

Morris Canal fueled Highlands growth

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The Morris Canal was a Highlands enterprise, as intertwined with our unique history, development and character as were its iron industry, the place in the Revolutionary War, and the era of railroads, of which were epochs in the evolution that continues today, in which the Highlands has emerged over the last century as New Jersey's primary source of clean water.

Water is always a key player in the Highlands. And it was while fishing in the waters of Lake Hopatcong in the early days of the 19th century that Morristown businessman George Macculloch conceived the wild idea of digging a ditch from Phillipsburg to Newark Bay, fill it with Lake Hopatcong's copious water outflow, to move coal from Pennsylvania to the Highlands iron foundries and furnaces and to points east. In those days, the Highlands iron mines were the third in a nation in the amount of iron ore mined. But the area was exhausted of trees from years of charcoaling to fuel the iron smelters. Pennsylvania was booming as a coal producer, but it was cheaper to buy coal from England, clear across the Atlantic Ocean, than it was to ship coal down the Susquehanna and Delaware Rivers, rounding Cape May, and north into New York Harbor and Newark Bay.

But before a canal could be dug, the problem of the 1,674-foot difference in elevation between the Bay and the hills of the Highlands had to be resolved. No other canal in the world had been built with such steep rises and drops. If current technology were employed, up to 170 locks would be needed across the canal's 102 miles. Instead, 27 locks and 27 inclined planes, which would lift boats out of the water and into plane cars, that by canal-water driven turbines, hauled the boats up or down, up to 100 feet, and into the next level of canal.

By the 1860s the canal was carrying around a million tons of cargo, mostly coal, each year. Highlands towns, such as Boonton, Rockaway and Port Colden boomed as canal way stations and depots. Water impoundments were made to control the water level in the canal. Today they are the recreational waterbodies of Lake Musconetcong and Pompton Lakes. Chronicles of the raucous lives of transient canal workers and the establishments that catered to their needs are as colorful as any found in Mark Twain's "Life on the Mississippi."

By the start of the twentieth century, railroads were rapidly supplanting the canal and by 1924 the canal was closed. Today, remnants of the canal can be seen along its 65-mile cut through the Highlands. Details of the Morris Canal's history, lore, sites and engineering can be found at the Canal Society of New Jersey's website, www.morriscanal.org.