

Tragedy at the Saratoga Dam



Tragedy at the Saratoga Dam

By Mike Bielkiewicz

What if, looking up river, you saw a mother and child adrift on a canal boat loaded with iron ore heading toward the falls? That's what Elijah Freeman saw in 1872. ...Or was it Martin Freeman in 1869?

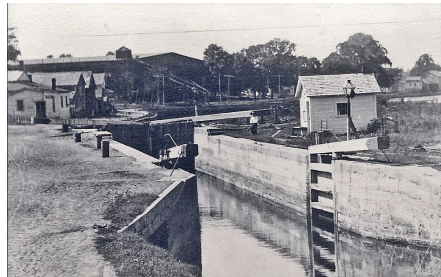
Folklore can be misrepresented as historical fact very easily. Volunteers at Hudson Crossing Park learned this during a search for living relatives of a Lock Tender who displayed heroism while at his post in the days of the old Champlain Canal.

Located within the boundary of the Park you can find the site of the old Champlain Canal Lock 10 where Elijah Freeman was a Lock Tender nearly fifty years after its 1822 construction.

The old Lock 10 was unique in that it was a transition point for the canal. The gate to the south led to the traditional five-foot deep ditch. The northern gate led to the use of the west bank of the Hudson River as a towpath and the open river to carry boats to and from the Northumberland Bridge.

Rather than build an expensive aqueduct over the water, a bridge was built with a carriage-way for public use, and a narrower passage for horses to draw canal boats across the river. The boats would be tethered to the bridge as the horses drew them from one side to the other.

Volunteers at Hudson Crossing Park have cleared the area closest to the original location of the old lock and have placed a replica Lock Tender's Shanty on the site. Plans for the replica



Old Canal Lock 10 around 1900
Photo courtesy Darryl Dumas collection

were created from an old photograph depicting the original Canal buildings. After the appropriate reviews from N.Y.S. Canal Corporation and the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), the new shanty was constructed by students in the Schuylerville High School Shop Class in 2010. The shanty is a nearly exact replica of the one used by Elijah.

While researching the history of the old lock, shanty, bridge and canal, a volunteer and board member of the Park, found a drawing of the landmark bridge and text in Benson J. Lossing's, 1866 "The Hudson from the Wilderness to the Sea". (see insert) The



Shop students at Schuylerville High working on the Lock Tender's Shanty.



New Lock Tender's Shanty

text included a reference to a wrecked boat at the falls. It was determined that this wreck predated the one in the Lock 10 tale.

A second reference to a boat wreck was identified in "Early Days In The Vicinity of Northumberland and Bacon Hill Book 2," by local historian Mrs. J. B. Vanderwerker, contained a collection of stories told to her by residents of the town in 1927. Among those stories was one about a flood in 1872 followed by this tragic tale:

"At this same time, one canal boat, named "The Weatherbee," from Whitehall, loaded with iron ore locked into the river from the north and was towed to the west side of the River. The water was knee-deep on the tow-path. The Captain's wife and child were on the boat.

The Captain went ashore with a large rope to tie the boat so that it would not "go over" the dam. The rope broke, and the boat headed for the dam. There were not the safety piers nearby, as now.

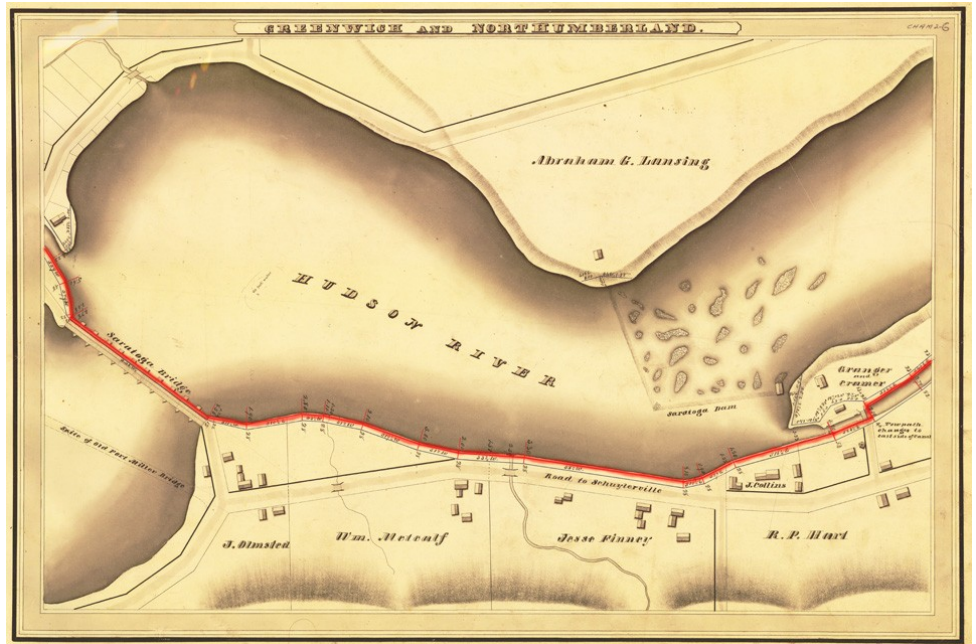
Elijah Freeman, the lock tender, took a boat and went to the rescue of the woman and child. As he rowed along side the canal boat, he shouted to the woman and child to jump.

They did, but missed the small boat fell into the rushing waters and were drowned. Freeman also went over the dam and was drowned. His body was found near the Breastworks of the British. After the waters had receded the mother and child were found nearly a mile below the dam.“

Based on this story, the Hudson Crossing Park Board of Directors originally planned to dedicate the replica shanty to Elijah for his heroism. They wanted to invite any living descendents to a dedication ceremony. To locate relatives, requests were made to regional historians and contacts at the N.Y.S. Department of Education and the N.Y.S. Canal Corporation. The requests included the tragic story and the intention to locate relatives.

