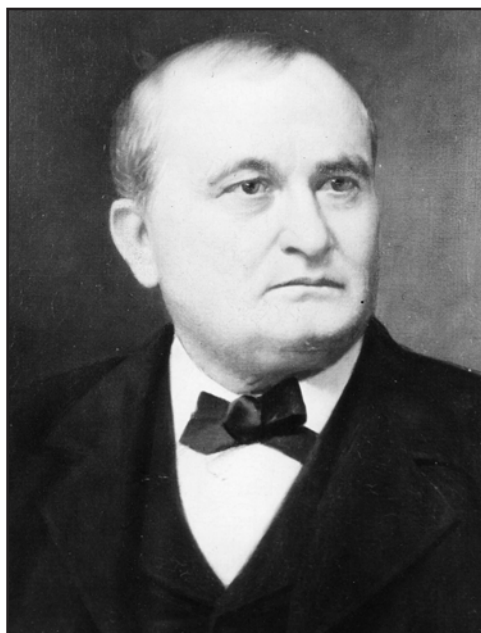


The St. Lawrence County Historical Association
QUARTERLY

Volume LIV

Number 4

2009



Our Amish Neighbors

Byron Benson and the
Opening of the Western
Adirondacks

A “Terrible Detonation”
at Benson Mines, 1908

The St. Lawrence County Historical Association at the Silas Wright Museum

The St. Lawrence County Historical Association is a private, not-for-profit, membership organization based at the Silas Wright House in Canton, New York. Founded in 1947, the Association is governed by a constitution, by-laws, and Board of Trustees. The Historical Association's membership meets annually to elect its trustees.

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St. Lawrence County Historical Association
at the Silas Wright House
3 East Main Street, P. O. Box 8
Canton, New York 13617
(315) 386-8133
fax (315) 386-8134
e-mail: info@slcha.org
www.slcha.org

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The SLCHA Quarterly welcomes contributions. To submit a manuscript, or for further information, please contact the editor through the St. Lawrence County Historical Association. Please address communications to: Managing Editor, *The SLCHA Quarterly*, P.O. Box 8, Canton, NY 13617.



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Contents

From the County Historian <i>Trent Trulock</i>	2
Letters to the Editor	3
Our Amish Neighbors <i>Betsy Tisdale</i>	4
Opening the Western Adirondacks: How Byron Benson Financed Iron Mines and the Carthage & Adirondack Railroad, Part I <i>James D. Carl</i>	8
A "Terrible Detonation" at Benson Mines (August 15, 1908) <i>James D. Carl</i>	29
No-Longer-a-Mystery Photo	34
New Mystery Photo	35

Issue Editor
James D. Carl

On the Cover

Top: The 1884-85 New York Central passenger depot still stands on North Mechanic Street in Carthage, N. Y. It was used by passengers on the Carthage and Adirondack Railroad. Photograph by James Carl, June, 2009.

Bottom: Byron David Benson (1832-1888), the tenth of twelve children from a farm family near Fabius, N. Y. With money earned from the early Pennsylvania oil fields, Benson organized the Carthage and Adirondack Railroad and the Magnetic Iron Ore Company that opened the mines at Jayville (near Harrisville, N. Y.) and Benson Mines near Star Lake.

From the County Historian

by Trent Trulock

I find the natural history of the earth beneath St. Lawrence County as interesting as the cultural history on its surface. The geological bounty of the county has led to business, immigration and the beginnings of many towns. Mining has been a commercial endeavor in St. Lawrence County from the 19th century to the present, and has consisted of both underground and surface mining. In the “Shaping of St. Lawrence County” exhibit in the museum’s County Gallery, there is a wonderful section on mining that includes examples of 20th century miner’s equipment and samples of different minerals. There is also a map created by Norm Young in 2002 that shows the approximate locations where mining has occurred.

Underground mines were clustered largely in the southwestern portion of the county in the Towns of Edwards, Fowler, Gouverneur and Rossie. Some of the minerals extracted from underground mines include iron (Jayville, Clifton and Rossie), feldspar (DeKalb), pyrite (Pyrites and Rossie), zinc (Edwards, Fowler and Pierrepont) and talc (Edwards and Fowler). Surface mining has produced more material by volume than underground mining. The largest percentage of surface mining in nearly every town consists of construction materials, such as sand, gravel and crushed stone. Other minerals harvested from surface mines include talc and zinc (Edwards and Fowler), graphite (Pope Mills), lead (Rossie and Macomb), limestone (Ogdensburg and Norwood), marble (Gouverneur), red sandstone (Potsdam) and iron (Fine). At one time the largest open pit iron mine in the state was located at Benson Mines in Star Lake. Clay and topsoil have also been mined throughout the county.

Professor Robert Badger, chair of the Geology Department at SUNY Potsdam, wrote



The Silas Wright House, home of the St. Lawrence County Historical Association.

about geology for *St. Lawrence County, a Map for All Seasons, 2002* (<http://www.co.st-lawrence.ny.us/Planning/MFAS-Pg2.pdf>). He wrote that there are two distinct physiographic regions in the county: the St. Lawrence Lowlands and the Adirondack region. According to Badger: “The Adirondack region is located in the southern two-thirds of the county. This is an area southeast of a line drawn roughly from the St. Lawrence River at Chippewa Bay, in the extreme southwestern part of the county, northeastward through DePeyster, Potsdam, Hopkinton and on to Nicholville at the eastern boundary of the county. The Adirondack region consists of rocks that are over one (1) billion years old.” Some rocks in this region were part of a large mountain range named the Grenville Mountains which, in their heyday millions of years ago, may have been as large as the present day Himalayas.

The second major geologic region, according to Professor Badger, is “the St. Lawrence lowlands, located northwest of the Adirondack region and along the river. Other significant geologic features of St. Lawrence County are those formed by the advance and retreat over the land of glaciers during the Ice Age, beginning about two million years ago and ending about 12,000 to 14,000 years ago.” Numerous minerals from these two regions have found their way into museums all over the world.

Dr. Marian Lupulescu, Curator of Geology Collections at the New York State Museum, has written about the state’s mineral collection and the localities where specimens have been found: (http://www.nysm.nysed.gov/research_collections/collections/

geology/mineralcollect.html). According to his research, "In 1851 and 1852 minerals and geological specimens from Mr. Franklin B. Hough were added to the collections. These were mostly specimens from St. Lawrence County." This is the same Hough who wrote the first published history of the county, *A History of St. Lawrence and Franklin Counties, New York, from the Earliest Period to the Present Time*, printed in 1853. Other specimens in the state collection include

over 4,000 from the collection of Chester D. Nimms that were purchased by the state in 1908. A large portion of this collection came from New York, including specimens from St. Lawrence County. Minerals collected by miners from the zinc and talc mines made their way to the state museum in 1991 via Vernon Phillips.

As you can see, Mother Nature certainly has made St. Lawrence County a real paradise for rock hounds!

Letters to the Editor

The article "South of Sunday Rock" by Louise Bixby was greatly enjoyed by my family. [I enclose funds to purchase four more copies.] It is something that my children and grandchildren must have!

Respectfully,
George E. Dillingham
Ogdensburg, NY

* * *

Words cannot express the great feelings I had when I received the Quarterly recently about the "South Woods" of St. Lawrence County. It was a fantastic issue, and the author and her sources are to be commended! I was a visitor to "Hollywood," starting in 1931 (with my grandfather, Lewis B. Fisher) or, more often after the war in 1946, to see Uncle Lewy and enjoy the place. And I certainly recall the actions around 1951, '52 and '53 when the flooding occurred. A few minor comments, not to detract from the wealth of good information in the article (by the way, the illustrations are great):

Page 17. 1980 [a reference to Lewis Fisher's "Old Hollywood" booklet, cited on p. 29 and on sale at the SLCHA]. While a preliminary pamphlet was issued in 1966, the polished copy was done with the St. Lawrence County Historical Association.

Page 23. (typo) paragraph #2; should read St. Regis [not Register] River.

Page 24. I cannot find my copy of the old U.S.G.S. Childwold map, but whether it was 1920 or 1922 isn't important since there are newer versions of the 1:24000 scale map.

Page 26. Not important, but Lewy Fisher resisted selling his place for 30+ years, at one point in the 1940s being the only holdout and later negotiating to get a square mile (section 32) for the Jordan Club.

Page 29, Figure 2. The Carry Falls dam must have been done in the late 1940s or early 50s as the reservoir started filling in 1953.

What a great issue! My highest complements to the author (and the editors, John and Susan Omohundro).

Sincerely,
David Fisher (nephew of Lewis Fisher, who died in 1982)
Greenport, NY

Our Amish Neighbors

Betsy Tisdale

Betsy Tisdale is a writer, photographer and Potsdam resident with a B.A. Degree in English from DePauw University and an M.A. in English from SUNY Potsdam. For nearly 25 years she has conducted a business selling small crafts and custom quilts made by the Amish. We asked for her impressions about Amish life in St. Lawrence County. –Editor



An Amish farm in St. Lawrence County. Photograph by B. Tisdale.

In 1974 three Swartzentruber Amish families moved from eastern Ohio to St. Lawrence County, New York. They bought small, run-down farms near Heuvelton, about 20 miles southwest of the county seat in Canton and about 20 miles southeast of Ogdensburg on the St. Lawrence River. This is a cold and windy place on the Canadian border, the largest and most rural county in New York State and one of the poorest.

Among the many Amish and Mennonite groups in North America, the Swartzentruber Amish are probably the most conservative, making the fewest concessions to modern technology. No electricity, no telephones, no radios or television or computers, no cars and trucks. They are allowed to farm or become

woodworkers. The women and teen-aged girls use treadle sewing machines to make all the clothes for their families. They cook all meals on big wood-burning cookstoves. They grow almost everything they eat and fill dozens of canning jars in late summer and early fall with the bounty.

Taught by young Amish women, the children attend first through eighth grades in one-room schoolhouses, and that is the extent of their formal education. At home everyone speaks a unique German that has changed considerably from the 1730s when the Amish first arrived by boat at Philadelphia from what are now Germany and Switzerland (via Holland). And so they are fully bilingual, although their English vocabulary is typically not much more than 600 words.

Many couples in this group marry at age 21 and hope to have as many children as God will provide. Sometimes that might be as many as 19, although typically 10 or 12 is the normal size family. Very early, Amish children start helping with chores, from finding eggs in the chicken house to fetching a clean folded diaper in the house for a baby.

Travel is by horse and buggy. Their farm work is typical of American farms of 100 years ago, and the small farms are of a size (50-60 acres) that can be worked by a few men with workhorses. Oats, barley, hay, wheat, corn, alfalfa and sometimes sorghum are raised by many families on these thrifty subsistence farms. The gardens are works of art, filled with rows of strawberries, raspberries, rhubarb, parsley, potatoes, beets, sweet corn, squash of various kinds, onions, tomatoes, peppers, garlic, carrots, peas, beans and anything else the family wants to eat or sell from a stand in front of the house.

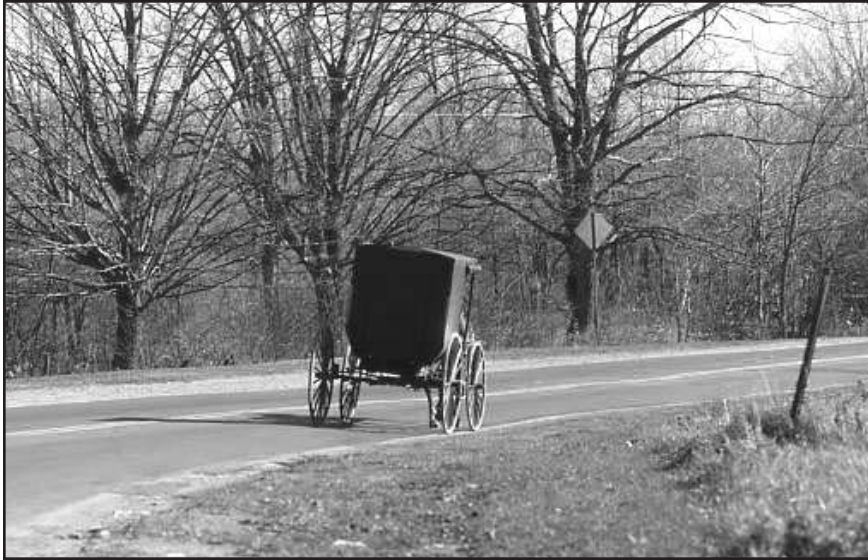


FIGURE 2. An Amish horse and buggy on a county highway. Photograph by B. Tisdale.

The Amish are multiplying very well; their needs are modest compared to ours but they do need land and are forced to keep moving away from urban and suburban sprawl, as well as from places where they themselves have been too successful. Right now, in 2010, the Amish community in St. Lawrence County numbers more than 200 families in Heuvelton, Hammond, Rensselaer Falls, Lisbon, Depeyster as well as east of Potsdam in Parishville, Stockholm and North Lawrence. In the past few years, small groups of families have moved south to Pulaski and Poland as well as to Aroostook County, Maine, near the New Brunswick border. One of those “pioneers” explained that with four couples having 38 babies and children (so far), there wouldn’t be enough available farmland in St. Lawrence County when their children were ready to have their own farms. His father belonged to one of three pioneer families that moved to St. Lawrence County from Ohio.

The Amish are not necessarily conservationists. They set up sawmills in every community, and in 20 years they have cut down a lot of white pines and maples. They clear forested land to create more fields. They spend thousands of dollars to hire companies to tile their fields (to drain

wet land quickly) and make them more productive. They cut cords and cords of swamp oak, poplar, cherry, ash and maple for firewood to heat their own houses and sell to the “English”, as they call us.

Every time I am asked to speak to a group about the Amish, invariably someone will ask, “How can they justify having so many children?” I want to say, “How can we justify accumulating so much stuff while having so few children?” I want those people to sit down in an immaculate kitchen at noon, around a huge table with six or seven girls on one side and six or seven boys on the other. All are arranged in descending order by age, with a child in a high chair at the corner, next to the mother at the table’s end, and father at the head, serving bowls of steaming beef, mashed potatoes, gravy, carrots and beans, all placed on mats upon the white oilcloth, with little glass dishes of honey, butter and strawberry jam glistening in beams of sunlight pouring through the windows. As we bow our heads for a full minute of silent prayer (including the toddler in the high chair), we can hear the wind outside the screen door, barn swallows swooping and chattering around openings to the barn, a rooster crow from somewhere near the chicken house. Those are the only sounds. How can I describe

the perfect picture of this all-encompassing family to outsiders? The only way is to take people with me.

