

Did the Irish actually build the Erie Canal?

By Richard Palmer

MONTEZUMA - Did the Irish build the Erie Canal? Did thousands of Irish laborers perish from disease in the Montezuma marshes? It's all nonsense.

Such stories have persisted for generations and have been told and retold verbally as well as in book form. But there is no actual documented proof, however, that even one person died here while building the original Erie Canal through what is commonly known as "Montezuma Swamp." Mon. Admittedly, there was sickness. But so far, no evidence of death.

Also, there is nothing to substantiate the claim that masses of Irish immigrants were brought over by the contractors, through the aid of Tammany Hall, to work on the original Erie Canal. It appears that authors have mixed up the wrong eras. There were large numbers of Irish who worked on the enlargement, on the new Erie Canal in the 1850's and 1860's.

Irish immigration on a large scale did not begin until long after the original Erie Canal had been completed. Work on the Middle Section of the canal between Utica and Montezuma commenced soon after groundbreaking were held at Rome on July 4, 1817. The New York State Canal Commissioners report for 1819 stated that three-fourths of the workers were "born among us," which immediately discounts this old legend. Records for that period show that most canal workers were recruited locally and many undoubtedly were Irish. But they were already living here when the canal was under construction.

The Montezuma region was particularly troublesome. The canal had to be dug in water from six inches to a foot in depth, and most contractors suffered the largest losses due to sickness in 1820 and 1821. During the spring of 1821 the water was so high, work did not commence until May, and then only temporarily when the area became flooded. Work was then halted for three weeks until mid-June. It was reported that "at that time, the work was recommenced with spirit; and it was carried on, thenceforward, with success, and increasing means, until the first of August, when sickness began to manifest its hands."

For two months, when the water was at its lowest, between 200 and 700 men became sick "and as there was daily a considerable change of men, those who had acquired, from experience, the skill necessary to enable them to apply their labors judiciously, being obliged to give place to new hands, the progress of the work was much retarded." Work in the swamp, which could only be accomplished during dry weather, was hampered in late August and into the fall of 1821 by heavy rainfall. Several times, the high water made work impossible. Still, in spite of difficulties and afflictions, the contractors had the "Seneca River Level" half completed by December.

Workers were also hampered by muck, marl, sand and clay. The Seneca River level was about six and a half miles long, and the Clyde level, four and a half miles long. The two levels were separated by a lock with an 11-foot lift.

During the spring of 1822, a concerted effort was made to complete these two levels, and a temporary wooden lock was built in the town of Galen in Wayne county, on the west side of the Montezuma marshes.

The Canal Commissioners report for that year stated the completion of the work "has been attended with many troublesome and unforeseen contingencies. We had an early

drought, which we regarded as propitious. Still, the labor necessary to keep out the water, where the line runs several miles through porous and soft bog, and the natural surface of the contiguous streams is from four to eight feet above the bottom of the canal, has been very great."

Albert Hovey and Abel Wethy of Montezuma formed a partnership and had several contracts during canal construction days. In May 1822, they advertised for 500 laborers to work on the canal through the marshes. They would be paid from \$12 to \$13 a month, in cash, and "shall be well fed, and lodged in comfortable shanties, with sufficient blankets."

They warned that laborers "will be subject to some inconvenience, from water and mud; but a portion of the work will be dry, and all experience proves that men may labor on the marsh without any unusual exposure to health until the middle of July, before which it is intended to have this portion of the canal completed."

Work in 1822 when as scheduled and was completed through the swamp in July. On July 21, completion of the work was celebrated with the passages of the packet boat "Myron Holley" from Lyons to Montezuma.

A newspaper reporter who covered this event said the canal through the marsh "is broad and deep, and has every appearance of being permanent. There is a good towing path through it, and if that part of the canal is most beautiful where the straight lines are the longest, and where the banks are highest and most regular, than this part of the great work will be considered as more beautiful than any portion of it hitherto completed."