

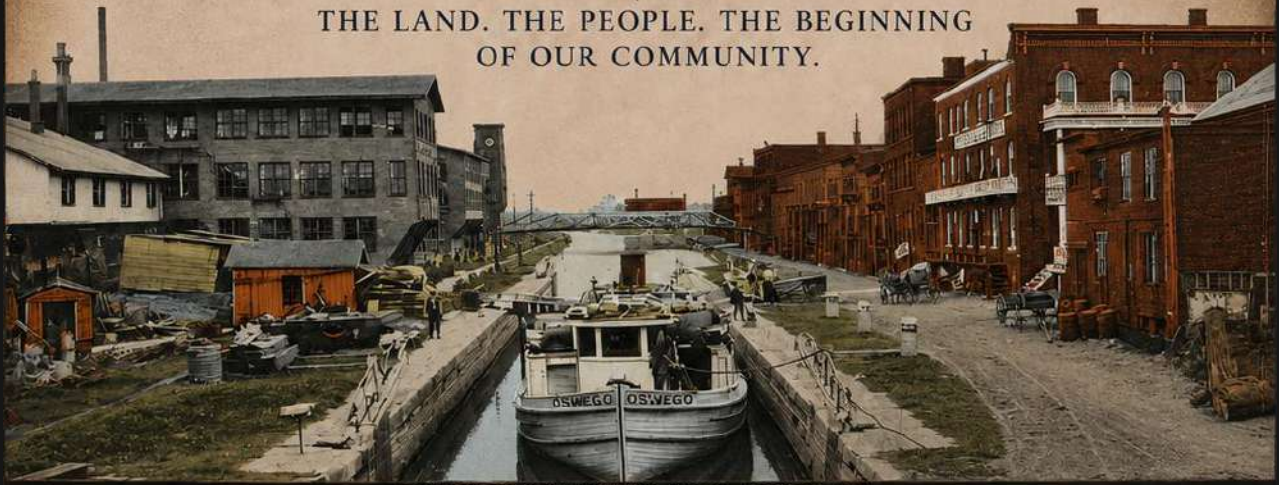
PHOENIX, N.Y.
1887

BEFORE THE CANAL
The Oswego River flowed
freely through Phoenix
before the canal
transformed the
waterway and
our community.

PHOENIX, NEW YORK

THE HISTORY OF A CANAL VILLAGE

THE LAND. THE PEOPLE. THE BEGINNING
OF OUR COMMUNITY.



VIEW OF LOCK ON OSWEGO CANAL, PHOENIX, N.Y.



LOCK 0-1, PHOENIX, N.Y.
EARLY 1900s



BRIDGE CONTROLS INSIDE
THE 1917 BRIDGE HOUSE



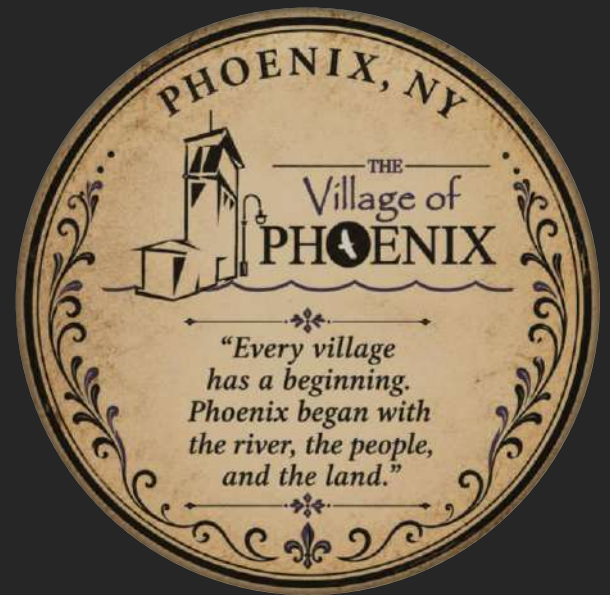
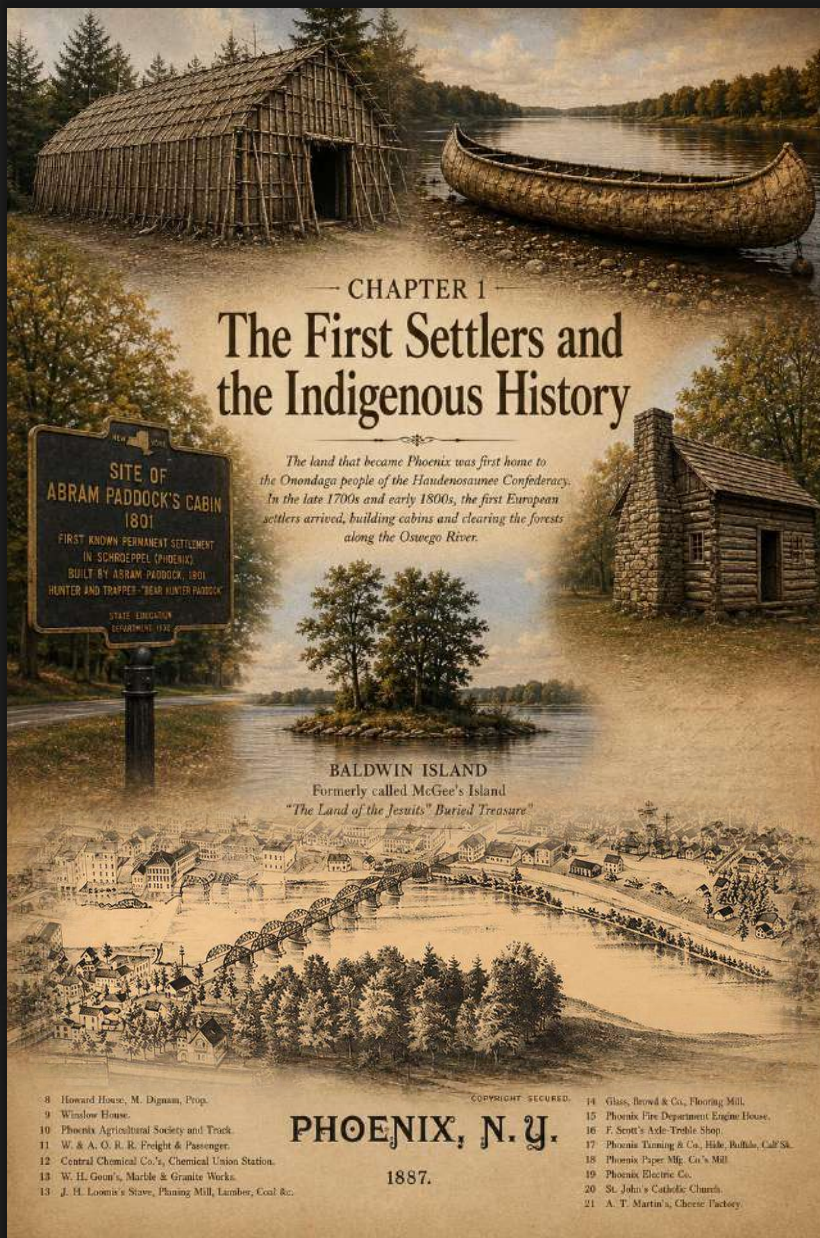
BRIDGE HOUSE
BUILT 1917