The Amish are deeply religious but they are not intellectual. They take the New Testament very seriously and they know it is easier to be good Christians by being farmers living close to the land and dependent upon the weather. They expect to be persecuted for their chosen lifestyle of living apart from the mainstream. They pay all required taxes except Social Security, since the Federal Government has finally recognized that they really do take care of their own from cradle to grave. They are pacifists and were finally given conscientious objector status in time of war. Many of the men are so kind and gentle that it still surprises me. Teamwork and cooperation are emphasized so strongly that they even forbid their children to play competitive games. Helping each other in the family and community are pre-eminent values.

When a severe ice storm in 1998 cut off electric power in the North Country for a week or two, the Amish were not severely affected. However, they went to the aid of their English



FIGURE 3. Products sold by the Amish include strawberries at roadside stands. Photograph by B. Tisdale



FIGURE 4. A large star quilt, made to sell, hangs on a clothesline. Photograph by B. Tisdale.

farming neighbors by hand-milking their cows. When I finally was able to drive to Amish farms again, one of my Amish friends came out on her porch and exclaimed, “Oh, we were so worried about you and how you were keeping warm! We wanted you to stay with us but then we realized you couldn’t even get here!” I was surprised at her deep level of caring. It hadn’t even crossed my mind that she would be concerned about us.

In almost 25 years of dealing with the Amish through my small crafts and custom quilt business, I have come to see that they are not afraid to look me in the eye, not afraid to examine life’s big problems with me, not afraid of my questions about their lives or the troubles in my life or American society. I am often the one at a loss for words. Their expectations from life are more humble, more realistic than mine, and I find that they are truly more grounded in many ways. Yes, their choices in life are fewer and that makes their lives somewhat simpler. But they also accept that much of life is out of their control and that many things are controlled by God. And that gives their hearts a certain amount of peace that I find lacking in our society. Obviously, this is what has drawn me to them for so long. Just by watching them I receive new suggestions about how to live a good life. Trying to transpose that music to my own life is a continuing challenge.

Opening the Western Adirondacks: How Byron Benson Financed Iron Mines and the Carthage & Adirondack Railroad, Part I

James D. Carl

Introduction

We begin a two part series in the Quarterly about railroads and iron mines in the western Adirondack Mountains. The wilderness of southwest St. Lawrence and northern Lewis counties was slow to be exploited, compared to the eastern Adirondacks near the state's population centers. Early settlers in the fertile Black River Valley (see map, Fig. 1) successfully petitioned for a canal that, accompanied by railroad construction, helped to expand the lumber and tanning industries. Beyond the valley and canal villages, however, lay additional resources in the bedrock hills, thick with timber and

underlain here and there with magnetic iron ore. Getting men and equipment into this remote region required an east-west railroad, but who had the funds and gambler's nerve to build one?

The answer was Byron D. Benson, a native New Yorker who made a fortune in the early Pennsylvania oil industry. We tell the story of his successful efforts in the oil pipeline business that provided the funds to invest in New York railroads and iron mines. The Carthage and Adirondack Railroad became a conveyor belt for Adirondack lumber and iron ore. It was the second attempt to organize and finance a western

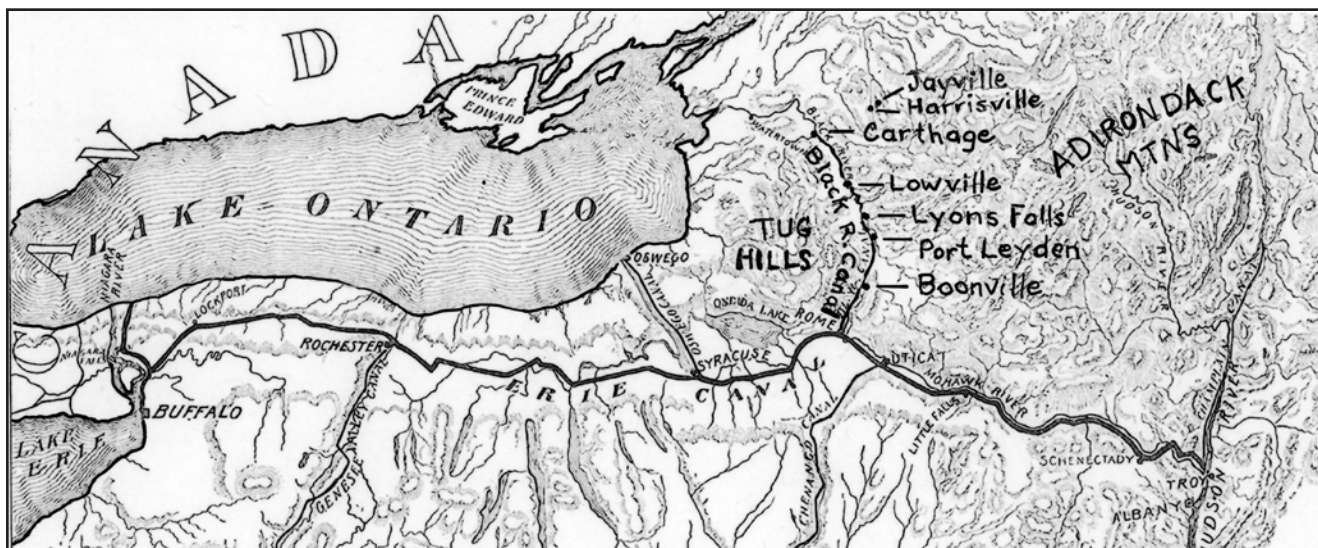


FIGURE 1. The Black River Canal (center of map) was an offshoot of the Erie Canal. It extended north from Rome to enter the Black River valley at Lyons Falls and end at a rough stretch of the river at Carthage. Completed in 1855, the canal connected the Erie Canal and the state's urban markets with Boonville, Port Leyden, Lyon's Falls, Lowville and Carthage. The canal also opened Tug Hill and the western Adirondacks to the lumber and tanning industries. Railroad service into the Adirondacks and St. Lawrence County (from Carthage to Harrisville and Jayville, upper right) was not established until 1886. Base map by Thomas C. Clarke, 1896.

mountain railroad. Beginning at Carthage, the tracks took aim at an iron-rich bedrock hill near the boundary between St. Lawrence and Lewis counties, a few miles east of Harrisville, where a small mining settlement called Jayville thrived from 1886 to 1888. Unfortunately, the ore was neither as rich nor abundant as anticipated, and the railroad moved on. It was extended eastwardly to a low, curved ridge of iron ore that, in mining surges encouraged by two world wars, was transformed into a curved open pit known as Benson Mines at Star Lake. But the mining story really begins at Carthage in the Black River Valley.

Timber, Tanning and the Black River Canal

Pioneer settlers in the Tug Hill and Black River valley looked south with growing envy at the traffic on the Erie Canal (see map, Fig. 1). Completed in 1825, the canal had jump-started the economy of central New York by giving the state a “virtual monopoly as a market for the produce of the great grain raising areas of the Midwest...”¹ For small villages within the Black River valley, however, the grand canal did little more than divert the traffic elsewhere.

Water power and decent farm land helped to attract settlers who built homes, sawmills and grist mills along this fast-moving, bedrock-floored stream, but one could not blame the residents for feeling isolated. Tug Hill and snowbound plateaus to the west hindered access to Lake Ontario. To the east lay the glaciated Adirondack Mountains whose hills of ancient crystalline rock and glacial debris were penetrated only by the roughest of roads. The way matters stood in the 1830s, development of resources would be slow compared to the eastern and southern Adirondacks that lay near large population centers.

In 1836 the New York State Legislature appointed a Senate committee to report on a “deluge of North Country petitions” that urged construction of a canal in the Black

River valley. A canal would not only open up the region and attract new settlers and industry; it also would tap the mountain rivers and keep the Erie Canal supplied with water. Along the high ground near Rome, for example, the Erie Canal experienced severe water shortages in summertime. Engineers favored the construction of a new canal extending north from Rome to Boonville, along with the addition of an Erie feeder channel that would extract water from the headwaters of the Black River.² Construction was authorized and contracts were let by November, 1837. By 1838 Irish immigrants were housed in shanties and put to work digging a ditch between Rome and the mouth of the Lansing Kill Gorge at Boonville.

New York halted all canal construction in 1842, presumably to allow the state to catch up with its debts.³ Work resumed in 1847, and on May 10, 1850, the first boat left the Erie Canal at Rome and proceeded north through the locks to Boonville. Other canal segments were completed so that by 1860, for all practical purposes, canal traffic had arrived and was open to Carthage. Locks made of locally quarried limestone had been installed to negotiate an 1100 foot rise and fall of the land with Boonville sitting at the crest. Each lock was 90 ft. long and 15 ft. wide with the capability of lifting a boat 10 vertical feet (Figs. 2, 3). The overland part from Rome through the Oneida County hills to Lyon Falls was 35.3 miles, then north to the rapids at Carthage along a channeled portion of the Black River. Total cost of the 42.5 mile-long ditch, 109 locks, canal feeders and dams was estimated at \$3,582,000.⁴

The new canal provided a pathway for logging the vast forests of the Tug Hills and western Adirondacks. The Black River had been declared a public highway in 1853 before the last canal segment was opened, thus initiating the annual log drives that lasted until 1948. But the amount of lumber carried by canal boats increased by leaps and bounds in the canal’s early years, reaching a total of 29,157,124 board feet in 1866. Six figure tonnages were maintained from 1881

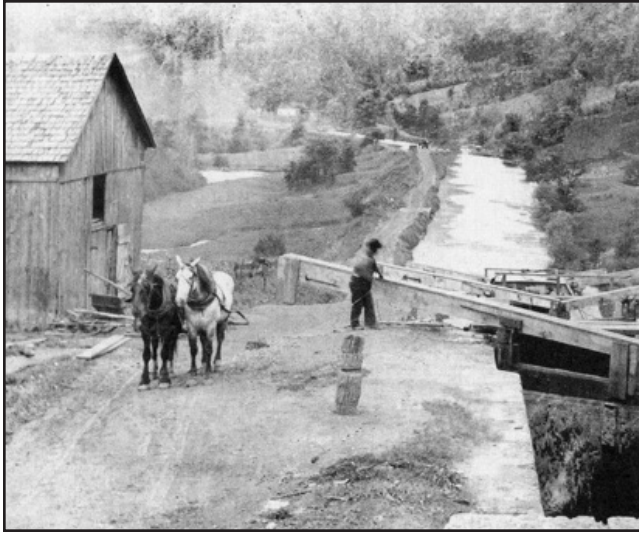


FIGURE 2. South view of the rugged landscape of the Lansing Kill Gorge on the Black River Canal near Dunn Brook, about 7.5 miles south of Boonville. There were five locks here (nos. 39-43), each capable of lifting a boat 10 ft. The surrounding hills reach elevations of more than 1500 ft. in terrain deemed too steep for railroad construction. Note the distant towpath bordering the left side of the canal. Recesses were made in the limestone walls so that the gates, when open, could rest evenly against the wall. From Fynmore and Corwin, 2005, p. 26.

FIGURE 3. South view of the remnants of five canal locks overlooking the Black River valley, downhill and out of sight to the left (east). All wood has rotted away, leaving iron bars and support bands mounted on the limestone walls of the 15 foot-wide locks. Highway 12 to Boonville is located next to the house on the right. About 2 miles south of Port Leyden. Photo by James Carl, fall, 1986.



to 1893, achieving an all-time high in 1893 for the lumber era with a shipping total of 143,561 tons. From 1851 to 1891 lumber and timber accounted for more than 80% of the canal's traffic.⁵ Huge white pine and spruce trees, up to 70 ft. long, were aligned in cribs and towed to the port of New York City. There were years when more than 100,000 trees were shipped to provide masts for large ships and pilings for wharves and docks.

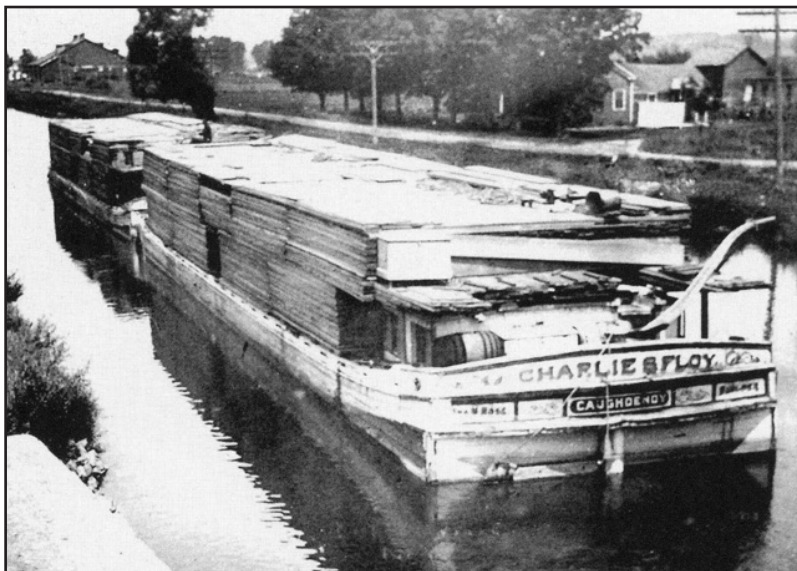
The presence of a canal encouraged the construction of sawmills and factories (Fig. 4). Local entrepreneurs loaded boards, shingles, kindling, staves and sometimes

furniture onto canal boats (Fig. 5). Settlements up and down the canal acquired the look of prosperous towns, complete with stores, banks, hotels, saloons and restaurants. Located beyond the town center were wood-framed industrial buildings—the warehouses, door-sash-and-blind factories, chair factories, cheese factories, flour mills, boat builders, dry docks, coal yards, sand and gravel loaders, flour mills and limestone quarries. More agricultural products— corn, cheese, butter, wheat, rye and astounding tonnages of potatoes— were exported as the land was stripped of its forest cover.

FIGURE 4. Henry Abbey's steam-powered sawmill near the mouth of the Independence River. The sawmill was said to have an annual production of 7,000,000 board-feet of lumber, most of which was shipped on the Black River Canal. The headwaters of this western Adirondack river (behind the sawmill) reach Big Moose settlement and lake north of Eagle Bay. The 1887 photo is from Fynmore and Corwin, 2005, p. 108.



