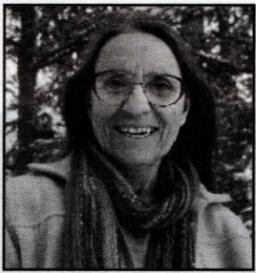


WAYNE COUNTY

The Erie Canal at 200



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Imagine a major water route beginning at Lake Ontario, heading south through Sodus Bay, continuing south and passing through the Wayne County Towns of Huron, Rose, and Galen. In Galen, the navigation route would connect with the Erie Canal just west of the Village of Clyde. Just imagine—that is exactly what a group of local business leaders proposed following the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825.

Formed in 1827, the Sodus Canal Company organizers included Pulteney land agents Joseph Fellows, John Greig, and Henry Towar; Dr. William N. Lummis, a major landholder and community leader; Elias R. Cook, a surveyor and engineer; Wayne County District Attorney General William H. Adams; Dr. David Arne, a politician, banker, and physician; and John Hurlbert. The Canal Company's 1827 petition to construct a canal from the Erie Canal to Great Sodus Bay failed in the New York State Legislature. The idea made sense. The Welland Canal, expected to be completed by the summer of 1827, would connect Lake Ontario to Lake Erie, providing continuous ship navigation. Eliminating the need for portage of goods at Niagara Falls, shipping would be faster and more efficient. Even though Sodus Bay was considered a far superior harbor, greater political and financial support was directed toward the Oswego Canal, which was begun in 1825, completed in 1828, and opened for traffic in 1829, providing the Lake Ontario and Erie Canal link. Sodus Canal Company organizers moved forward anyway.

In 1828, the Sodus canal organizers put forth a plan for a route from Montezuma at the Seneca River to Sodus Bay, a route of some 24 miles, requiring no locks until near Sodus Bay. This canal would go through the Town of Butler, part of the Town of Wolcott, and the Town of Huron. In 1829, the New York State Legislature approved a bill for the incorporation of the Sodus Canal Company and authorized the corporation to raise \$200,000 in stock subscriptions, as well as have the right to seize land for the canal's construction if not sold voluntarily. A different location between Montezuma and the Canandaigua Outlet near Lyons was proposed in 1831. Neither plan was used.

In 1836, local attorney and War of 1812 veteran, General William H. Adams, and founding member of the established Sodus Land Company, purchased land along the east shore of Sodus Bay, land west of Clyde, and land in Rose along Glenmark Creek, also known as Sodus Creek. Adams also purchased the Sodus Bay Shaker Tract from the Shaker community in April of 1837. Adams became a major force behind the promotion and continuing attempts to construct a Sodus Canal.

Meanwhile, a small boomtown of some 2000 residents at the southern tip of Cayuga Lake saw great promise with the construction of the Sodus Canal in prospects for their economy. Overlooked in the construction of the Chemung Canal, an Ithaca politician,

entrepreneur, and engineer named Ezra Cornel became a vocal advocate for the Sodus Canal. He believed the canal would provide Ithaca a path to become a major shipping port. In "A Short History of Tompkins County," Jane Dieckmann wrote of Cornell's vision, "...deep-water ships would convey raw materials from the Middle West through the Great Lakes via this Sodus Bay Canal to Ithaca; here mills would convert these materials into finished goods, which would then be moved out to markets to the south, east and west. Coal from the rich Pennsylvania fields and lumber, grain, shingles, and plaster would move in and through and out of the region."

The Panic of 1837 put a halt to construction, including the expansion of the Erie Canal and any growth connected to the canal, including the Sodus Canal. The crisis took several years to work through. In 1841, the Sodus Canal Company was revived with Adams at the helm, and the digging began. Swamp land in the towns of Galen and Rose were drained.

