that the museum's home, the Weighlock Building, "stands as a monument to the importance of the canal in United States history."

The museum is planning a community celebration to toast the anniversary on July 28. The event, from noon to 4 p.m., is [free](#) at the museum, 318

We're told the building was the busiest of the seven weighlocks in the original canal system, because it stood at the junction of the north-south Oswego Canal and the east-west Erie. This junction made Syracuse the center of commerce and culture of the time.

This is how it worked: A boat would be floated into area between the columns and the building, the water would be drained and the boat would settle on a wooden cradle. The boats weight would then be compared to a weight established earlier of the boat empty. Tolls were calculated based on the weight of the boat's cargo.

In 1883, the canal system stopped charging tolls because its bonds had been paid off; the Weighlock became a dry dock and office building. It remained an office until 1954, when the state offices there moved across Water Street into the new State Office Building; plans were made to demolish the structure because it was in the path of I-81, which was eventually moved to the east.

A coalition of the Onondaga Historical Association, the Canal Society of New York State and the Junior League of Syracuse successfully lobbied for the Weighlock's importance.

During the past 50 years, the museum has been visited by thousands of school children, [families](#) and adults; built a new wing; constructed a full-sized replica of a canal boat, The Frank B. Thomson; created the locktender's garden, among other projects. The museum houses one of the statewide series of visitor centers.

The old Erie once passed directly through Syracuse, east to west. When the Barge Canal System was created, the pathway of the Erie was filled in, creating Erie Boulevard, in the early 1900s.

July 28's celebration includes a talk by Liz and David Beebe, who co-founded the Erie Canal Park in Camillus; an exhibit of pen and ink drawings of the state's Canal System by Ray Sax; an anniversary cake provided by Wegmans and a real mule, Franklin, on view noon to 2 p.m.

The program is sponsored by the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor. It is a Syracuse ArtsWeek event.

## **Help!**

An Australian researcher, John Carter, would like to hear from relatives of the Onondaga County residents who were taken as political prisoners during the so-called Patriot's War of 1838, the Upper Canadian Rebellion. Carter listed them as follows, and where they lived: Edward Wilson, Pompey; Nathan Whiting, Liverpool; Michael Freer, Clay and Hugh Claxon, Gideon Goodrich, Jerry Grills, Foster, Calvin Matters,. Jacob Paddock, Hiram Sharpie, all of the Salina. An additional prisoner was Hiram Loop of Schroepfel.

John Carter is a research associate at the University of Tasmania. He recently gave a presentation on his research at the Onondaga Historical Association.

## **Wesley Whitmore**

A reader, Rosemary Evans, asked me to pass on information of the death in Florida of Wesley Whitmore, a native Syracusan who was killed in December 2010 in Winter Haven. Whitmore, a sergeant in the Polk County sheriff's department, was killed while duty when he was struck by an elderly driver who lost control of his car.

The deputy served 26 years in the U.S. Air Force, most of that time in Germany where he was a chief of air traffic control operations. He'd been with the sheriff's office 15 years.

Dick Case writes Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. Reach him at 470-2254, or by e-mail, [dcase@syracuse.com](mailto:dcase@syracuse.com).

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