THE GREAT FIRE OF 1916

September 23-24, 1916
A devastating fire destroyed
the heart of Phoenix.
But from the ashes came
courage, community, and
a stronger tomorrow.



A WATERWAY THAT CONNECTED COMMUNITIES.
A HERITAGE THAT CONTINUES TODAY.



Chapter 1

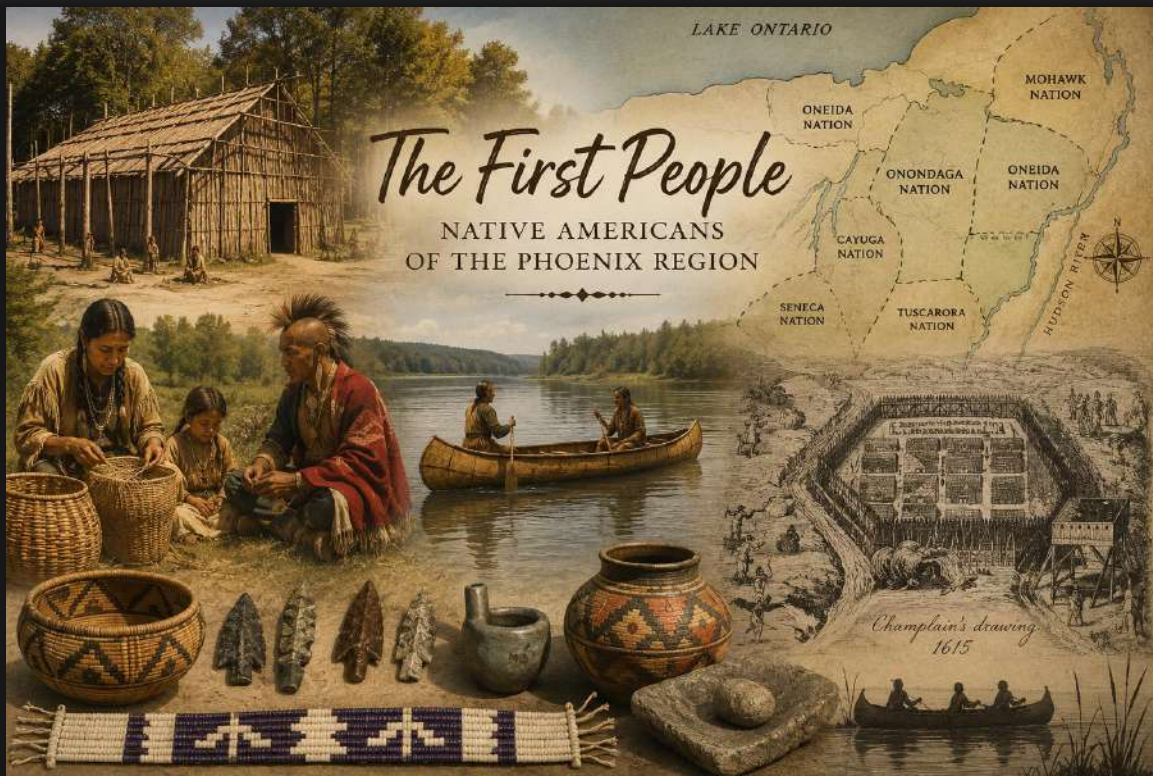
The First Settlers & Indigenous History of Phoenix, New York

