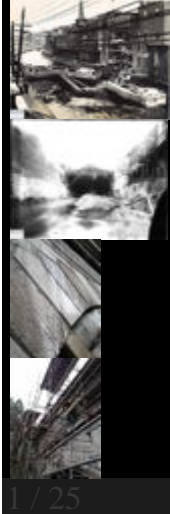


'Hidden treasure' restored in downtown Syracuse: The 19th century Erie Canal bridge few ever see









John Kivlehan, with the city, and Dustin Trivisonno, with C & S Companies, at old Erie Canal bridge, being repaired from longstanding damage from 1907 collapse. Sean Kirst | skirst@syracuse.com

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Halloween: A time in Syracuse for tales about wailing shades of fear, phantoms that walk half-seen through darkened halls.

But a city, as it is, involves a different kind of ghost. At every corner, even with the bricks beneath each street, you feel the sweat and sacrifice of those who came before.

Understandably, that is not the primary thought these days for weary motorists on Erie Boulevard West, near the [National Grid Building](#) -- where the ramp for the West Street arterial has been closed for months.

Yet the project goes back to why our larger community exists. Drivers cannot see what's going on beneath that road, which bridges Onondaga Creek. They cannot see the work crews that walk each day through stone tunnels, crews redoing the repairs from a 107-year-old Erie Canal collapse known at the time as "The Great Canal Catastrophe."

At creek level, between walls of Onondaga limestone from the 1800s, it all goes back to the ghosts.

"They built this bridge by hand and horses and steam, whatever they had," said John Kivlehan, a city division engineer, speaking of 19th-century laborers. "You get down here, and you understand the challenges they had, what they had to go through and their lack of real equipment."

He gestured toward a particularly striking example of [Erie Canal](#) architecture, one of the few remaining in greater Syracuse: In the late 1830s, when the canal was expanded, workers built a stone aqueduct to carry barges across Onondaga Creek -- thus creating a crossroads for two major waterways.

"What's there now is a hidden treasure," said Dennis Connors, curator of history for the [Onondaga Historical Association](#).



The great collapse of 1907: A mill wall fell into the

Erie Canal in Syracuse, punching a hole in the bridge above Onondaga Creek - and throwing the canal system into chaos. *Courtesy of Onondaga Historical Association*

He has always dreamed of a pedestrian overlook, or some way for everyday residents to view the face of the bridge. In the heart of the city, it is striking, even beautiful - an elegant and functioning memorial to the forces that created Syracuse. But it is almost impossible for onlookers to see the bridge without trespassing, and even the new Creekwalk does not skirt that area.

Unless you venture onto private property, you cannot admire the ornate arches above three tunnels, or culverts, once needed to handle the then-unchanneled creek. Land on one side of the bridge is owned by National Grid; the other side serves as a ramp for the arterial.

Last week, Kivlehan and Dustin Trivisonno, a consulting engineer with the C&S Companies, walked down the bank and into the tunnels, where workers with Economy Paving of Cortland are handling repairs. In a place that has the feel of catacombs, the two men pointed out an old and crumbling patch in the stone wall, near some timbers -- above the bridge -- charred by a long-ago fire.

Those are physical reminders of the "catastrophe."

Tuesday, July 30, 1907, mid-afternoon. The bridge, at that time, was totally covered by close-packed breweries and other commercial buildings. According to yellowed clippings at the OHA, several canal boats were moving through downtown Syracuse when onlookers noticed a "disturbance" in the water, above the arches for the aqueduct.

A few minutes later, with a roar that could be heard for many blocks, the entire wall of a mill fell into the canal -- followed by 50 barrels of flour.

Beneath that weight, The Post-Standard reported, part of the bridge caved in.

The aqueduct had sprung a leak. In the way of a giant drain, water began roaring through the hole and into the creek. The force was enough to snap some boats in half. Others were drawn toward the tear in the canal, and wedged together.

Reporters wrote accounts of stirring rescues: Travelers on several vessels were saved by onlookers who helped carry them to safety. Among those who made it to shore: An infant, and the 81-year-old father of a canal captain.

Miraculously, no one was killed.

The word "catastrophe" referred to the economic result. After canal workers shut off the water, they "dried out" a long stretch of the waterway. The canal in Syracuse was closed into September, which sent a commercial shudder through the entire system. Enterprising merchants made postcards from images of the canal bed, without water.

Some estimates placed the loss in statewide business at \$1 million - a significant blow at that time.

To Kivlehan, the marvel is how quickly the damage was repaired. The state, in 1907, put 200 workers on the job. They quickly realized the wooden boats were too heavy to drag out. The wreckage was soaked with oil and then burned -- which accounts for the charred timbers still in evidence today. Laborers used concrete and reinforcing steel to patch the broken walls.

That remedy held together for more than a century, even as the bridge changed in purpose: In Syracuse, after the canal was abandoned, the right of way was converted into Erie Boulevard.



John Kivlehan, a city engineer, by Onondaga

Creek beneath the old aqueduct on Erie Boulevard: In downtown Syracuse, a feeling of the catacombs. Sean Kirst |

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Over the decades, the strain of handling countless trucks and cars slowly took a toll. A few years ago, Kivlehan said, state inspectors noticed the patching from 1907 was beginning to crumble.

"If it wasn't fixed, there could have been a serious problem," said Trivisonno, the consulting engineer.

In June, the city and its contractor began \$4.4 million in repairs. That includes a new waterproof membrane and steel liner reinforcement, said Kivlehan, who's hoping the West Street ramp will reopen this week. The city is also mandated to protect the historic detail of the bridges; masonry specialists have reused 80 percent of the original stone and replaced what couldn't be saved with the same material, he said.

The arches are still there, striking and evocative -- although few people in the city even realize the old aqueduct exists.

As for Kivlehan, he was born in Galway, in Ireland. He moved to Syracuse when he married his wife, Dawn, and he soon learned the lore of the canal. He knows that Irish immigrants -- "my countrymen," as he puts it -- were often hired to move earth and break stone while building the canal.

In Syracuse, those laborers left behind an enduring wonder, a stone bridge with three arches in the heart of the city. After 176 years and a few repairs, it's still doing its job.

The shame is, no one can see it.

Unless you count the ghosts.

Sean Kirst is a columnist with The Post-Standard, who thanks Sarah Kozma of the [OHA](#) for the last-minute help in putting this together. Email Kirst at skirst@syracuse.com, read more of his work at www.syracuse.com/kirst, or send him a message on Facebook or [Twitter](#).