

CENTRAL NY ENTERTAINMENT

Erie Canal Museum celebrates 55 years after rescue from near-demolition

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An early photograph of the Erie Canal Museum from May 1963 during construction of what is now the Locktender's Garden.(Erie Canal Museum)

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By **Katrina Tulloch**, ktulloch@syracuse.com,
syracuse.com

SYRACUSE, N.Y. -- This week, the Erie Canal Museum celebrates 55 years as a public museum devoted to telling the Erie Canal's story, after almost being torn down to build Interstate 81.

The museum opened in 1962 after years of effort by members of the Junior League of Syracuse, the Canal Society of New York State and the Onondaga Historical Association.

In 1956, the Junior League discovered the New York State Department of Public Works had drawn plans for the construction of I-81 that would demolish the Syracuse Weighlock Building, built in 1850.

As a result of an intense lobbying effort, the governor approved a new plan to divert I-81 to the east, sparing the Weighlock Building, the last remaining structure of its kind.

The lock was one of five stopping points on the Erie Canal, where the state weighed the boatloads of freight to charge a toll.

After the building was saved, Gov. Nelson Rockefeller transferred its ownership from the state to Onondaga County. Volunteers transformed the building into a public canal museum.

On Oct. 25, 1962 at 7:30 p.m., The Post-Standard reported "[a]n unexpectedly large crowd was on hand...as the administrative structure on the Erie Canal, Syracuse's Weighlock Building, was officially dedicated as the first Canal Museum in New York State."



The following day, 137 years to the day after the Erie Canal opened, the Erie Canal Museum opened to the public for the first time.

"It is thanks to the hard work of those and many more dedicated individuals over the past five and a half decades, that we are still a public museum that welcomes thousands of visitors from all over the world each year," said Natalie Stetson, Erie Canal Museum executive director. "I hope the residents of Central New York will stop by to visit as we celebrate this milestone."



The Erie Canal Museum's board of trustees poses on the museum's opening night, on Oct. 25, 1962. From left to right: Peggy Feldmeier, Marie Cady, Janet Besse, Robert Clark, Frank Thomson, Don Mawhinney, Ann Bruns, Anna Ryan. (Erie Canal Museum)

The OHA and Erie Canal Museum will also celebrate the bicentennial of the Erie Canal in October and November of 2017.

"Before the Erie Canal was built, Syracuse was a swampy village of 250 people," Dan Ward, the canal museum's curator, told The Post-Standard in 2012. "The Erie Canal made this city possible and prosperous."

Today, the Erie Canal Museum is open seven days a week and has free admission: Monday - Saturday, 10 a.m. - 5 p.m.; Sunday, 10 a.m. - 3 p.m. (5 p.m. in December).

Katrina Tulloch writes music and culture stories for Syracuse.com and The Post-Standard. Contact her: [Email](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#)



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