

National Canal Museum

30 Centre Square
Easton, PA 18042

<http://www.canals.org>

610-559-6613

Delaware and Hudson Canal

The Delaware and Hudson Canal established the first direct transportation link between the Pennsylvania anthracite fields and New York Harbor. Its construction was the result of the efforts of two enterprising Philadelphia merchants, William and Maurice Wurts. In 1814-1815 they began to purchase coal lands in the Lackawanna Valley, and within two years they had begun a small-scale mining operation. Their initial goal was to transport anthracite from their mine to Philadelphia, but the fact that coal from the Schuylkill and Lehigh Valleys could be transported there more cheaply, forced them to turn their attention to the New York market. A preliminary survey was made of routes utilizing the Lackawaxen, Delaware, Neversink and Rondout Valleys, and it was found to be feasible for canal construction.

In 1823 the legislatures of both Pennsylvania and New York gave approval to the separate companies that would undertake the building of this waterway in their respective states. By 1825 these corporations had merged to form the Delaware and Hudson Canal Company, and enough capital had been raised to begin construction under the supervision of two former Erie Canal engineers, Benjamin Wright and John B. Jervis. The Delaware and Hudson Canal was completed in 1828, and it was 108 miles in length. It utilized 109 locks to overcome the 972-foot elevation difference between the Hudson River at Kingston, New York, and its western terminus at Honesdale, Pennsylvania. From Kingston, the loaded boats were towed by steamboats down the Hudson River to New York Harbor. Essential to the operation of the canal was a 16 mile gravity and inclined plane railroad which brought anthracite from the coal fields to the canal at Honesdale. The first boats carried 10 tons of coal, but by 1839 boats of a 30-ton capacity were quite common. Between 1842 and 1856, a series of enlargements and improvements were made resulting in the ability to move boats of more than 100 tons of cargo more quickly and efficiently. These improvements included construction of four large aqueducts, including one across the Delaware River, replacing a cumbersome and dangerous ferry crossing. Designed by John A. Roebling, these iron-wire suspension bridges were milestones in bridge-building technology, and one of them, the Delaware Aqueduct, has survived and was recently restored by the National Park Service. Soon after the completion of the enlargement additional anthracite traffic reached the Delaware and Hudson Canal when the Pennsylvania Coal Company completed a gravity railroad linking its Lackawanna coal fields with its new canal port at Hawley. By 1854 more than 1,400 boats were operating on the D & H.

The decline of the Delaware and Hudson Canal commenced in 1858 when it began to lose traffic to the Erie Railroad. To compete with this new transportation route, the Delaware and Hudson Canal Company began construction of its own steam railroad. During the 1870s and 1880s the company increased its railroad activities until by 1890 the Delaware and Hudson Railroad was a major link in the network between Pennsylvania, New York, and Canada. However, in 1899 traffic ceased on the D & H Canal.

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