

STORIES of New Jersey

In 1836 there was a wave of national prosperity; Morris Canal stock which had sold at 32 in 1834 rose to 188 in a year. The directors purchased \$6,000,000 worth of improvement bonds of Indiana and Michigan, then young and struggling States. After selling these to the public, some of the money was used to extend the Morris Canal to Jersey City, but most of it was dissipated. Then the canal was mortgaged for nearly \$1,000,000 but the stockholders' interests were not protected. The company went bankrupt and thousands of investors lost everything.

Out of the proceedings, however, came a reorganized canal company. In 1844 the canal was enlarged, enabling the heavier Lehigh boats to come directly from the mines through the Lehigh Canal, across the Delaware and through the Morris Canal. These were made in two sections hinged together, to enable them to pass up and over the steep inclines of the planes. From then on the canal began to prosper. At the peak of its prosperity in 1866 there were as many as 1,200 boats in operation, an average of 12 boats per mile.

But the reorganization came too late. Whereas the usual time for the trip between Phillipsburg and Jersey City was 5 days, railroads were now able to haul coal between the two points in 8 hours. Each car, carrying almost as much as a canal boat, continued to draw tighter and tighter the noose that was slowly but surely choking life from the canal.

Besides the railroad competition, which alone was enough to kill the canal traffic, there were other forces at work. The canal basin in Jersey City had become enormously valuable for other purposes. The Lehigh Valley Railroad, which had leased the canal in 1871, had found it a burden to carry. The revenue was not sufficient to pay for the upkeep, but under the terms of the lease, the railroad company was obliged to keep the canal navigable. When traffic had dwindled to little or nothing the company demanded that the State take over the property. This was in 1903. Finally no craft were seen along the quiet waterway except a few canoes or motor boats on pleasure voyages to and from Lake Hopatcong.

Probably the most insistent demand for abandonment came from Hudson Maxim, one of the inventors of smokeless powder, who owned many hundreds of acres at Lake Hopatcong, the primary source of water for the canal. Under the charter the canal company had been permitted to construct a 6-foot dam to hold the water of the lake in time of flood and heavy rainfall, thus ensuring a sufficient supply for operation in abnormally dry seasons. As a result the surface area of the lake, already the largest in New Jersey, was more than doubled in size. But if, as permitted by law, this 6-foot supply was drawn off, parts of Lake Hopatcong would become a mudflat, reeking with decaying vegetation.

While it was conceded that the canal was worthless for transportation and that in the cities the sluggish waters were a menace to health, there were many who fought strenuously to preserve its rural sections as beauty spots. The Morris Canal Parkway Association was formed to champion the cause of the derelict. It was not concerned with the sections of the canal that ran through cities. The members were willing to compromise with Maxim and guarantee that only the overflow waters of Lake Hopatcong would be used. They pointed out that with the discontinuance of canal boat traffic the enormous amount of water needed to work the locks and planes would be saved.