The Board received many helpful responses to their requests. Two however taught the group that the source of the story was a documented tale told by a local resident and that time had apparently blurred the memory of the story-teller to some of the details.

Combining the responses from two of the historians with the original story, the fate of the Lock Tender and the true story emerged. Following are the two responses that clarify the story:



NYS Archives map of the Champlain Canal drawn in 1830 showing the tow path (red) along the western bank of the Hudson River and both the “Saratoga” Bridge and Falls

1.) Mike Riley, Port Byron, New York

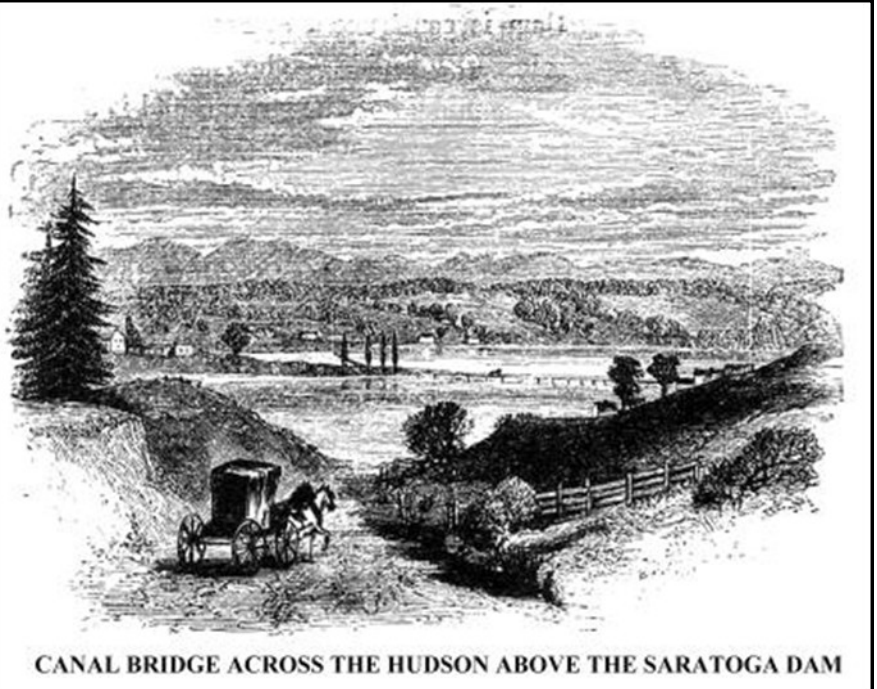
“In 1869 (not 1872), the Plattsburg Sentinel reported that the Witherbee went over the dam and the wife and child died, but the lock tender Martin (not Elijah) Freeman survived by riding on his row boat. There is quite an article outlining the “Sad Drowning Casualty”. The Witherbee belonged to Silas H. Witherbee, a wealthy mine owner who died in 1889.”

2.) Kristina Saddleire, Historian, Village of Schuylerville

“I found that the lock tender's name was Elijah Freeman. Census records demonstrate that he did survive the incident. Elijah was married to a woman named Harriet, and they had no children (sorry, no descendants). They removed to Saratoga Springs, where Elijah died between the years of 1910 and 1920. Elijah Freeman did own property in Saratoga Springs on

For the twofold purpose of affording water-power for mills, and providing still water for the boats of the Champlain Canal to cross, the Saratoga Dam is constructed at Fort Miller, three miles below the rapids. The dam forms an elbow in the middle of the stream, and is about 1,400 feet in length. Below it are considerable rapids; just above it is a bridge, which has a carriage-way for the public use, and a narrower passage for the horses that draw the canal boats. These vessels float safely on the usually still water of the river, but sometimes, when the stream is very full, the passage is attended with some difficulty, if not danger, on account of the strong though sluggish current. When we visited the spot, a large-class boat lay wrecked in the rapids below, having gone over the dam the day before.

THE HUDSON from THE WILDERNESS TO THE SEA by Benson J. Lossing, 1866



Ludlow Street, and was listed as a Saloon Keeper.”

Most of the references found indicate the Lock Tender’s name was Elijah. The Plattsburg Sentinel, stating that the tragedy occurred in 1869 appears to be accurate. An event in the Champlain Canal Legal and Historical Events 1791 - 1905 states: “1869 Saratoga dam partly carried away during a great freshet”. There were no references to repairs to the area in the entries for 1872. Since damage, due to high water, occurred in 1869 but not in 1872 and the story teller placed the flood and the tragedy in the same year and was wrong about the fate of Elijah, it is logical to conclude that the Sentinel carried the correct year.

To learn more about the experiences that await you at Hudson Crossing Park please go to:

www.hudsoncrossingpark.org.



NYS Archives image of a load of wood coming down the Old Champlain Canal heading for the Northumberland Bridge

The next time you are boating along the Champlain Canal or traveling through the Towns of Northumberland or Saratoga, take time to stop at Hudson Crossing Park. Walk the trail to Eagle Point, stand overlooking the dam and allow yourself to imagine what went through Elijah’s mind seeing the runaway load of iron ore and two passengers, drifting closer and closer to the falls.

The Park is centered on and around Champlain Canal Lock 5 Island just north of Schuylerville. From the floating dock (free 48 hour mooring) you can walk the Island Loop Trail to Eagle Point and view a panorama of the Hudson River, the Champlain Canal, and the “new” Saratoga Dam – located at the site that was the scene of this tragedy and numerous other wrecks during the mid to latter nineteenth century.