



This view of the historic bridge that carried the Erie Canal over Onondaga Creek is off limits to the public because of safety concerns. A new park on top of the bridge will offer a view of the creek, but not the stone arches. (Sean Kirst / skirst@syracuse.com)

A bridge too far from view for unsuspecting public

Nathan Lafferty enjoys one of the best views in Syracuse. He's a manager at the new Café Kubal coffee shop at Creekwalk Commons on Erie Boulevard. That means he spends the day looking out the window at the National Grid headquarters, also known as the Niagara Mohawk building, a stunning example of art deco design.

Yet Lafferty was startled to learn another significant landmark — a piece of the Erie Canal, built in the 1830s, that still supports city traffic — exists about a half-block from where he stood Monday selling coffee.

For onlookers, it remains absolutely hidden.

"Wow!" said Lafferty, when shown a photo of the canal bridge, with its elegant limestone arches. "I never even knew it was there!"

He said it "would be very cool" if he could direct customers to take a look at an original part of the waterway responsible for the growth of this city.

While we're not quite at that point, we may be getting there.

For years, Dennis Connors — curator of history for the Onondaga Historical Association — has quietly worked toward finding a way for people to see the bridge. Elements of it were built in the late 1830s, when laborers constructed the Erie Canal. Known as a "culvert," the stone structure — with three arches — was a 19th-century solution to a significant obstacle, since it created a way to carry the canal across Onondaga Creek.

Even then, despite the beauty of its design, the bridge was hidden beneath the walls of mills and factories.

In 1907, the span achieved statewide notoriety: The wall of a nearby mill collapsed, and the bridge could not support the weight. Part of it caved in. Water from the canal began pouring into the creek with such violence that barges were pulled into the hole. Miraculously, no one was killed, but the disaster — often

SEAN KIRST
skirst@syracuse.com



called the canal "catastrophe" — shut down the statewide waterway.

To repair it, the state quickly brought in hundreds of workers. They soaked the wooden barges with oil and burned them to get rid of the debris. In the tunnels beneath the bridge, you can still see scorched remnants of the flames. The workers then patched the damage, a patch that held well enough to endure the switch from barges to trucks and cars when the canal became Erie Boulevard, in the 1920s.

Since then, this original Erie Canal bridge has continued to do its job in the heart of Syracuse — even if few people realized it. Connors inquired in the past about finding ways to view the bridge, and was always told it would be impossible. Niagara Mohawk, and then National Grid, fenced off private property on one side of the creek. The other side serves as a ramp for the state's West Street arterial.

Last year, the city hired contractors to do \$4.4 million

in repairs to the bridge; much of the work involved reinforcing the patchwork from more than a century ago. The project is all but finished, and John Kivlehan, the city division engineer who supervised the job, said workers created a public overlook area that allows spectators to view the creek, from a new and ornate railing.

Kivlehan's crews also set out a couple of limestone pieces of the bridge that visitors can use as places to sit and rest, stones that speak to the indomitability of 19th-century workers who somehow — with horses and pulleys — managed to move around that staggering weight.

Virginia Limmiatis, of National Grid, said her company is sponsoring interpretative signs that explain the importance of the site and "provide residents and visitors with an opportunity to experience the rich history of the Erie Canal." Connors said the signs also will suggest links for viewing the bridge itself if you go online.

But the frustrating reality: For now, if you stop by the site, there's no way to walk the 15 steps or so required to actually see the stone arches of the bridge from where you're standing. The shoulder of the West Street ramp, on first glance, resembles a walkway. But the state Department of Transportation put up signs warning pedestrians to stay

off. DOT spokesman Gene Ciento said anyone on foot would be in danger if a motorist lost control on the ramp, danger intensified for onlookers admiring the bridge, with their backs to traffic.

Limmiatis, the National Grid spokeswoman, said her company has similar concerns on the opposite side of the creek. "Unfortunately," she wrote in an email, "a permanent viewing area would be a challenge given the existing safety protocols."

Still, it seems as if imaginative engineers and designers from the city, the state and National Grid — looking at the entire landscape, in a spirit of collegiality — might eventually come up with a creative way for viewing a unique and historic bridge, a transportation landmark tied directly to the origins of Syracuse.

If there's any way for it to happen, here's a good target date: Connors noted the Inland Waterways International association will hold its World Canals Conference in Syracuse in 2017. Certainly, it would be a nice touch if a functioning downtown remnant of a world-famous canal could be seen and appreciated by international visitors.

Not to mention residents of Central New York.

As for Connors, he prefers to emphasize the progress we've made. His dream is that the bridge — the most striking architectural element along Onondaga Creek — might someday turn into an integral part of the Onondaga Creekwalk.

For now, he's glad Central New Yorkers finally have an area for reflection at the bridge, a place to contemplate an extraordinary and enduring feat of engineering that's brought together two sides of Syracuse since the city's early days.

"That's a step forward," Connors said of the new overlook, "because no one even knew the bridge was here before."

Sean Kirst is a columnist with The Post-Standard. Email him at skirst@syracuse.com or write to him in care of The Post-Standard, 220 S. Warren St., Syracuse 13202.



An old piece of stone from the canal bridge sits in a new park on Erie Boulevard, where a viaduct carried the canal over Onondaga Creek. (Sean Kirst / skirst@syracuse.com)