FIGURE 5. Boards stacked like pancakes on the Charlie Floy, shown here on the Erie Canal near Durhamville. Loaded boats like this one often listed and damaged the locks. The steersman had to stand on an elevated platform to see across the cargo. Note the long-handled tiller. From Fynmore and Corwin, 2005, p. 56.



The Black River Canal, wrote Barbara McMartin, made tanning possible in Lewis County.⁶ Tanning is an industrial process for preserving animal skins and converting them into leather, and the preservative used in the nineteenth century was the tannin or tannic acid contained in tree bark. Lots of hemlock trees grew in the western Adirondacks. When soaked in vats of hot water, the scaly bark released tannic acids and other compounds that produced the natural brown color of Adirondack swamp and stream water.

Tannery sites had to be located near an abundant supply of water in the presence of thick groves of hemlock trees. The dried

and salted cowhides could be delivered by rail, wagon or canal boat, and the isolation of the industry meant that few people would complain about polluted water and the putrid smell of the process. The finished leather product, however, was essential in the nineteenth century for clothing, shoes, boots, gloves, bags, straps, equipment cases, book covers, harnesses, saddles and leather belts that literally drove the wheels of steam- and water-powered industrial machinery.

Early on, cow hides were conveyed by canal boat to tanneries at Port Leyden and Carthage. Hides also were stacked in wagons for a ride east into the Adirondacks. The

Beach and Dodd Tannery on the West Branch of the Oswegatchie River at Harrisville (Fig. 6) employed 60 workers in 1870 when it produced 54,000 sides of leather (halves of cowhides) worth \$275,000.⁷ Larger yet was the 1866 L. R. Lyon and H. Snyder tannery located at Moose River settlement on the Brown's Tract Road, about ten miles east of Booneville and Port Leyden. The finished leather was returned to canal ports and shipped to the state's population centers. Most tanneries were built or expanded around 1870; they suffered financially in 1880 when the Adirondack hemlock forest was nearly exhausted and a new chemical means of tanning replaced the need for bark. Authors Fynmore and Corwin estimated that, over the years, 40 tanneries and 200 sawmills had materialized in the Black River watershed.⁸

George Gilbert of Carthage and the Black River and St. Lawrence Railroad

Railroads arrived when the last segments of the Black River Canal were under construction. In 1855 the tracks of the Utica and Black River Railroad were laid from the Mohawk Valley for 35 miles north to Boonville. The line reached Lowville in 1868 and Carthage in 1872 before coming under the management of the Rome, Watertown and Ogdensburg Railroad (RW&O) in 1886. By 1874 the entire Adirondack region was encircled by railroads (see map, Fig. 7). Author Thomas O'Donnell noted that the railroad had "no appreciable effect upon the lumber and timber tonnage [transported by] the canal." The canal's usefulness had declined by 1892 with the diminished supply of forest products. But "it was not the railroad... that brought about this regrettable fact: the canal simply had fulfilled its destiny."¹⁰

The western Adirondacks possessed a major resource other than trees, namely the magnetic iron ore discovered in several

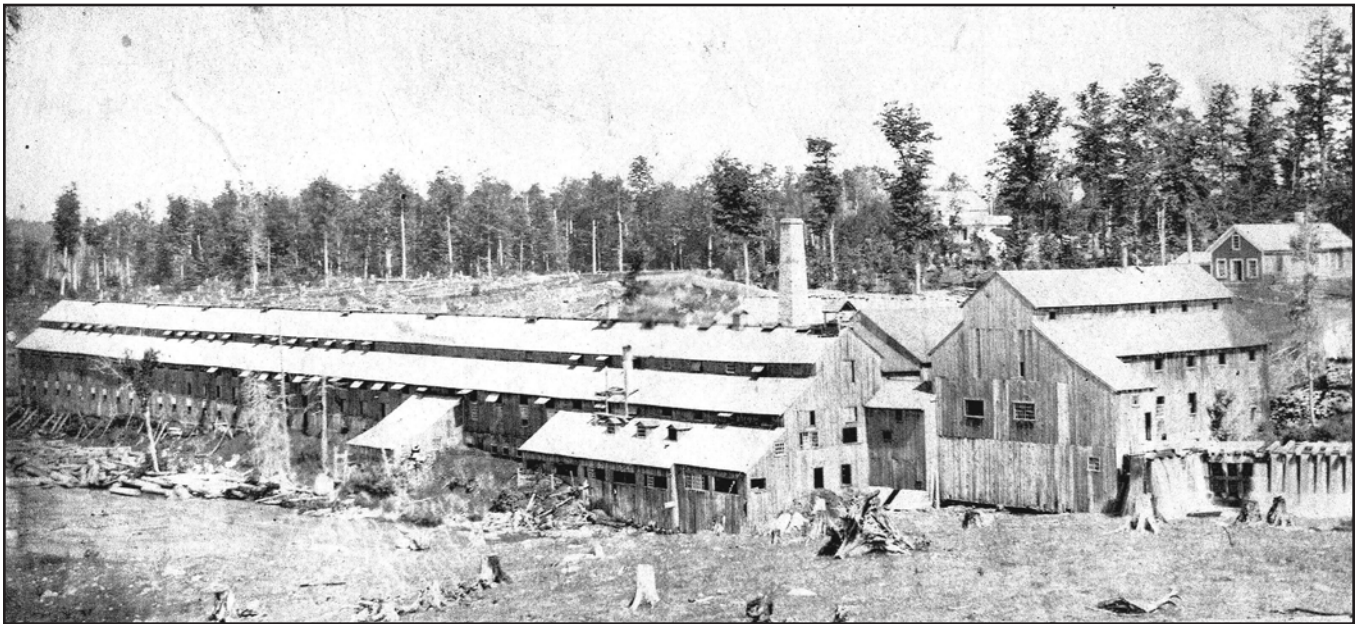


FIGURE 6. Undated photograph of the Beach and Dodd Tannery in Harrisville, built in 1859 and enlarged in 1866 on the West Branch of the Oswegatchie River. The tannery was purchased in 1880 by Henry J. Bochford. The narrow, 288 foot-long building, shown here with uplifted window shutters, housed 160 hot water tanning vats.⁹ The brick chimney (center) marked the location of the boiler that heated river water. Photograph courtesy of Ross N. Young and the Town of Diana Historical Museum in Harrisville.

FIGURE 7. Simplified map of Adirondack railroads in 1874. Railroads marginal to the western Adirondacks appeared shortly after construction of the Black River Canal, beginning with the Utica and Black River Railroad in 1855, shown here as the Rome, Watertown and Ogdensburg Railroad (RW&O, lower left). The railroad did not follow the canal from Utica to Boonville (dashed line, lower left) because the terrain there was too steep for engines. Tracks reached Carthage in 1872, prior to connecting with the St. Lawrence Branch of the New York Central (SL). Note the short line railroad extending southeast from East DeKalb to the Clifton Iron Mines at Clarksboro (near Clifton Furnace, see arrow). Early on, plans were made for the Black River and Adirondack Railroad to start at Carthage, proceed northeast to Harrisville and connect with the Clifton Mines railroad. Map modified from Jenkins and Keal, 2004, p. 88.



low bedrock hills. Undoubtedly, said the promoters, more ore must be out there. Early efforts to extract and smelt the ore had failed, partly because of the high cost of moving men and materials to and from the isolated wilderness mines and furnaces. Building a railroad east into the mountains, it was believed, would lower transportation costs and attract new mining and logging firms.

Prominent local men would make the first effort to build a western Adirondack railroad. One of the leading promoters was George Gilbert of Carthage (b. Dec. 18, 1828, in the town of Northampton in Fulton County, N. Y.; d. in Carthage, March 19, 1890), son of a Connecticut mother and New York father, Berzilla and Asenath Gilbert. The young man attended Kingsboro Academy in the town of Johnson and, beginning in 1851, read law with Wesley Gleason of the village of Fish House on Great Sacandaga Lake. Gilbert was admitted to the New York State bar in

Saratoga in 1853. He arrived in the canal village of Carthage in 1854 to become the second lawyer to practice there.

George Gilbert was a devout Presbyterian and former Democrat who, prior to the Civil War, had converted to Abraham Lincoln's new Republican party. Gilbert was said to have been instrumental in obtaining legislation for construction of the last lock and dam on the "Black River improvement project."¹¹ A winter was spent at Albany appearing before committees of both houses while arguing for funds to complete the canal. His service as town clerk and justice of the peace (from 1860 to 1864) caused one historian to write: "He always took a lively interest in the material welfare of the village and was the organizer of the Merchants' and Manufacturers' Exchange, of Carthage, of which he was secretary at the time of his death."¹² On July 7, 1875, at age 46, he married Hattie C. McAllister of Stowe, Vermont. Three young boys and a girl were

left in her care when he died of pneumonia in 1890.

In 1866 Gilbert prepared and submitted to the state legislature a bill providing for the incorporation of a company that would construct a railroad from Carthage to “some point on the Oswegatchie River, at or near Harrisville, in Diana, Lewis County...”¹³ An attractive aspect of the proposal included provisions to purchase state timber lands and engage in the lumber business. The railroad bill was passed by the New York State legislature but, unfortunately, the provisions for purchasing land were not included.

Railroad promoters believed that the road would benefit the fledgling communities and was a proper investment for towns in St. Lawrence, Lewis and Jefferson counties. Not everybody agreed. Some questioned whether it was proper to bond taxpayers in thinly populated towns with the financial risks and burdens of railroad construction. On April 2, 1868, an act was passed by the New York Legislature authorizing the towns of Wilna in Jefferson County, Diana in Lewis County and Edwards in St. Lawrence County to issue bonds and subscribe for capital stock in the Black River and St. Lawrence Railway Company.¹⁴ Anticipating population growth and railroad profits from hauling iron ore, lumber, cowhides and farm products, the towns of Wilna and Diana subscribed and paid \$50,000 for stock. The Town of Edwards subscribed \$35,000 but did not make full payment. Private subscriptions from individuals ranged from \$100 to \$500. Of the \$380,000 authorized, \$183,500 was subscribed and \$145,000 paid in.¹⁵ It was not a large sum for starting a railroad.

The first company president was Samuel H. Beach. George Gilbert was made vice president and secretary, and Henry Rushton, treasurer. Other members of the board of directors were Hezekiah Dickerman, Richard Gallagher, Jackson Weaver, Joseph Pahud, William Palmer, William Hunt, Silas Bacon, George M. Gleason, Lucius Carr and George Smith.¹⁶

The railroad’s chief engineer, Octave

Blanc, issued a report that was summarized in the *Lowville Lewis County Democrat*. The preparation of a graded surface for approximately 20 miles of track from Carthage to Harrisville would cost about \$60,000 with another \$37,062 added for “engineering and contingencies.” Cost of the rails was not included, but wooden rails would be much cheaper than steel (the right of way included all timber necessary for construction). Adirondack land bordering the track was described as follows: “From its long winters, deep snow, rocky and cold soil, it is, with a very few exceptions, poorly adapted to agriculture, and remains yet an almost unbroken forest.”¹⁷ Part of the route passed through swamps where log pilings would be required, but deep cuts in solid rock were unnecessary as were high bridges or expensive structures other than trestles. Sand and gravel were abundantly available for fill. Probably the newspaper reporter and not the surveyor wrote the following: “Experience has proved that business on railroads have always exceeded original estimates ...the products of the forest and the transportation of iron ore, will alone make it a paying road.”¹⁸

In the meantime, miles away in St. Lawrence County, the Clifton Iron Company had commissioned its own survey for a railroad right-of-way. The company needed a railroad to connect its iron mining operation at Clarksboro and nearby Clifton Furnace with the Rome, Watertown and Ogdensburg Railroad located in the St. Lawrence Valley. Clarksboro was a tiny mining settlement at the high falls on the Grasse River in the newly formed Town of Clifton.¹⁹ The mine railroad opened in 1868 using cheap wooden rails instead of iron. The use of wood, usually hickory or maple, “...was a new idea, and seemed to be a feasible one for a pioneer road in a country where timber was abundant.”²⁰

Trains from the Clifton mine began rolling northwest to DeGrasse in the Town of Russell, passing the small settlements of Stalbird and Marshville in Elm Creek Valley before completing the 21-mile distance to

East DeKalb (Fig. 8).²¹ The “wooden railroad” and this beginning phase of the Clifton mining operation, however, would abruptly come to a halt. Shortly after the first batch of steel was shipped, an early morning fire on Sept. 4, 1869, destroyed the steel plant and produced a loss estimated by one stockholder at approximately \$140,000.²² The smelter continued to operate until 1870 when a business depression forced its closure.

Promoters of the Black River and St. Lawrence Railroad wanted to build 38 miles of track from Carthage to Harrisville and beyond to connect with the Clifton mine railroad. A construction contract was signed in December, 1868, with Row (James and Henry), Fields and Company from Brockville, Ontario, who quickly established their work headquarters at the Hatch House in Carthage. The company broke ground without ceremony on April 30, 1869, and laborers fell to work, cutting timber, clearing the line and driving poles into swamps.²³ On August 28, 1869, a new 14-ton locomotive and tender, the Pioneer, arrived on the Black River Canal from the shops of Smith and Porter of Pittsburgh, Pa.²⁴ The locomotive was

tested favorably on a section of wooden track and kept in Carthage in a newly built engine house near the Black River.

By late August, 1869, the railroad right-of-way had been graded for nine miles between Carthage and Natural Bridge. Construction must have been slower than expected. The Ontario contractors had promised to complete the road to the St. Lawrence County line by June 1, 1870, and, given the coming winter, that promise seemed unachievable.²⁵ Railroad officials may have hired another contractor to extend the line to Edwards.²⁶ Litigation ensued when Row, Fields and Company quickly secured an injunction that stopped construction altogether.²⁷ Tracks for the wooden railroad would be laid no further than Natural Bridge, a little more than halfway to Harrisville.

