

## The Oxbow

### **Part One: The Early Years**

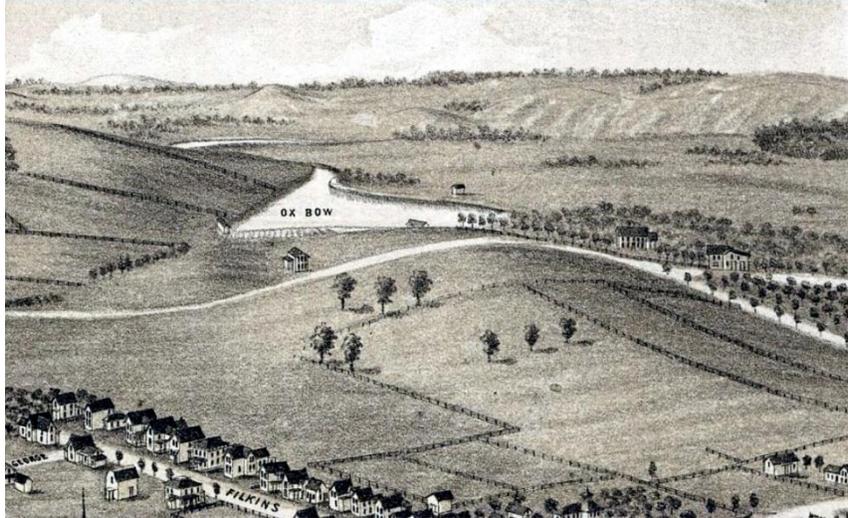
The original Erie Canal was much narrower and not as deep as today. Constructed with hand tools and horsepower from 1817 to 1825, the canal had countless bends and turns as surveyors mapped out a route that best accounted for the elevation of the land, rock formations, and areas with stable soil. About a half mile south of the bridge over the canal at Fairport Road, the original path of the old Erie turned dramatically to the east and looped in a semi-circle, before continuing its southern path toward Bushnell's Basin. In a stream or river, an area with this characteristic is called an oxbow, defined in the dictionary as "a U-shaped frame forming a collar around an ox's neck and holding the yoke in place," or in the case of a waterway, "a bend in a river resembling an oxbow."

When the canal was first enlarged in the 1830's, and later in the 1860's, most of the twists and bends were removed, often by building an embankment to carry the canal over lower terrain. Such an embankment, forty feet in height, was constructed when the canal was relocated and straightened to the west of the oxbow. Water was allowed to fill the area from the old canal's path to the earthen embankment, creating a small lake. Perinton residents took an immediate liking to the pleasant surroundings on the east shore of the oxbow and the new lake, and found it a pleasant place to picnic, camp, fish, and swim.

The canal suffered frequent breaks in the early years, often at the site of these man-made embankments. In 1997 Perinton historian Sue Roberts wrote: "The first oxbow break occurred November 29<sup>th</sup>, 1864. A muskrat burrowed a small hole through the berm. The force of the water quickly enlarged the hole – eventually emptying 17 miles of canal, from Montezuma to Rochester."

Another break adjacent to the oxbow, even larger than the first, occurred seven years later, in late April of 1871, again reportedly caused by a tunneling muskrat. Two hundred feet of the embankment was washed away, to a depth of 20 to 30 feet below the bottom of the canal. All the water in the canal from the locks at Macedon to the east and Pittsford to the west rushed through the breach. A nearby packet boat was flushed through the break, and sent on a wild ride west through farm fields and fences, to land part way up an elm tree. The captain, his wife, child and steersman were reportedly unhurt. According to newspaper reports, the dam at Hayward's mill on Irondequoit Creek and the bridge at the Rochester Road (Fairport Road) were washed away.

Repairs to the embankment were quickly begun, but trouble soon followed. Approximately 800 workers were hired to repair the break, some local, but many others from out of town. Some of the workers grew increasingly agitated, fueled by poor weather, difficult working conditions, and more than a little drinking. When the rowdies demanded more money for their labor and violence appeared imminent, the New York State Militia was brought in to quell the rioters. The soldiers camped on the hill above the oxbow, marched in formation and practiced target shooting. A few of the most enthusiastic rioters were hauled off to jail in Fairport. The remaining workers picked up their shovels and got back to work, and by May 9<sup>th</sup> the embankment was rebuilt, and the canal was back in business.



Detail from 1885 Bird's Eye View of Fairport looking southwest, showing the oxbow and surrounding area

Written by Bill Poray, Perinton Town Historian Published in the Fairport-ER Post, 04/25/2013