Finances were a big problem for the struggling yet determined Sodus Bay Canal Company. In 1852, Adams wrote a major prospectus on the subject of the Sodus Canal, which included endless economic factors, comparisons of cost, distance, and practical benefits of the Sodus canal over the Oswego canal. As a local benefit for residents and businesses, Adams noted that with the elevation fall of 140 feet from the Erie Canal at Clyde to the waters of Sodus Bay, the canal would be able to provide water power for mills and other businesses throughout the waterway.

Sodus Canal advocates on both ends of the state continued to push for the waterway's construction. During the period from 1841 to 1850, Adams continued to obtain from New York State legislature extensions for the Sodus Canal Company charter. The final extension was approved on June 27, 1850, 21 years after the 1829 legislative approval of the incorporation of the Sodus Canal Company. The legislation allowed the company to "revive and amend the several acts to incorporate and to increase and extend the powers of the Sodus Canal Company." The canal was to be completed by Nov. 1, 1861.

Ithacans continued to view their growing city as a perfect port for the shipment of Pennsylvania coal to Lake Ontario via this yet to be completed Sodus Canal. The canal continued to be a growing obsession of Adams. With time and progress, other forces came into the arena of transportation that would diminish the canal's potential and funding. Railroad transport across the country during the 1850s became the new kid on the block. Being able to operate year round and cross difficult terrain, railroads greatly expanded shipping transport, at a faster and more economical rate. In 1851, New York State passed legislation exempting railroads from paying tolls to the



Seen is the current view of the Sodus Canal ditch, which now serves as an agricultural drainage ditch, as seen from Kelsey Road looking north in the Town of Galen.

Erie Canal, thus increasing profit and competitiveness of rail transport.

The Sodus Bay and Southern Railroad was organized in 1852 to transport coal from the Pennsylvania mines through Elmira and on to Sodus Bay. Though the rail line was not completed until 1873, a promise of faster and limitless season of transport, public and private funds were directed toward railroad construction rather than canal expansion.

The advent of the Civil War in 1861 steered public and private funds away from many projects. In the case of the Sodus Canal, interest had already dried up. Though some digging was accomplished in Rose and Galen, much of the canal remained unfinished.

Adams' and his original 1827 Sodus Canal Company partners' dream of a major waterway connecting inland New York with the Great Lakes and beyond was fading away. Adams died, perhaps at home in Alloway or on business in Albany, in April 1865. With his death, Sodus Canal efforts were put to rest - temporarily.

Over the years there were more proposals to construct a Sodus Canal. For instance, a story printed in the Feb. 1, 1930 edition of the *Democrat & Chronicle* stated, "The idea of creating a deep water way to connect the western Great Lakes with New York City involved deepening the Barge Canal from Clyde easterly and construction of Adams' Sodus Canal."

Additionally, according to an article printed in the Jan. 10, 1941 edition of the *Democrat & Chronicle*, "A Buffalo Engineer sent a completed a survey



Shown is a close-up from an 1850s map of the proposed Sodus Canal.

for a canal (following Adam's plan) to run from Clyde to Sodus Bay to the Federal Government." However, no follow-up article was printed, and no canal was built.

As another example, it was reported in a story printed in the June 19, 1960 edition of the *Democrat & Chronicle*, "An Elmira citizen wrote to Governor Nelson Rockefeller proposing construction of a canal from Sodus Bay to Seneca Lake for the purpose of providing a link for a yet-to-be put forth steel plant near Elmira. Rockefeller's staff sent a reply with sound negative economic and construction reasons, turning down the request to construct such a canal."

Though the Wayne County leaders' vision of a Sodus Canal never came to fruition, their efforts have provided a benefit to area farmers to this day with drainage ditches for their fields. The story continues to be a tool for further understanding of the



Pictured is a portrait drawing of General William H. Adams, a major proponent of the Sodus Canal.

growth and value of the Erie Canal over time, even on outlying regions as far away as Ithaca. The Sodus Canal story also entices people like this lover of Sodus Bay to wonder and think, "What if? Just imagine."