Natural Bridge welcomed the railroad, given the presence of a saw mill and tannery, but the short-line road was said to have operated for less than a year before closure. The towns began searching for a company, any company, that would buy their stock and guarantee the “...building and ironing of said road to Harrisville...”²⁸ Some stockholders

FIGURE 8. Clarksboro and Clifton mine in the Town of Clifton (see arrow, lower right corner). The wooden-track mining railroad (not shown) ran from Clarksboro northwest to DeGrasse, Stalbird and Marshville (south of Hermon), en route to East DeKalb (see arrow, upper left corner). There it connected with the St. Lawrence Branch of the New York Central Railroad. Builders of the Black River and St. Lawrence Railroad proposed to connect Carthage with the Clifton Mine tracks, but their road was never completed. From a 1911 Road Map of St. Lawrence County.



anticipated an offer from the owners of the Clifton mine. Historian John Haddock wrote, tongue-in-cheek, that “none of these subscribers, so far as the author could ascertain, has since considered this act [of investment] as ranking at all conspicuously among their master strokes of finance.”²⁹

Indeed, local folks did lose money. Nearly 35 years later the *Lowville Democrat* announced that “the Town of Diana has only \$9500 of the old railroad bonded indebtedness to pay.”³⁰ Sarcasm aimed at company sponsors appeared in an 1877 issue of the *Carthage Republican Tribune*. Flat bottom cars of the old “tram road” (streetcar line, an insult) were reported to be lying in a ditch along the Utica and Black River Railroad near Theresa, and an old company caboose was being used as a wood shed by a Theresa resident. The *Tribune* added: “So, much of the rolling stock of the glorious old Black River & St. Lawrence Railway is accounted for. Perhaps someone knows what has become of the engine, and how much has been realized from the sale of the rolling stock. Let us know all about this grand and glorious enterprise which so admirably succeeded in sinking \$50,000 for the Town of Wilna.”³¹ From the perspective of town taxpayers, lawyer George Gilbert’s reputation must have suffered during the 1870s. His status would be revived somewhat in the 1880s with completion of the Carthage and Adirondack railroad to Harrisville.

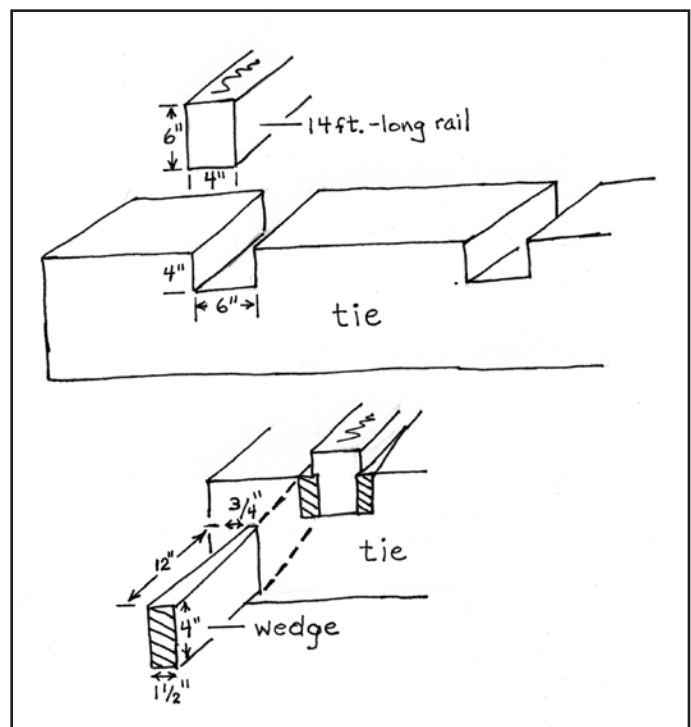
Years later, the state Board of Railroad Commissioners seemed to blame the demise of the Black River and St. Lawrence Railroad

FIGURE 9. A railroad crosstie with notches for holding two 14 ft.-long wooden rails. Set loosely into a notch, each rail was anchored by hammering in wedges on both sides. The result was a tightly fitted rail that protruded 2 inches above the tie. Ties were laid 3 feet apart. The cost of red beech crossties (10 cents each), maple rails and maple wedges, including the cost of labor, was estimated at \$1,000 for each mile of track in 1868.³³ Compare this with an estimated \$7,000 per mile for steel rails in 1869.³⁴ Sketch by J. Carl.

on its choice of wooden instead of iron rails. The 1885 report announced that the rails had been a failure and that the road had not been operated since 1871. It concluded: “An agreement is now pending... by which [the Black River and St. Lawrence Railroad] proposes to turn over its property to the Carthage and Adirondack Railroad Company upon condition that it will complete this road.”³²

The Question of Wooden Rails

Wooden rails were widely discussed among railroad builders in the 1860s and 70s. They were promoted as cheap but suitable track for short-line railroads that carried mostly freight. Relatively lightweight steam engines with wide-rimmed wheels could be used for operation at speeds varying from 8 to 12 miles per hour. Wooden rails, the products of sawmills instead of smelters, were much cheaper than steel and, if properly maintained, could last for 6 or 7 years. Hard, close grained, not-easily-warped wood was used, such as maple or hickory. Each rail was placed loosely into notches cut in the cross ties and firmly held in place by wooden



wedges, hammered next to the rail on both sides (Fig. 9).

The *Carthage Republican* had questioned whether the low cost of wooden rails on the Clifton mine railroad had unduly influenced the financial backers of the Black River and St. Lawrence Railroad.³⁵ Early on, the Black River supporters were invited to take a ride on the Clifton mine railroad and observe its wooden track first hand. George Gilbert and other citizens from Carthage, Natural Bridge, Harrisville and South Edwards gathered at the hotel of George Converse in Edwards, N. Y. A message received from J. B. Hurlburt, Chief Engineer of Clifton mine, invited the group to ride his train for a personally conducted tour of the mine and railroad. At 8 o'clock the next morning, about 40 people climbed into horse-drawn carriages to ride "...over hills and rough roads, which demonstrated better than any argument the necessity of some better way than the use of horses and wagons to reach this wilderness..."³⁶ It was an eight mile ride from Edwards to Silver Hill and the Clifton mine railroad tracks where Hurlburt greeted them. Horses were left in an old barn, and the group boarded a two-car train for the six-mile journey to the mine.

The *Carthage Republican* reported on the chief engineer's enthusiasm for wooden tracks. Maple rails had been inserted into slots cut 4 inches deep in the heavy cross ties. The ties were spaced three feet apart, and the result was a smooth train ride. Hurlburt pointed out to his passengers that wooden rails were much cheaper (less than \$1000 per mile) than steel rails and could be laid in tighter curves. Visitors were told that rail surfaces could be made hard and gritty by sprinkling with fine sand from the locomotive box. The treated surfaces facilitated traction and lasted for years. Hurlburt claimed that an edge tool could not shape the hard surface of a six year-old wooden track that he had removed. He enthused about the isolated property at Clifton mine that had greatly increased in value when the railroad was constructed. At the end of the day,

the visitors gave him three cheers for his courtesies and forthright talk.³⁷

There were drawbacks to wooden rails whose constant need for repair played a role in depleting the funds of the Black River and St. Lawrence Railroad—rotting wood, warped sections of track, the shaving of rails by the steel flange of an engine wheel and the derailling of engines during build up of heavy ice and snow. The ultimate cause for company failure, however, was inadequate capital, unforeseen construction costs and delays for what proved to be an expensive project. After closing the railroad, the board of directors continued to meet every year. Equipment and survey reports had been set aside, and a right-of-way into the wilderness was laid out for everyone to see. Men with greater financial resources, including Byron Benson and his Pennsylvania oil partners, could take note of the reasons why Adirondack towns and local businessmen had invested their money. Maybe Benson and his wealthy friends would buy the railroad's assets and make another construction effort.

Fame and fortune: the Benson family and the Pennsylvania oil industry

The Bensons would complete in the late 19th century what the good citizens of Carthage, Natural Bridge and Harrisville had started after the Civil War: building a railroad to promote lumbering and mining in the western Adirondacks. Throughout the 20th century, the Benson family name would remain on a 2½ mile-long open pit iron mine near Star Lake, in spite of changes in company ownership. How did the sons and grandsons of a large farm family from central New York acquire such wealth as to compete with the best of 19th-century industrial tycoons?

Byron David Benson (Fig. 10) was the tenth of twelve children born to the pioneer farm family of David Benson (b. 1791; d. 1842) and Jane Sumner Benson (b. 1796; d. 1858). The couple had married on March 12, 1815, and resided near Fabius in Onondaga

County, N. Y.³⁸ Byron, his seven sisters and four brothers were born between December, 1815, and September, 1840. Byron was educated in a “Dame’s school,” kept by an elderly maiden lady in her home in Fabius about 2½ miles from the Benson farm. His father died at age 51 when the boy was ten, but older brothers and unmarried sisters must have helped tend the farm and care for their younger siblings. As a young man, Bryon and a close friend, Robert Emmet Hopkins, left home to operate a stave mill and make barrels, pails and casks a few miles north of Brewerton, the site of an 18th

century fort and settlement on the outlet of Oneida Lake.³⁹

Byron married Minerva Stevens of Brewerton in 1858. Two years later he was elected sheriff of Onondaga County, serving throughout the Civil War years from 1861 to 1864. The couple would have two sons in Brewerton: Robert Dix (b. May 14, 1861) and William Sumner Benson (b. Feb. 21, 1864). Byron’s travel companion and business partner, Robert Hopkins, had joined the Union army. He organized a company of soldiers in Brewerton and was captured in Virginia in 1863 at the Battle of Chancellorsville. He was released from Richmond’s Libby prison and honorably discharged from the Union Army with the rank of major. In May of 1865, Byron and Robert prepared to make a new start in life. They traveled to Enterprise, Pa., to engage in the lumber business. Byron’s family joined him there, and the couple’s third child, Elizabeth (Bessie), was born in Enterprise on March 22, 1866.

The move to Pennsylvania oil country was a propitious opportunity for talented businessmen. Land speculation and well drilling were the order of the day, and oil was discovered in the vicinity of Enterprise. Byron and Robert’s first land purchase had been part of the Rouse estate, comprising 700 acres east of Enterprise. The men plunged into the oil business by organizing the Colorado Oil Company. Then they formed a partnership, known as D. McKelvy and Company, with David McKelvy of Titusville, an attorney and native of Sugar Grove, Pa. The company first operated in the Black oil field at Pleasantville but later “...followed the trend of developments into Butler and Armstrong counties and drilled several wells in the Wardwell district in Warren County. They were active in Bradford County during the excitement there.”⁴⁰ In the winter of 1872-73, Byron moved to Titusville and purchased a stately home on the corner of Oak and Perry streets. He and Minerva would live there the rest of their lives.

Titusville lay about 7 miles west of Enterprise. This former lumber town held

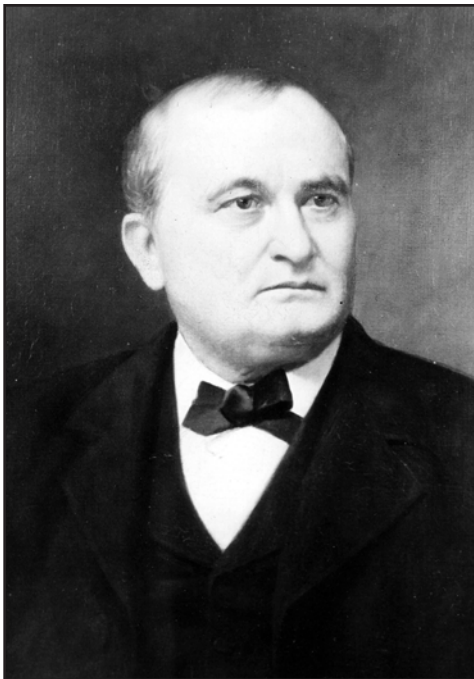


FIGURE 10. A mature Byron David Benson (b. Feb. 29, 1832; d. Feb. 8, 1888), the tenth of 12 children born in a farm family near Fabius, N. Y. His Tide Water Pipe Line Company gave Standard Oil a run for its money in the highly competitive Pennsylvania oil industry. Benson organized and helped to finance both the Carthage and Adirondack Railroad and the Magnetic Iron Ore Company that operated at Jayville from 1886 to 1888. In 1889 the railroad was extended to the Little River ore beds near Star Lake. A large open pit mine would be known throughout the 20th century as Benson Mines. Photo courtesy of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Drake Well Museum, Titusville, Pa.

the distinction of hosting the beginnings of America's oil industry in the boom year of 1859. "Colonel" Edwin Drake, a retired jack-of-all trades and railroad conductor with no military experience, had arrived as the front man for the poorly financed Seneca Oil Company of New Haven, Conn. Drake rode horseback out of Titusville and observed the consequences of digging shallow trenches in the ground. The diggers stood by and watched with prolonged patience as oil and water slowly seeped into the ditch. Small amounts of oil were then skimmed off the surface, stored in containers and sold chiefly as a medicinal remedy.

Believing that the true source of oil lay not in the soil but at some depth in the underlying rocks, Drake hired a well-driller and erected a wooden derrick for lifting drilling tools and installing pipe (Fig. 11). A boiler provided steam power that operated a walking beam connected to a churn drill.⁴¹ The well was located in low ground near a stream bed, and soil and alluvium had to be penetrated before encountering the bedrock. To prevent the walls of his drill hole from collapsing, Drake hammered a large

diameter iron pipe into the ground, prior to drilling into the sandstone bedrock. People long remembered the astounding news that Saturday afternoon of August 27, 1859, when oil oozed from the rock and seeped into the 69 foot-deep hole. It rose to the rim of the pipe where it could easily be removed with a container or by installing a pump. Drake could recover barrels of the smelly liquid in a fraction of the time required by a patient digger of trenches. With common well drilling equipment, he had created a cheap and convenient means of extracting oil, provided that the natural gas content was low and a gusher didn't blow the rig apart.

Everyone understood the implications of Drake's discovery. The future of a new industry lay in the drilling, transporting and refining of oil to make a clean-burning fluid (kerosene) that would illuminate the night. Drake's drilling technique had set off a mob scene in the rush to lease property, thereby launching an insatiable demand for well drillers and equipment. The rush to participate became the liquid equivalent of the Colorado and Montana gold rushes. Titusville and northwest Pennsylvania soon sprouted a forest of wooden derricks, thousands of them, all the while roaring through the bloody years of the Civil War as a center of land leasing and well drilling (Fig. 12). Fortunes were made and lost overnight. Refineries began to produce immense quantities of cheap, clean-burning kerosene for lighting lamps that the suppliers of coal oil and the New England whaling fleets could not match. Lumbermen, saw mill operators,



FIGURE 11. The second well drilled by "Colonel" Edwin L. Drake in Titusville, Penn., in 1861. A boiler provided steam to operate a walking beam and churn drill inside in the shack (see end note 41). A pulley mounted at the top of the derrick helped to raise and lower the drilling tools and iron pipe into the hole. This famous photograph shows a bearded Drake with a tall hat (lower right) standing next to the thin-faced Peter Wilson, a Titusville druggist. The photo is a reproduction from the John A. Mather Collection, purchased by J. Carl at the Drake Well Memorial Park in Titusville, Pa., May, 1993.

