

Canals in Northeastern Pennsylvania

There was a time, well before the American War of Independence, that the northeastern corner of what is today the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania belonged to the State of Connecticut. To be even more specific, it belonged to Litchfield County.

In order to clarify this obscure fact, we have created a map of the area showing the present-day political boundaries as well as the economic importance of the region that once belonged to Connecticut. By far the most important economic aspect was the discovery of anthracite (hard) coal, the first shipment of which went to Philadelphia in 1820. Had it been discovered before it was, perhaps our forests would have been spared, as the majority of it was converted into charcoal to be used in the American iron industry, centered at that time around the Salisbury ore beds.

Once discovered, a means of transporting this “black gold” had to be devised; hence the system of canals and railroads. Note on the map the destination of Kingston, New York by the coal-carrying Delaware & Hudson Canal. Look just to the east of Kingston and see the reason for the railroad that passed through Winsted, Norfolk and other towns along this east-west coal distribution route.

The Delaware & Hudson Canal This canal was incorporated in 1823 and completed in 1829. It connected Eddyville, just off the Hudson River near Kingston, with Honesdale in Pennsylvania, a distance of 108 miles by canal. To reach Carbondale, a 16-mile inclined-plane railroad was added. The canal was 4 feet deep, from 32 to 36 feet in width and included 107 locks, each 76 feet in length by 9 ½ feet wide, overcoming a total change of 950 feet in elevation on the uphill, downhill route. Some years after it began operation, the company replaced certain of its “at grade” river crossings with aqueducts, and hired John Roebling, the suspension-aqueduct expert, for much of the work. What the last sentence means is that originally the canal came to a river at the same elevation as the river (at grade); crossed it, and continued on. This could present several problems, such as encountering river traffic (there weren’t any traffic lights then), or what to do during periods of high water on the river. One such aqueduct designed by Roebling was a 600-foot long span crossing the Delaware River, which was built in 1849. It was one of the first suspension structures built by Roebling, who later designed the Brooklyn Bridge, for which he justifiably became recognized as one of the world giants in structural engineering. This span is still in use as a highway bridge to this day.

There were two unique inclined-plane railroads serving the Delaware and Hudson Canal. One was the Delaware and Hudson Gravity Railroad, part of the original canal-rail system, to transport coal from the mines at Carbondale to the western terminus of the canal at Honesdale; and later, a separate enterprise known as the “Pennsylvania Coal Company Gravity Railroad,” connected with several other canals. (The only inclined railroad that I know of today is the one in Quebec City, connecting the upper with the lower levels of the old city. The up-going car(s) are counter-balanced by the descending cars, and they pass in the middle, where the tracks are double for this purpose.)

The D. & H. Canal reached the peak of its operation, in terms of tons of coal shipped, about 1883. From this time on its business declined until it was finally phased out of existence, about 1900.

