

National Canal Museum

30 Centre Square
Easton, PA 18042

<http://www.canals.org>

610-559-6613

Delaware and Raritan Canal

On February 4, 1830, the New Jersey Legislature granted a charter to the Delaware and Raritan Canal Company to construct a canal across the narrow waist of New Jersey, thus connecting the Delaware River with Raritan Bay and the lower portion of New York Harbor. In 1831 the Delaware and Raritan Canal Company combined with the competing Camden and Amboy Railroad and Transportation Company, to form the "Joint Companies." This new concern completed both the canal and railroad.

The Delaware and Raritan Canal was completed in 1834, and it consisted of two parts. The main portion of the canal was 43 miles in length with 14 locks between Bordentown and New Brunswick. At Trenton it was joined by a navigable feeder with two more locks which supplied the canal with water from the Delaware River at Bulls Island, 22 miles to the north. In 1838 the main canal was enlarged to a seven-foot depth, and it became a functional extension of the Schuylkill Navigation as the principal means of transporting anthracite coal from Pennsylvania to New York. It also stimulated the industrial development of Trenton. In 1839 the "Robert F. Stockton" was built in England for use as a towboat on the Delaware and Raritan Canal. This iron-hulled, screw-propelled steamer was the first of its type to cross the Atlantic and to operate in America. In 1846 the capacity of the Delaware and Raritan Canal was further enlarged, and in 1849 drop gates began to be installed which decreased the time that was required for a vessel to pass through its locks. An outlet lock and cable ferry on the feeder at Lambertville was completed to connect with the Delaware Canal at New Hope. This new connection gave the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company an alternative to the Morris Canal for transporting its coal to New York City. Continually increasing traffic created a need to lengthen the locks to 220 feet. The main channel was rip-rapped, or lined with stone, to prevent damage from the wakes of faster, steam-powered vessels. The feeder, however, was limited to towpath navigation.

The Delaware and Raritan Canal reached its peak of prosperity in 1866 when it carried 2,857,232 tons of cargo. Two years later, Chief Engineer Ashbel Welch designed and supervised the installation of steam powered winches, valves, and gates at all locks which further speeded the passage of vessels. In 1871 both the D & R Canal and the Camden and Amboy Railroad were leased to the Pennsylvania Railroad. Since the Pennsylvania Railroad was locked in a rivalry with the Reading Railroad, which controlled the Schuylkill Navigation, restrictive tolls were initiated to discourage Schuylkill boats from utilizing the Delaware and Raritan. This caused a sharp decline in traffic. Although in 1889 the Delaware and Raritan Canal still hauled more than 1,200,000 tons of cargo, within three years it was operating at a deficit.

The canal experienced a resurgence during World War I when it provided an inland route for small vessels and military supplies that was safe from German submarines, and an alternative to railroads congested with wartime commerce. After the war, the D & R continued to decline. In 1923 the last boat passed over from the Delaware Canal. In

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1933 the Delaware and Raritan Canal was permanently closed to commercial navigation. A year later the State of New Jersey took control of the canal, and it has utilized it as a water supply source for the growing communities of the central part of the state.

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