FIGURE 12. High density oil well drilling. A hillside at Pioneer Run near Oil Creek, northwest Pennsylvania, in 1865. The shack (right center) has signs reading "Shoe & Leather Petroleum Co, David Harris, Supt.," and "E. C. Bishop, Act., Foster Farm Oil Co." Ten men and two seated, well-dressed ladies posed for the photographer. Note the tree stumps in the lower left. Imagine the muddy quagmire created here during a heavy rainstorm. The photo, reproduced from the collection of the Drake Well Museum, was purchased by James Carl in 1993.



carpenters and coopers were in great demand for building oil rigs, frame buildings, barrels and storage facilities.

Oil was transported from wells to railroad stations by teamsters using spent whiskey barrels and horse-drawn wagons. In turn, the railroads quickly adapted to hauling oil in large wooden vats mounted on flat cars. One oil field entrepreneur, Dr. David Hostetter, had been a promoter and manufacturer of a patent medicine called "Hostetter's Bitters." He owned wells in the Butler County fields north of Pittsburgh and did not wish to pay the exorbitant shipping rates charged by railroads. His alternative was to build a pipeline, the Columbia Conduit Pipe Line, extending from the Butler field south to Sharpsburg on the Allegheny River, a few miles upstream from Pittsburgh.

In 1874 the good doctor leased the pipeline to D. McKelvy and Company, owned by Pennsylvania native David McKelvy and his two partners from New York's Onondaga County, Byron Benson and Robert Hopkins. The company devoted itself to making the pipeline a paying proposition. The effort, however, was regarded as a major threat to the profitable business of hauling oil by rail. The Columbia pipeline came to an abrupt halt at Sharpsburg because the West Penn

Railroad denied permission to continue the line across its track. The track's narrow right-of-way, said the railroad, extended from "the center of the earth to the top of the sky," and no pipeline was going to cross their tracks above or below the ground.⁴² Thus, the oil had to be carted across the tracks and placed on barges for shipment downstream on the Allegheny and Ohio rivers to Parkersburg, West Virginia. From Parkersburg it went by rail to refineries in Baltimore—not to Pittsburgh, because refineries there were owned or leased by the Standard Oil Company. When the embittered Hostetter finally sold the pipeline company, he, Byron Benson and the other men who leased it were considerably enriched.

There was money to be made in bypassing the railroad altogether, by organizing a pipeline company of one's own or by purchasing the pipeline of a competitor. Standard Oil had already purchased most independent pipeline companies by the time Byron Benson and five partners organized the Tide Water Pipe Line Company, Ltd. with capital of \$625,000.⁴³ On Nov. 13, 1878, Benson announced plans to construct a pipeline from Coryville in McKean County, Penn., about 10 miles south of the New York State border, to Williamsport on the

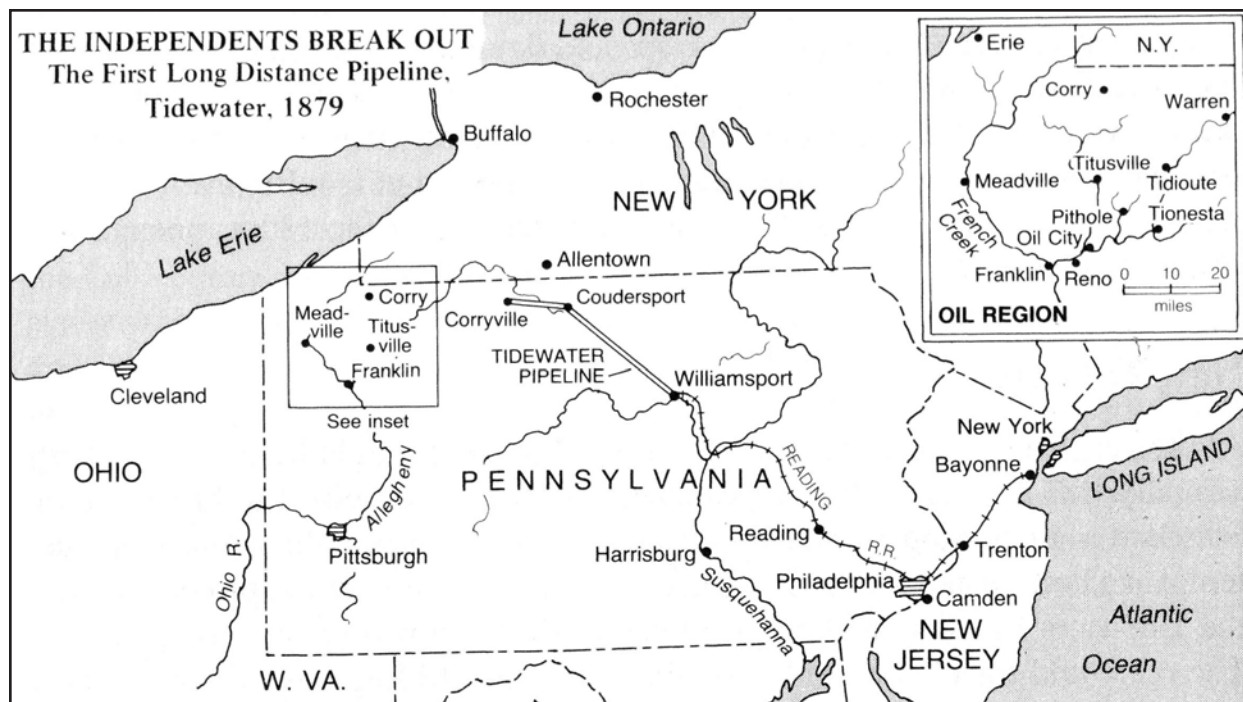


FIGURE 13. Bryon Benson's Tide Water pipeline (center of map) extended from Coryville (only one "r"), Pennsylvania, across the Allegheny Plateau to Williamsport on the West Branch of the Susquehanna River. The Reading Railroad carried the oil to Bayonne, New Jersey (lower right), for refining. From D. Yergin, 2008, p. 28.

West Branch of the Susquehanna River, a distance of more than 100 miles. Author Daniel Yergin described the project as a "...daring experiment—the world's first attempt at a long-distance pipeline."⁴⁴ Construction would not be easy. Roads were lacking and much of the land was forested and thinly settled. The pipeline had to cross rivers and traverse the Allegheny Plateau at elevations above 2000 feet. Pumping stations had to be installed and maintained. New technologies and techniques for laying pipe would be called for, and surely there would be troubles with the aggressive John Rockefeller and his Standard Oil Company.

The Tide Water Company began laying pipe on top of the ground at Coryville on Feb. 22, 1879.⁴⁵ In less than three months of strenuous effort, the pipe had been laid for 109 miles across the Allegheny Plateau. Only two large pumping stations were built, and the valves were opened at Coryville on May 28, 1879. Oil began flowing at the

rate of about a half mile an hour, reaching Williamsport on June 4 where it was stored in two 30,000 barrel tanks. From there, the Reading Railroad delivered the oil to refineries in Bayonne, New Jersey (see map, Fig. 13).

Today, a state marker in McKean County, 0.3 miles southwest of Coryville, marks the site of pumping station No. 1 for the first pipeline to cross the Allegheny Plateau (Fig. 14). By 1885 the Tide Water Pipe Line Company had completed the line to its refineries at Bayonne, New Jersey, a few miles southwest of Jersey City. The company finally lived up to its name by delivering oil a distance of 286 miles to Upper New York Bay.

John D. Rockefeller and his Standard Oil Company were mostly in the business of refining oil rather than gathering it from wells, but the company sought control of all aspects of refining, distribution and sale. Given the unregulated state of the early oil



FIGURE 14. Sketch illustrating the construction of the first pipeline across Pennsylvania's Allegheny Plateau by Byron D. Benson's Tide Water Pipe Line Company. Profits from this and other oil related projects would be spent on a railroad and iron mine in the western Adirondacks. Teams of four horses are shown struggling up an incline in winter, hauling sleds loaded with iron pipe. From web site <http://www.explorepahistory.com>

industry, Standard Oil had a point. Intense competition among hundreds of small independent companies had produced a volatile market. Everyone drilled too many wells and pumped too much oil in order to please stockholders and pay landowners their promised royalties. Time after time, a glut in production had been followed by a precipitous drop in price, and many drilling companies had no oil storage facilities. State regulations were lacking. The land and the industry suffered, and the source of the oil itself was often damaged. Deep down in the porous rock, the "driving power," the pressure that pushed oil into the well hole, was diminished when the rock's pore water and natural gas content were allowed to escape.

Clearly, continuous flow through a pipeline could deliver more crude oil to a refinery's door than a string of railroad tank cars, thus cutting costs for producers and refiners alike. Rockefeller, however, had created an efficient means of delivering oil by locating warehouses and storage tanks in convenient places for the railroads. He

built and rented his own fleet of oil-tank cars and secured concessions by promising to ship large and steady volumes. In turn, the railroads provided rebates once delivery had been made. Delivery costs for other oil refiners, however, were raised in what was interpreted by Rockefeller's competitors as a defining signature of a cartel.

What followed was described by author Daniel Yergin:

"The clear success of Tidewater, and the revolution it implied in transportation, not only caught Standard by surprise, but also meant that its control of the industry was suddenly again in jeopardy. The producers had an alternative to Standard Oil. The company sprang into action, building in short order four long-distance pipelines from the Oil Regions to Cleveland, New York, Philadelphia and Buffalo. Within two years, Standard was a minority stockholder in Tidewater itself..."⁴⁶

Author Ron Chernow described Standard Oil's efforts to discourage legislation helpful to independent pipeline companies:

"During the Tidewater battle, Standard lobbied hard to perpetuate the system that allowed state legislatures to grant exclusive pipeline charters... [R]eformers in the late 1870s introduced measures in several states to enact free-pipe bills, which would enable Standard Oil foes to lay competing lines and enjoy the right of eminent domain; under the existing system, Tidewater had to buy costly rights-of-way along its 110-mile east-west route. Standard Oil regarded these [free-pipe] bills with such apprehension that Henry Flagler [business associate of John Rockefeller]⁴⁷ returned from Florida... to spearhead the lobbying campaign. To foster the impression of a popular groundswell against the bill, he hired lawyers to pose as incensed farmers and landowners in favor of the status quo."⁴⁸ Standard Oil also undercut rates charged by the independent pipeline companies and blocked access to crude oil for anyone who dealt with the independent refiners.⁴⁹

The Tide Water Company relied upon the

council of David K. McKelvy who piloted the company through the legal obstacles and secured a right-of-way for its pipeline. In June 1882, however, the company agreed to sell a third of its stock to Standard Oil. "The combination of predatory pricing and state charters ultimately led Tidewater to make a pact with Standard Oil, restricting its activities to 11.5 percent of the pipeline business and leaving the rest of the market to Standard Oil."⁵⁰

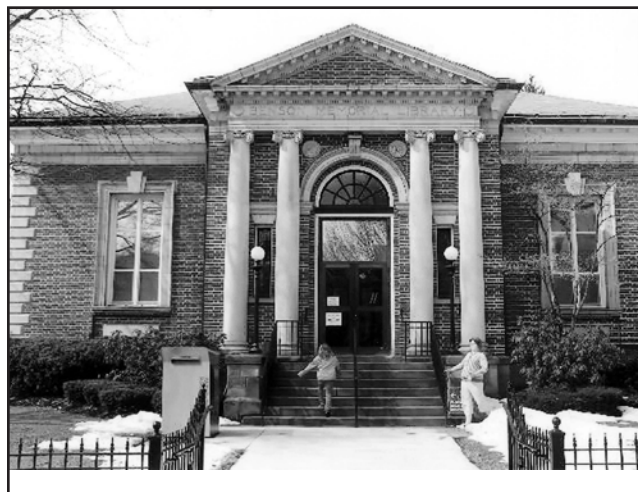
The valuable oil refineries at Bayonne, N. J., were acquired by a new Benson company, the Tide Water Oil Company, organized in 1888 with a capital of \$5,000,000. Byron D. Benson was president, his 24 year-old son, William Sumner Benson, Vice President and Treasurer, and another son, 27 year-old Robert Dix Benson, served as manager and director. The father died in 1888, departing this world prematurely but widely admired for his business creations. When Robert Dix Benson became president in 1908, the oil company increased its capital to \$24,000,000 and acquired control of the Tide Water Pipe Line Company. Products were marketed under the name of Tydol in service stations that sold Veedol products from the 1930s to the mid-1960s. In the eastern United States the company was absorbed by Getty Oil that, in turn, was acquired by Texaco in 1984. It is now incorporated in ChevronTexaco.

Titusville regarded Byron Benson as one of its own. This native New Yorker was praised as a prominent Pennsylvania citizen, an independent oil man, philanthropist and visionary. Benson died from complications of a cancerous facial tumor at age 55 on Feb. 8, 1888, at his temporary residence at 130 West 42nd Street in New York City.⁵¹ A copper casket containing his remains was transferred the next night to the private railroad car of T. P. Fowler, president of the New York, Ontario and Western Railroad.⁵² Nearly 200 people were at the Titusville depot when the train arrived, and a horse-drawn hearse conveyed the casket to his home.

The funeral party assembled at the depot that evening included family members,

friends, and corporate notables such as Cadwell B. Benson,⁵³ the treasurer of the newly built Carthage and Adirondack Railroad in upstate New York, and Samuel Q. Brown, its general manager. Also present were B. F. Warren of the Ocean Oil Co. in New York, and J. Edwards and J. E. Morse of the Chester Oil Co. in Philadelphia. An overflow funeral crowd at the Presbyterian Church the following morning included members of the Oil Exchange who had "adjourned in respect to the deceased." With heads uncovered, the members lined up on each side of the entrance as the casket was carried into the church. Sitting in the center behind the family were employees of the Tidewater Pipeline Company. "Merchants, ministers, professional men, and artisans of all classes were comprised in this vast throng..."⁵⁴

In February, 1904, a new library constructed in honor of Byron and Minerva Benson⁵⁵ was presented to the people of Titusville by the couple's three children, Robert, William and Elizabeth (Bessie). The \$35,000 Benson Memorial Library (Fig. 15) contained 4,000 books, a children's reading room and a mezzanine for displaying collections of minerals, bottles of Pennsylvania oil and other "natural curiosities."⁵⁶ A men's smoking room in the basement came complete with a fireplace of "old New England design." Byron Benson had been school director and one of the founders



of the Titusville Library Association. He and Minerva were buried in Titusville's Woodlawn Cemetery.

