

Pennsylvania Canal System

In the early 1800s, canals along waterways were an efficient means of transporting goods and people across a land with few good roads.

The Pennsylvania canals system began in 1824-26 with the passage of the Canal Acts. The main canal, running from Philadelphia to Pittsburg, used the Susquehanna, Juniata, Connemaugh and Allegheny rivers. The North Branch included the Susquehanna from Duncan's Island to Northumberland, thence up to Athens and connecting with the New York canals. The West Branch went from Northumberland via the West Branch of the Susquehanna to Sinnemahoning Creek.

Towns on either side of the river wanted the West Branch canal on their side, but surveys indicated the eastern shore was the most feasible. Contracts for the canal in 1828 specified that the canal be 40 feet wide at the top, 28 feet wide at the bottom with a depth of four feet of water. The canal was 24 ½ miles long with a dam at Muncy Hills, six lift locks, two culverts and an aqueduct at Chillisquaque Creek. The canal was built between 1828 and 1830 by engineers Francis W. Rawle, Robert Faries and James D. Harris.

Lewisburg requested a cross-cut canal be built to connect the town with the canal on the eastern shore. William Cameron of Lewisburg built the cross-cut canal, just over a half-mile long with a lift lock midway and another at the river, and a dam just below the cross-cut. Construction began in 1833 and concluded in 1834.

Port of Lewisburg

Once Lewisburg was hooked into the West Branch Division of the Pennsylvania Canal in 1834, the small town began to grow and prosper, we're told. But how much business did the canal mean for Lewisburg? As I've been reading through early Lewisburg newspapers, the importance of the canal became much clearer, thanks to weekly blurbs entitled "Port of Lewisburg" that appeared in some of the short-lived early newspapers.

One early paper, the *People's Advocate*, often ran a weekly column, noting the arrivals and departures of canal boats, usually including the name of the captain, place of origin, and goods carried.

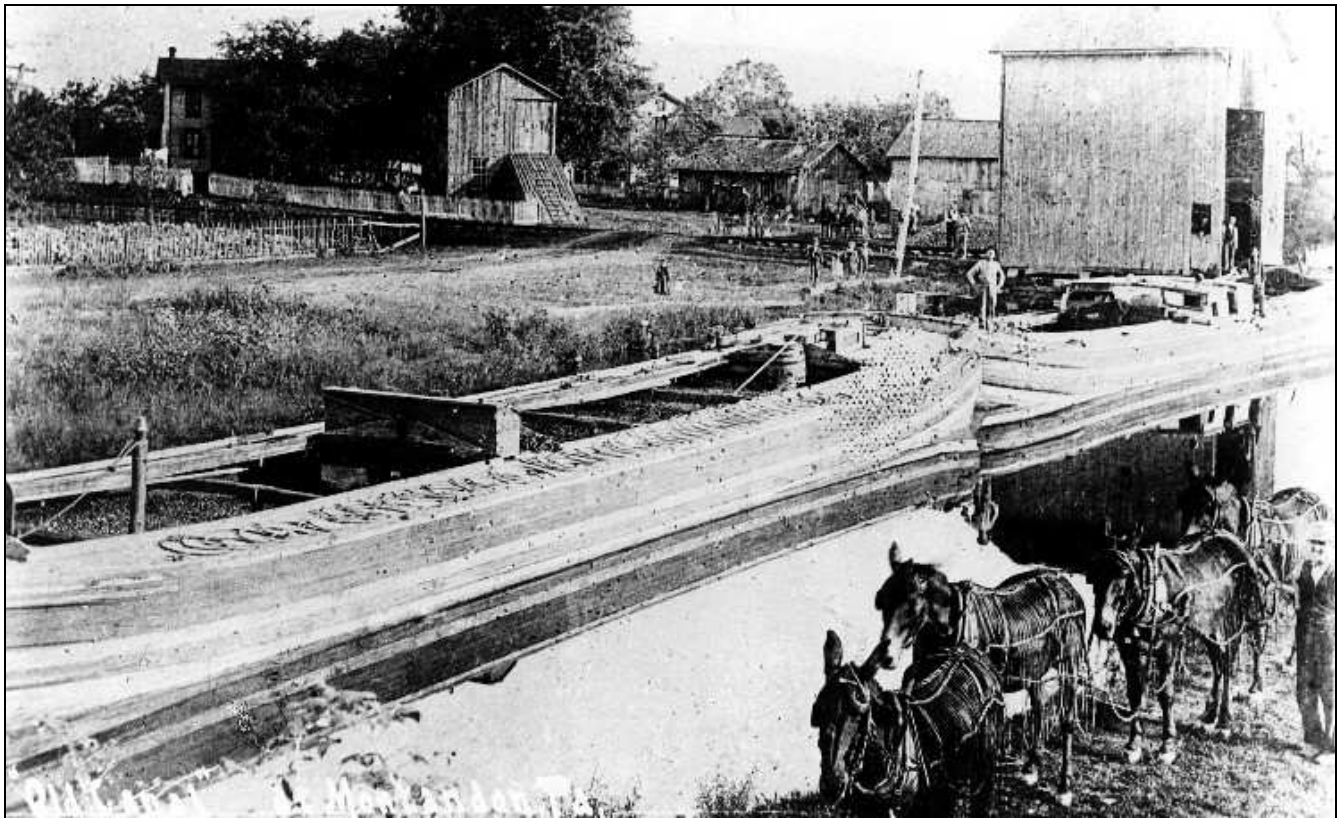
The month of May 1839 contains such lists of boats coming and going, though I've noticed that some boats come in and don't leave by the end of the month, most likely omissions when compiling these lists for publication. In May 1839, 26 boats arrived and 25 departed. Most came and went to Philadelphia. Other ports of origin included Sunbury, Plymouth, Reading, and Waynesburg, while Alexandria, VA; Dauphin, and Kettle Creek appear as destinations. Goods came to Lewisburg for eleven different businesses, including Walls & Geddes, O. P. Duncan, H. P. Sheller, and H. S. & T. Graham. Goods also arrived for Mifflinburg, Aaronsburg, and Brush Valley.

Many boats appear more than once. The *Adelaide*, with Captain Call, came from Philadelphia with goods for the Graham dry goods store, left with 1050 bushels of wheat from this business for Philadelphia, came back later in the month from Philadelphia with more goods, then departed with

1000 bushels of wheat for Philadelphia. Wheat and flour from Lewisburg topped the list of goods sent out, which also included corn, oats, rye, whiskey, 3 barrels of butter, and a single cask of tobacco. Arriving goods were generally unspecified, but did include coal, stoneware (from Reading), and locust posts (from Waynesburg).

The canal meant jobs for many workers, loading and unloading the canal boats, meant new goods for a variety of businesses, and led to many other tangential effects such as a cheaper way for area farmers to sell their goods and a whole allied line of suppliers that earned money from the canal business.

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Barges being pulled by mules along a section of the canal.