Benson's name was assigned to a 7953-ton oil tanker built in Tampa, Florida, in 1922. The Byron D. Benson saw two decades of service before being torpedoed by a German U-boat off the coast of North Carolina on April 5, 1942, while the ship was en route from Port Arthur, Texas, to oil refineries at Bayonne, New Jersey. Ten men perished out of a crew of eight officers and 29 men.⁵⁷

The Bensons Seek Adirondack Lumber and Iron Ore

We cannot say when Byron Benson first turned his eye away from the Pennsylvania oil fields to business opportunities in northern New York. Was he looking to divert his financial interests to a less competitive industry, given the grip on the oil industry by the powerful John Rockefeller? Did Benson initiate contact with Black River Valley citizens, or did influential residents approach the oilman?

In his book on the history of Jefferson County, Hamilton Child called attention to the aftermath of the failure of the Black River and St. Lawrence Railroad. He wrote that Byron Benson "...had been investigating the extent and character of the deposits of iron ore at Jayville, Fine, and other points in St. Lawrence County, the title to which had been secured by Joseph [Pahud] of Harrisville, to be used in aid of the completion of this road. Mr. Benson and his associates became satisfied

that these ores were of sufficient value to warrant the construction of a railroad from Carthage to Jayville, and a company was organized for that purpose..."⁵⁸ Child gave neither the dates for Benson's investigation nor the names of people, other than Joseph Pahud,⁵⁹ whom Benson may have contacted.

The *Watertown Herald*, however, named the leader of an early group of Adirondack iron prospectors: "In the winter of 1873, under the management of C. B. Benson, a prospecting party [was] at work in the mines east of our village, and only suspended the work on account of the sudden depression in [the price of] iron."⁶⁰ Presumably C. B. was Cadwell Belden Benson whose prospecting efforts must have been initiated at Byron's urging.

North County historians and newspapers tended to praise local men who obtained financial backing for major projects, but the financiers themselves were mentioned only in passing and sometimes were referred to as "foreigners" with foreign money.⁶¹ Writing in 1894, historian John A. Haddock praised two local men for helping to establish a railroad to the iron mines: "The inception of this enterprise was unquestionably due to the active mind of Mr. George Gilbert, for many years up to the time of his death [in 1890], a prominent lawyer of the village of Carthage. Mr. Gilbert was seconded and greatly aided by Hon. Joseph Pahud, an esteemed citizen of Harrisville, Lewis County. Indeed, but for Mr. Pahud's efforts, it is doubtful whether the road would have been completed."⁶²

Eastward into the Mountains: the Carthage & Adirondack Railroad

The Carthage and Adirondack Railroad (see map, Fig. 16) was chartered on March 23, 1883, a decade after Cadwell Benson's *in situ* examination of iron ore sites near Harrisville. The new railroad had 25 stockholders and capital stock authorized at \$500,000. Byron D. Benson of Titusville was named President; Robert Dix Benson, Secretary; and Samuel Q. Brown of Philadelphia, Treasurer. Robert

FIGURE 15 (opposite page). The Benson Memorial Library at 213 North Franklin Street in Titusville, Pennsylvania. The edifice was dedicated on a Saturday afternoon in February, 1904. Funds for the building were contributed by the three children of Byron and Minerva: Robert Dix, William Sumner and Elizabeth (Bessie) Benson Emerson. Accepting the gift on behalf of the city was Mayor Daniel F. Reuting. Architects Jackson and Rosencrans of New York City designed the Greek Revival building with four Ionic columns.



FIGURE 16. The Carthage and Adirondack Railroad (C&A, see arrow), the first to penetrate the western Adirondacks. It reached Harrisville and Jayville in 1886, Benson Mines in 1889 and the paper mill at Newton Falls in 1896. Thomas Durant's Adirondack Railroad, later the Delaware and Hudson, D & H, had penetrated the southeastern Adirondacks much earlier (1872) from Saratoga Springs to North Creek (bottom right). A major difference between this map and Fig. 7, however, is the presence of the "Mohawk and Malone" Railroad diagonally across the Adirondacks. This railroad was built in 1892 by W. Seward Webb and is labeled AD here, the Adirondack Division of the New York Central. Map modified from Jenkins and Keal, 2004, p. 89.

was Byron's 21-year-old son, born in Titusville. Samuel Brown had been a partner with Byron in the Tide Water Pipe Line Co.

The 1883 Carthage and Adirondack Board of Directors included only two local citizens: George Gilbert of Carthage and Joseph Pahud of Harrisville. Other members were Cadwell B. Benson of Oswego, N.Y., Joseph Callett of Terre Haute, Indiana, Samuel Dixon of Philadelphia, Oscar L. Hascy and Alanson A. Sumner of Albany (Sumner was another partner in the Tide Water Pipe Line Company), Josiah Lombard of New York City, Thomas B. Reiter of Pittsburgh, and William A. Sweet of Syracuse.⁶³ The *Watertown Herald* added that Cadwell Benson was general manager and Edwin Austin Bond the chief engineer and general superintendent.⁶⁴ Bond had been recruited from his job as chief engineer on the Utica and Black River Railroad.

In contrast to this geographically diverse and wealthy board, the 1883 Board of Directors of the inoperative Black River and St. Lawrence Railroad consisted of 13 local men of more modest means. Eleven were from Carthage, one from Harrisville

and one from Clayton. Three of the officers were Carthage men: Lawrence J. Goodale, President, John C. Reed, Vice President and George Gilbert, Treasurer. Joseph Pahud of Harrisville was Secretary.⁶⁵ This board would dissolve after selling equipment, property and other interests to the Carthage and Adirondack line, valued (probably overvalued) at \$100,000.

The railroad was built to haul iron ore, and two mining companies were incorporated the same month as the railroad: the Ontario Iron Co. on March 9, 1883, and the Magnetic Iron Ore Co. on March 20. Certificates of incorporation were filed in the Lewis County clerk's office, each with \$1,000,000 in capital stock (10,000 shares at \$1,000 each) with principal operations to be conducted in the Town of Diana. The same people were involved in both companies. Alanson A. Sumner of New York City was made president and Samuel Q. Brown secretary and treasurer.⁶⁶ These men were reported to be "under the active management" of Byron D. Benson, Cadwell B. Benson and G. D. Grannis.⁶⁷

Newspaper accounts seemed confused

about which company would do the mining. The Lewis County Democrat reported that the Ontario Iron Company had leased 75,000 acres of Adirondack land (from Zebulon Benton?) and sent G. D. Grannis to Carthage. Grannis, an old contractor and general manager of public works, arrived on March 26, 1883, rented an office and hired Charles Ruter, a Carthage lumber dealer, “to furnish 600,000 feet of lumber to be used in construction at Natural Bridge.”⁶⁸ Chief Civil Engineer E. A. Bond of Clayton and three assistants, T. P. Bond of Michigan, W. H. Schall of Vernon and F. A. Rice of Watertown, were expected to complete the road by Nov. 1, 1884. The Ontario name quickly disappeared from newspaper articles, and mining operations were ascribed to the Magnetic

Iron Ore Co. Shafts were sunk into a bedrock hill, and a mining settlement called Jayville was created at the end of the line, 8.2 miles east of Harrisville.

Lowville, the Lewis County seat, had wanted railroad construction to start from there. In the spring of 1881, surveyor E. A. Bond estimated the cost of construction between Lowville and Harrisville at \$153,000, whereas the cost from Carthage to Harrisville was \$127,000. The estimates included depots, ties, bridges, right of way—everything except the rails. Laying new steel rails would cost \$5,520 per mile. No wonder the old Black River and St. Lawrence Railroad had begun with wooden rails. Lowville’s *Lewis County Democrat* acknowledged early on that “...[the cheaper Carthage route] is the one in



FIGURE 17. Still standing in downtown Carthage is the 1884-1885 New York Central passenger depot on North Mechanic Street, erected after the city fire of 1884. Heated by coal stoves, the station was used by passengers on the Carthage and Adirondack Railroad. The C. and A. line ran south of the village (to the right) before turning northeast toward Harrisville and Jayville. An earlier depot site and a freight station are located 0.1 mile to the north (to the left) on Alexandria Street.

Carthage was a major railroad hub. A roundhouse on Boyd Street was abandoned in 1950; two years later an ice house, located between the Black River and South Mechanic Street, was torn down. By 1956 passenger service on the New York Central was being curtailed and, in 1957, a nearby freight house was put up for sale. Strictly freight trains continued to run in 1965 when work was done to strengthen the track and road bed to support the heavy ore trains arriving from Benson Mines. A meeting was held in March, 2009, to consider reviving the depot as a downtown community hub and meeting area.⁷² Photo by James Carl, June, 2009.

all likelihood that will be adopted.”⁶⁹

Sure enough, construction began in 1883 from the Carthage depot (Fig. 17) to Natural Bridge, following the right-of-way of the old Black River and St. Lawrence Railroad, but this time with enough funds to lay steel rails instead of wood. Approximately \$15,000 had been spent by the contractor and, during the winter of 1883-84, the railroad was expected to “soon be open for traffic.”⁷⁰ However, all work was stopped by 1884.⁷¹ Construction resumed two years later in May, 1886, and the railroad to the Jayville mines was officially opened on January 1, 1887.

The western Adirondacks finally had a railroad, established by a native New Yorker who made his money in the Pennsylvania oil business. The Carthage and Adirondack Railroad fulfilled the ambitions of the old Black River and St. Lawrence Railroad. Most C. & A. business at the turn of the century, however, was the transport of timber and lumber from dead-end logging railroads that sprouted from the main line. They led to lumber camps and saw mill settlements, such as Kalurah and Wanakena. But the Jayville iron ore, the initial objective, is the topic of Part II.

Part II will appear soon in the Quarterly...

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End Notes

- ¹ T. O'Donnell, 1972, p. 16.
- ² Ibid, p. 17.
- ³ The state's freeze on canal construction (the "Stop Law") launched a storm of protest against the Democratic Party. Whigs seized the situation as an opportunity to discredit Silas Wright of Canton who was in line for the Democratic nomination for governor. T. O'Donnell, 1972, p. 33.
- ⁴ T. O'Donnell, 1972, p. 28.
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 68, 96-7, 100.
- ⁶ B. McMartin, 1992, p. 269.
- ⁷ Ibid, p. 279.
- ⁸ E. P. Fynmore and H. J. Corwin, 2005, p. 57.
- ⁹ F. B. Hough, 1860, p. 99.
- ¹⁰ T. C. O'Donnell, 1972, p. 97.
- ¹¹ J. Haddock, 1894, p. 819-20.
- ¹² Obituary of George Gilbert clipped from an unidentified newspaper, probably the *Carthage Republican*, in March, 1890.
- ¹³ H. Child, 1890, p. 125.
- ¹⁴ From the *Carthage Republican Tribune* of March, 1877, as quoted by D. H. Ackerman in the same newspaper on March 11, 1971.
- ¹⁵ *Second Annual Report of the Board of Railroad Commissioners, 1885*, p. 101-103. The Black River and St. Lawrence Railroad Company had 37 stockholders who owned a single locomotive.
- ¹⁶ H. Child, 1890, p. 126. Three years later on Jan. 10, 1871, the stockholders met at Natural Bridge for the annual election. They kept S. Beach as President, named Joseph Pahud as Sec., William R. Dodge, Treas. and H. W. Hammond, Superintendent. Remaining members of the 1868 board were Hezekiah Dickerman, Richard Gallagher, William Hunt, Silas Bacon and George Gleason. New members were S. S. Hoyt, H. W. Hammond, Lyman Barber, N. R. Geere, Lawrence J. Goodale and William R. Dodge. *Lowville Journal and Republican*, Jan. 18, 1871.
- ¹⁷ Lowville's *Lewis County Democrat*, Sept. 16, 1868.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ The Town of Clifton was formed on April 21, 1868. The Clarksboro site is now located in the Town of Clare, the last town formed in St. Lawrence County (Dec., 1880). In 1894 historian Gates Curtis wrote, p. 715: "There is almost no business of any kind carried on within the [Clare] town limits..." The 2000 census showed 112 people living there, a population density of 1.2 persons per square mile.
- ²⁰ H. Child, 1890, p. 125.
- ²¹ M. Kudish, 2005, p. 168-172.
- ²² *Ogdensburg Daily Journal*, Sept. 7, 1869.
- ²³ J. A. Haddock, 1894, p. 321; *Carthage Republican*, May 4, 1869.
- ²⁴ *Carthage Republican*, Aug. 31, 1869.
- ²⁵ *Carthage Republican*, Dec. 15, 1868.
- ²⁶ T. Daly and P. Golden of Ogdensburg were reported to be contractors for the grading to Edwards. Does that mean that Row, Fields and Company had been dismissed, or did the Ogdensburg group act as subcontractors? *Ogdensburg Daily Journal*, Aug. 30, 1869.
- ²⁷ *New York Daily Reformer*, Watertown, Nov. 30, 1869, and H. Child, 1890, p. 126.
- ²⁸ *Watertown Daily Times*, June 4, 1872.
- ²⁹ J. Haddock, 1894, p. 321.
- ³⁰ *Lowville Democrat*, Dec. 28, 1904.
- ³¹ This March, 1877, newspaper article is quoted by D. H. Ackerman in the *Carthage Republican Tribune*, March 25, 1971.
- ³² *Second Annual Report of the Board of Railroad Commissioners, 1885*, p. 101.
- ³³ *Carthage Republican*, Jan 28, 1868.
- ³⁴ *Carthage Republican*, May 25, 1869.
- ³⁵ *Carthage Republican*, April 1, 1908. The newspaper claimed to review the contents of an 1867 article found in a scrapbook. The article described an early meeting in Edwards of supporters of the Black River and St. Lawrence Railroad.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Byron Benson Genealogy, www.jowest.net/Genealogy/Jo/Cary/Benson.htm. Fabius lies south of Syracuse and east of Route 81, near Tully and Pompey.
- ³⁹ Most of this brief biography is from W. Scott, 1922, p. 149-153.
- ⁴⁰ *Titusville Morning Herald*, Feb. 8, 1904, on the occasion of the dedication of the Benson Memorial Library in Titusville.
- ⁴¹ A walking beam converted the rotary motion of a wheel into the up-and-down motion required for a churn drill. A churn drill consisted of a heavy steel blade connected to a cable. The blade was lowered into the drill hole and repeatedly dropped and lifted to break the rock and deepen the hole. Drilling was stopped for removal of rock fragments.
- ⁴² A. Crum and A. Dungan, 1911, p. 274.
- ⁴³ A. Crum and A. Dungan, 1911, p. 243. Partners of the Tide Water Pipe Line Company were Byron D. Benson, Robert E. Hopkins, David McKelvy, Alanson A. Sumner, Samuel Q. Brown and Josiah G. Benton.
- ⁴⁴ D. Yergin, 2008, p. 27.
- ⁴⁵ Later on, the pipe was buried in trenches. Pipe on the surface expands when exposed to the sun.
- ⁴⁶ D. Yergin, 2008, p. 27.
- ⁴⁷ Henry Morrison Flagler lived in Cleveland but was recuperating from poor health in Florida.
- ⁴⁸ R. Chernow, 1998, p. 209.
- ⁴⁹ M. Fridson, 1999, p. 107-08.
- ⁵⁰ C. A. Baylor, 2001. A book review of *Titan: the life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.*, p. 5. On line at eh.net/bookreviews/library/0373.
- ⁵¹ *Titusville Morning Herald*, Feb. 9, 1888.
- ⁵² *Titusville Morning Herald*, Feb. 11, 1888. Benson was chosen to replace a retired member of the Ontario and Western Railroad's Board of Directors (*New York Times*, Nov. 25, 1886). Stockholders voted Benson

a board member the following year (NYT, Jan. 20, 1887).

⁵³ Cadwell Belden Benson (b. Feb. 3, 1841; d. Jan. 2, 1915), a native of Apulia, N.Y., a village located in Onondaga County about three miles west of Fabius, Byron Benson's hometown. Cadwell had married a daughter of Byron's older sister, Eunice. His father was David M. Benson, an Apulia physician, and his mother the former Harriet Belden. Cadwell was described as a "railroad builder and manager" from 1880 to 1900 and, afterwards, the owner and operator of the Minetto Shade Cloth Works in Syracuse (see Byron Benson Genealogy, op.cit).

⁵⁴ *Titusville Morning Herald*, Feb. 13, 1888.

⁵⁵ Minerva preceded Byron in death on Jan. 19, 1878.

⁵⁶ *Titusville Monthly Herald*, Feb. 8, 1904.

⁵⁷ Web site: www.uboat.net/allies/merchants/1503.html. A headstone memorial to the tanker *Byron D. Benson* in the Confederate Cemetery in Alvin, Texas, lists nine dead and dates the sinking as April 4, 1942.

⁵⁸ H. Child, 1890, p. 126-27.

⁵⁹ Child mistakenly gave Pahud's name as Joseph Palmer.

⁶⁰ *The Watertown Herald*, Dec. 4, 1886.

⁶¹ For example, "These new men [investors] are from Pennsylvania, and it is likely... that the road [Carthage and Adirondack Railroad] will be put through entirely by foreign capital." *Lewis County Democrat*, Jan. 12, 1881.

⁶² J. A. Haddock, 1894, p. 321.

⁶³ *Second Annual Report of the Board of Railroad Commissioners*, 1884, p. 771-772. The Carthage and Adirondack Railroad was listed under "Steam surface roads not in operation" (this was 1883, the year of its charter). Also in 1883, Robert Dix Benson was named President of the Solar Oil Company, a small refinery in Buffalo, N.Y. Byron was grooming his older son for the oil business.

⁶⁴ *Watertown Herald*, Dec. 4, 1886.

⁶⁵ Other 1883 Carthage board members were Charles P. Ryther, Rollin Dickerman, Nicholas Wagoner, Curtis C. Ingraham, Richard F. Nery, John T. Walsh, Henry W. Hammond, S. S. Hoyt and Edward A. Bond. *Second Annual Report of the Board of Railroad Commissioners*, 1884, p. 750-51.

⁶⁶ Lowville's *Lewis County Democrat*, March 28, 1883.

⁶⁷ *Watertown Herald*, Dec. 4, 1886.

⁶⁸ Lowville's *Lewis County Democrat*, April 18, 1883.

⁶⁹ Lowville's *Lewis County Democrat*, June 1, 1881.

⁷⁰ *Gouverneur Free Press*, Jan. 3, 1884.

⁷¹ Causes for the work stoppage were not given in the *Tenth Annual Report of the Board of Railroad Commissioners*, 1894, p. 152. There may have been problems obtaining mineral rights at Jayville hill from Zebulon Benton. On October 20, 1884, Carthage was devastated from a fire that burned more than 200 buildings (see L. Thornton, 2008, p. 88).

⁷² From "Depot as community hub discussed" by Abigail Ortiz, *Carthage Republican Tribune*, March 20, 2009.

A “Terrible Detonation” at Benson Mines in 1908

James D. Carl

In 1888-89, the Carthage and Adirondack Railroad was extended eastwardly from the Jayville mines in southwestern St. Lawrence County to Benson Mines, an iron ore deposit along the Little River near Star Lake. Given the potential of the new mine, the board of directors of the Magnetic Iron Ore Company agreed to abandon the mining efforts at Jayville. By 1891 a site for a settlement at Benson Mines was surveyed and arrangements made to build 25 houses for mine officials and workers. The company operated on and off under difficult economic conditions until the mine was closed in the aftermath of World War I. Here’s a story about work hazards in that early open pit iron mine, long before the Jones and Laughlin Steel Corporation revived the mining operation in World War II.

* * *

On Saturday, August 15, 1908, a small crew of roughly clad men was working outdoors in the open pit iron mine, filling rows of newly drilled blasting holes with powdered dynamite. From a distance the men were seen as small, dark objects clustered on a ledge above the pit floor. Some were bent over, squatting or kneeling, while others were standing and walking about. Several seemed precariously close to the edge of the ledge and a 60-foot drop-off. It was nearly noon when employees crossing the pit floor glanced upward at their fellow workers.

Suddenly the roar of an unannounced explosion! Narrow columns of dust and smoke shot vertically into the air like the simultaneous discharge of Civil War trench mortars. A section of the cliff collapsed in an avalanche that spewed rock debris outwardly

into the pit. Body parts of at least four men, including three French Canadians, were blown high into the air over a radius of a hundred feet. It was reported that a fifth man was buried beneath a mass of rock and iron ore and was most likely dead.¹ Joe King, a worker the furthest away, was thrown into a pit. Onlookers stared in horror; premature explosions were feared but not unexpected. Men began running toward a fallen colleague made visible in the smoke-cleared air. Joe King had suffered no bodily injury but was reported as “rendered insane by the terrible detonation.”

By itself the sound of a distant explosion would raise no heads in an open pit mining community, but reports of fatalities seem to travel faster than sound, and pandemonium quickly spread among the residents. Exaggerated rumors about the number of victims added to an atmosphere of confusion and volatility as the wives rushed wildly to the site, searching for their husbands. Newspapers described the women as uncontrollable, as pacing “back and forth before the scene of the tragedy, tearing their hair and screaming like maniacs.” Bystanders were unable to pacify them: “The foreign laborers were also wildly frantic in the abandonment of the emotions, and an outbreak of lawlessness was feared by the saner element of Benson Mines.”²

Four men camping at Star Lake heard the explosion and quickly made their way to Benson Mines. Their grisly report described the following:

...pieces of ribs and parts of bodies. One fellow was identified by his head and shoulders and the remainder of his body could not be found... People telephoned all over for all the doctors they could find,

and almost every one drove in to learn what was the trouble... in the town the buildings were jarred and the windows smashed. You can judge how excited they were when a photographer arrived and they would not let him take a picture of the mine, threatening to smash his camera... I never want to see such a sight again.”³ Once the scope of the incident was determined (4 deaths, 4 widows and 14 fatherless children), Coroner F. F. Drury of Gouverneur was called to investigate.⁴

The dead crew members on that warm Saturday morning of August 15, 1908, were Evangelistie King, age 38, William Dominy, age 23, Henry Gerow, age 37, and S. (Serephin?) Bourgon, age 42.⁵ All were married and three of the men had children. A young priest, Father Bergeron, had recently been called as cleric of St. Hubert’s Catholic Church (Figs. 1 to 3) that stood on the north side of what is now Route 3, near the site of the 1951 Benson Mines office building. Bergeron went from home to home, praying with the wives and consoling their distraught families. Author Robert Bogdan described the scene as follows:

...remains of the dead were taken to the parish house where Father Bergeron watched over them. The next morning they were put in caskets and placed in a line down the center aisle of the church. Approximately one thousand mourners came to the memorial service, a crowd that was much beyond the sanctuary’s capacity. The overflow remained outside as Father Bergeron conducted the service.⁶

Details of the mining procedures that led to the accident were presented in newspaper accounts of trials, and the first of four negligence actions began on June 8, 1909, ten months after the accident.⁸ The plaintiff was the widow Anna Gerow, mother of five children and the wife of 37 year-old Henry Gerow who had died in the blast. She

was represented by lawyers George E. Van Kennen and Thomas Spratt of Ogdensburg. The defendant, the Benson Mines Company, was represented by the firm of Purcell and Purcell.

Open pit mining involved drilling holes (Fig. 4) on a surface (a ledge) of ore-bearing rock at the edge of the open pit. The surface ended in a sheer cliff about 60 feet high overlooking the pit floor. A row of holes, about 60 feet deep and 12 feet apart, had been drilled 12 feet back from the face of the cliff. Daniel Shea, the mine superintendent, gave instructions to Murphy, the foreman of the drillers, to have his men lay the charges. Two men worked at each hole; one would break open a stick of dynamite and sift the powder into the hole. The other man would tamp it in after three or four sticks had been used up. When all holes were half or two thirds filled with as much as 200 pounds of loose dynamite, the area was cleared and the dynamite electrically detonated. Rock would be blown into the pit, then blasted into smaller pieces and taken to the mill.

Most attention at the trial was centered on filling the drill holes with dynamite powder and the use of a tamping bar to pack it down. A tamping bar was made from a 2½ foot-long section of iron pipe, so-called gas pipe, perhaps used to carry coal gas. The section of pipe was filled and weighted with a soft alloy of tin, copper and antimony (called babbitt metal), and an eyebolt was welded at one end for attaching a rope. The other end was enlarged with a protrusion of lead, a heavy but soft metal, presumably to add weight to the iron bar and keep it from scraping the rock and producing sparks. A workman would insert the bar into the hole and use the rope to move it up and down.

Anna’s husband, Henry Gerow, was earning \$2.75 per day that summer to carry cases of dynamite to the holes. Three pairs of men were working on three holes, and the men at two of the holes were killed, including Gerow. Several others were seriously injured. There was testimony by a miner present at the site who had stepped away prior to the

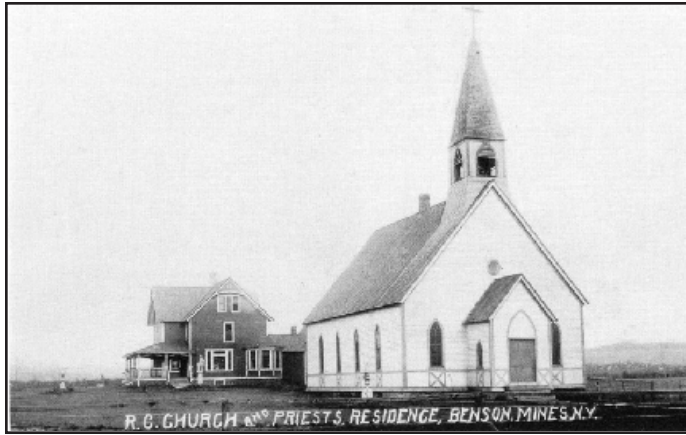


FIGURE 1. A stark, deforested landscape surrounded St. Hubert's Catholic Church and the priest's residence in Benson Mines Village. The funeral for the four workers killed in the mine explosion was held here on Monday, Aug. 17, 1908, with an overflow crowd. Built in 1892 by the Magnetic Iron Ore Company, the church was especially important to the families of French Canadian immigrants employed at the mine. In 1942 the church was jacked up, placed on steel dollies and moved to Star Lake when the village of Benson Mines was displaced by renewed mining operations.⁷ Photo by Henry Beach, ca. 1909, in R. Bogden, 2003, p. 139 (see end note #6).

explosion; this witness had seen his son-in-law, William Dominy, tamping a hole immediately before the explosion. Plaintiff lawyers claimed that this hole went off first, setting off the other two and killing his fellow workers, Dominy and Bourgon. A fragment of a tamping bar picked up from the debris was introduced in court as the bar that "did the mischief."

Lawyers for the plaintiff claimed that the holes were loaded by men who had no experience in the use of explosives. The lawyers also claimed that the use of iron tamping bars was a violation of regulations established by the State Commissioner of Labor that required the strict use of wooden bars. It was also claimed that the company was negligent in allowing anyone to pour loose dynamite down the holes.

Lawyers for the defense called in Daniel Shea, an experienced superintendent for the

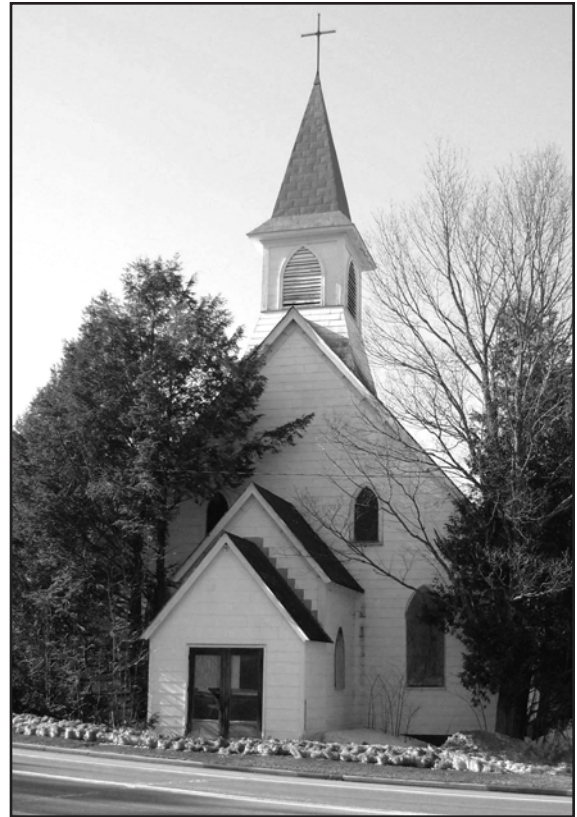


FIGURE 2. The abandoned and deconsecrated St. Hubert's Church, located on the north side of Route 3 at the east end of Star Lake. The church occupies the grounds of the old Grove Hotel. A new St. Hubert's Church was built on the northwest shore of Star Lake. Photo by James Carl, March, 2009.

Benson Company. He expressed an opinion that the use of metal tamping bars was as safe as any method of preparing charges. He explained that it was necessary to put in loose dynamite to get a quantity to the bottom of a 60 foot-deep hole. The holes were six inches in diameter at the top and four inches in diameter further down. If dynamite sticks had been inserted, they would get stuck and the explosion would not have the desired effect. Methods used in ordinary mining, it was claimed, were not applicable here where the holes were deeper and everything was done above ground. Upon cross-examination, however, the superintendent admitted that

it was feasible to have ordered the use of wooden tamping bars. He also admitted that the purpose of the lead extension at the base of a tamping bar was to keep the iron pipe from rubbing against the sides of the hole. Otherwise the sparks could set off a blast. Other possible causes for the blast were argued by the defense. Perhaps dynamite powder had been scattered about the hole and that sparks from nails in the heels of a helper's shoe may have set off the charge. Or the helper himself may have dropped a box of dynamite.

The "hotly contested" case went to the jury after a motion by the defense for a "nonesuit" was denied. The jury left at 7 p.m. and returned before 9 o'clock that evening in favor of the plaintiff. The case had been settled in one day, and Anna Gerow, widowed mother of five children, was awarded \$3,500 for the loss of her husband. A newspaper account concluded, "Probably none of the other cases arising from this accident will be tried at this term."⁹

The case of Olive King regarding the death of her husband, Evangelistie or Evangelist King, was settled in late March, 1910, after deliberation by a jury. Olive and her five children were awarded \$5,000. George Van Kennen and Thomas Spratt were lawyers for the plaintiff.¹⁰ About four months later, the same lawyers represented the widow, Onesime Bourgon and her four children, against the Benson Mines Company. She was awarded \$2,500 for the death of her husband. It must have been clear to the defense that another jury trial would result in the same verdict for the fourth plaintiff. The company agreed to submission of the same evidence on behalf of Edith Dominy, the widow of 23-year-old William who was younger and had less work experience than the deceased Mr. Bourgon. Mrs. Dominy was awarded the lesser sum of \$1,000 because she had no children and the jury reasoned that "the Dominy widow stands more chance of remarrying."¹¹

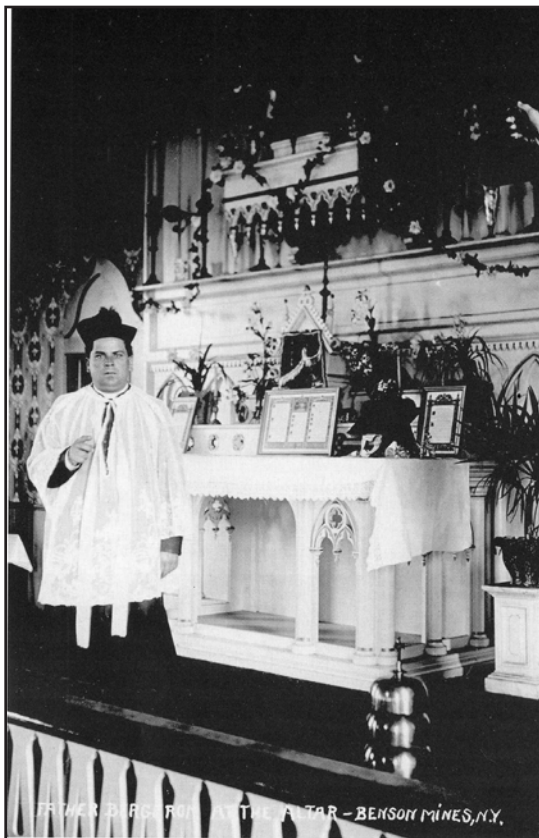


FIGURE 3. Father Bergeron at the altar inside St. Hubert's Catholic Church. The young priest comforted the families and presided over the funeral service for mine workers killed in the 1908 explosion. Photo by Henry Beach from R. Bogden, 2003, p. 140.

Endnotes

¹ *Canton Commercial Advertiser*, Aug. 18, 1908, vol. 36, no. 21.

² *Ibid.*

³ *St. Lawrence Republican*, Ogdensburg, Aug. 19, 1908.

⁴ *The Northern Tribune*, Gouverneur, Aug. 19, 1908, vol. 21, no. 41.

⁵ There was much confusion about spelling. Newspaper variations for Evangelistie King included Evangeline and Evangelist; William Dommie or Dominick instead of Dominy; Henry Geron for Gerow; S. Bongor, S. Bonger and Serephin Bourgeow for Mr. Bourgon. A fifth name, Harry Boleger, mentioned in the *Canton Commercial Advertiser* (Aug. 18, 1908) and *Ogdensburg St. Lawrence Republican* (Aug. 19, 1908), does not appear in the court cases.

⁶ Robert Bogdan, 2003, *Adirondack Vernacular: the Photography of Henry M. Beach*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, N. Y., p. 138.

⁷ *Canton Commercial Advertiser*, July 7, 1942, vol. 70, no. 14.

⁸ Accounts of the trial appear in the *Potsdam Courier Freeman*, June 16, 1909, vol. 58, no. 3, and the *Canton Commercial Advertiser*, June 15, 1909, vol. 37, no. 12.

⁹ *Potsdam Courier Freeman*, June 16, 1909, vol. 58, no. 3.

¹⁰ *Potsdam Courier Freeman*, Feb. 2, 1910, vol. 58, no. 36.

¹¹ *Potsdam Courier Freeman*, June 15, 1910, vol. 59, no. 3.

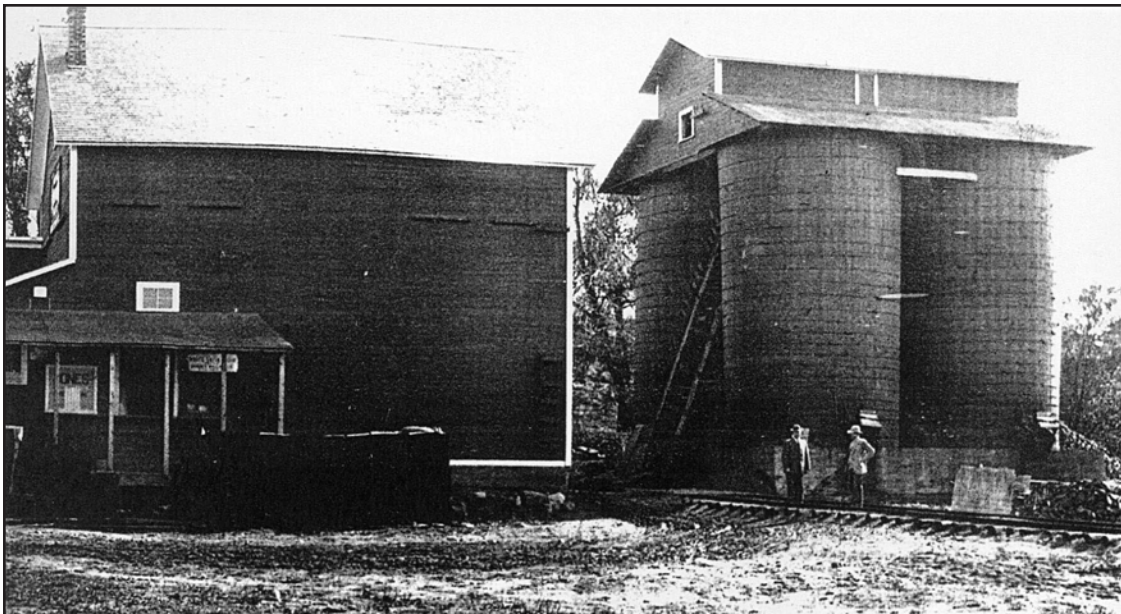


FIGURE 4. Drilling blasting holes in magnetite-bearing bedrock at Benson Mines. The stern-faced man stands on a drill mounted on an iron tripod. A jet of steam used to power the drill is being ejected from a round opening, just below the horizontal pipe. Three wooden barrels lie in the background. Photo by Henry Beach, ca. 1911. From R. Bogden, 2003, p. 138.

No-Longer-a-Mystery Photo

What is the origin of this cylindrical outbuilding made of vertical boards and located in a backyard on Main Street in Hermon, New York? The question was raised in the *Quarterly*, Vol. 52, no. 1, 2007, p. 25.

Was it a railroad water tank or a large coal bin? Speculation about the origin of this outbuilding (top photo) seems to be resolved. The bottom photograph is a southwest view of four tall, cylindrical coal storage bins located next to the



Hermon depot of the old Adirondack and St. Lawrence Railroad. From 1907 to 1920, the railroad connected DeKalb Junction with Hermon and the Stellaville pyrite mines. Evidently a segment of the silo was cut and moved across Main Street for use as a storage shed. Horizontal bands on the coal bins are the metal straps shown in the top figure.

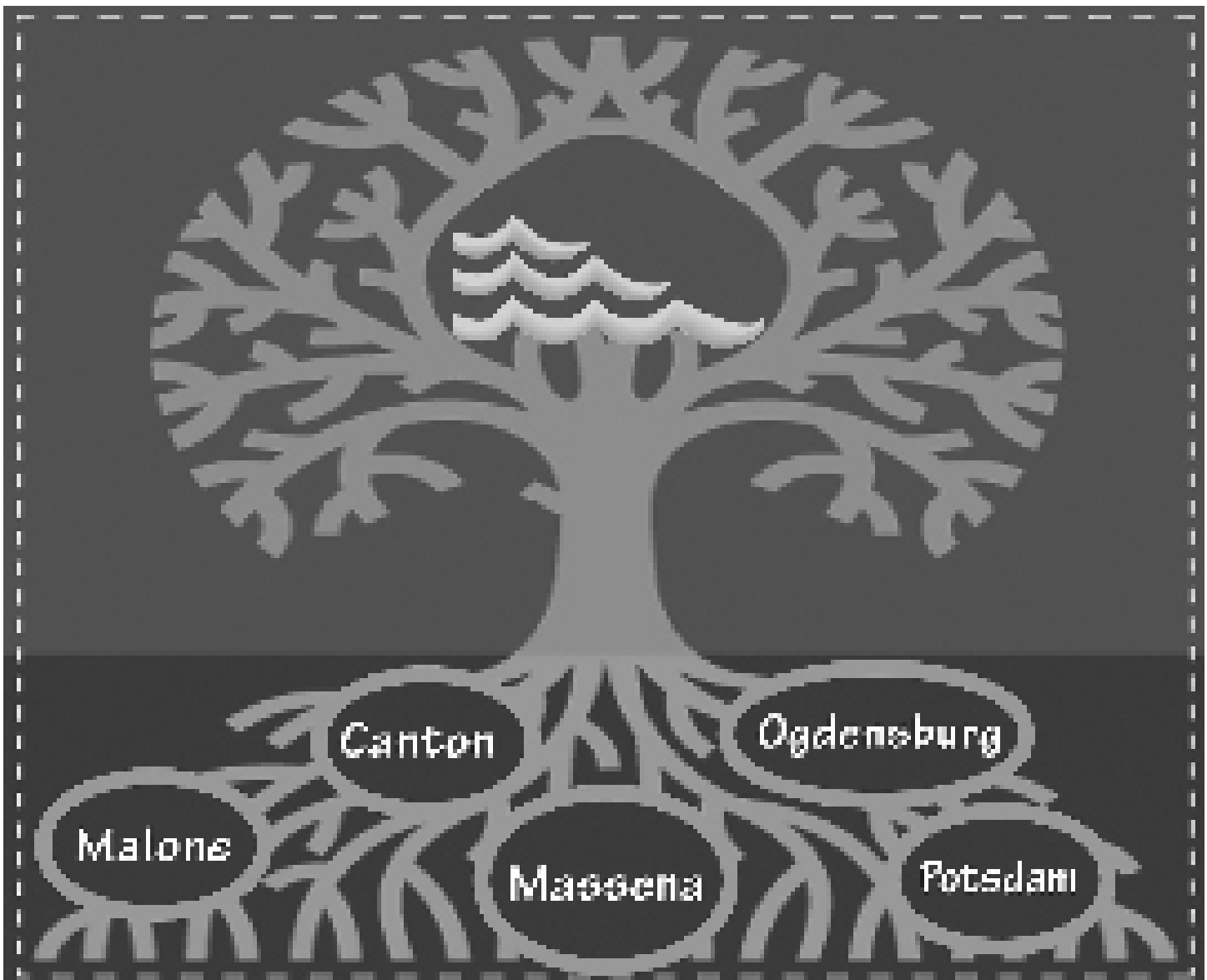
In the bottom photo, the building on the left appears to be the office and warehouse of R. J. Fairbanks and Sons, according to the 1914 Sanborn map of the Hermon railroad yard. However, large letters on a sign (left of the door) can be read as "Jones." Also, the two men standing on the tracks are not laborers; one wears a business suit and the other is nattily dressed in a light colored sport coat and tight-legged pants.

The bottom photo, probably taken before the railroad closed in 1920, comes to us courtesy of Kyle Hartman of Rensselaer Falls and William Dibble of the Hermon Heritage Association.

New Mystery Photo



Here's a photograph of young, probably college-age men who belonged to a football team. The ball one of them holds is rather fat and not the streamlined ellipsoid in use today. Written on the back is "Plaindealer," suggesting that the team was from Canton and may have represented St. Lawrence University. Does anyone recognize any of the players and the approximate date of the photograph?



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