Introduction

Long before the Village of Phoenix existed, the land surrounding the Oswego River was home to Indigenous peoples who relied on its forests, wetlands, and waterways. The river served as a natural highway for travel, trade, fishing, and communication for thousands of years.

The First People

The region is the ancestral homeland of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, also known as the Iroquois Confederacy. The Onondaga Nation, whose traditional territory includes much of Central New York, played a central role in the Confederacy. Families traveled seasonally, cultivated corn, beans, and squash, hunted deer and other games, and harvested fish from local rivers.



Native Americans of the Phoenix Region

Long before Phoenix became a village, the land along the Oswego River was home to Native American communities for thousands of years. Dense forests, fertile riverbanks, and abundant wildlife made this area an ideal place to hunt, fish, travel, and trade. The first inhabitants were the ancestors of today's Haudenosaunee people, whose influence shaped Central New York for centuries.

The Onondaga Homeland

The Phoenix area lies within the traditional homeland of the Onondaga Nation, known as the 'Keepers of the Central Fire.' The Onondaga were one of the founding nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, alongside the Mohawk, Oneida, Cayuga, and Seneca. The Tuscarora later joined, creating the Six Nations. The Onondaga served as the political and spiritual center where Grand Council meetings were traditionally held.

Life Along the Oswego River

The Oswego River served as the region's highway. Native families traveled by birchbark canoe, using the river to reach Lake Ontario, Oneida Lake, and inland communities. The Oneida and Onondaga people traveled down the river over two trails toward Three River Point in search of game and fish during the earliest period of white settlement. They fished for salmon, trout, eel, and other species while hunting deer, bear, turkey, beaver, and waterfowl. Seasonal camps were established along the river to gather fish, berries, nuts, maple sap, and medicinal plants.

It recounts French Jesuit travel through the Oswego River corridor in the seventeenth century and identifies the rapids at Phoenix as a stopping or camping place on journeys between Lake Ontario and Onondaga.

The publication includes a “Path of the Jesuits” section and an island-treasure tradition. These narratives are valuable as period local history, but museum interpretation should distinguish documented travel accounts from later folklore.

The Three Sisters

Agriculture formed the backbone of Haudenosaunee society. Women cultivated corn, beans, and squash—the 'Three Sisters.' Corn supported the climbing beans, replenished nitrogen in the soil, and squash shaded the ground to help retain moisture and suppress weeds.

Government Before America

Centuries before the United States existed, the Haudenosaunee developed one of the world's oldest continuously functioning systems of representative government through the Great Law of Peace. Many historians believe aspects of this confederacy influenced later ideas about representative government in North America, though the extent of that influence remains a topic of scholarly discussion.

Early Contact with Europeans

French explorer Samuel de Champlain reached central New York in 1615, beginning a new era of interaction between Native peoples and Europeans. Trade expanded, but so did conflict as European powers competed for control of the region and its waterways.

Legacy

The Haudenosaunee continue to live on their ancestral lands today. The Onondaga Nation, located south of Syracuse, preserves its language, traditions, government, and culture. Their enduring connection to the land remains an important part of the history of Phoenix and the Oswego River.

Did You Know?

- Indigenous people have lived in what is now Oswego County for approximately 7,000 years.
- The Onondaga are known as the 'Keepers of the Central Fire' of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.
- The Oswego River served as an important transportation and trade route long before European settlement.

The Oswego River

The Oswego River connected inland communities with Lake Ontario. Birchbark canoes carried people and goods along this route, making it an important transportation corridor long before European settlement.

European Arrival

During the 1600s and 1700s, French and later British traders and soldiers traveled through the region. The river corridor became strategically important during the colonial period and the French and Indian War.

First Settlers

After the American Revolution, settlers gradually established farms and mills. Fertile soils, abundant timber, and access to water power attracted new residents. Small settlements slowly grew into organized communities.

The story of Phoenix, New York, begins with two men whose contributions shaped the community in different ways. Abram Paddock is remembered as the village's first permanent settler and pioneer, while Alexander Phoenix is the man for whom the village was named. Together, their stories help explain how a small frontier settlement grew into the historic canal village known today.

Abram Paddock: The First Permanent Settler

Abram Paddock arrived in the early 1820s and established what is generally recognized as the first permanent settlement at the site of present-day Phoenix. At the time, the area was heavily forested and required enormous effort to clear land, construct buildings, and create productive farms. His work laid the foundation for future growth.

As more families arrived, the settlement expanded around the Paddock homestead. Members of the Paddock family became important figures in the early community. Historical accounts note that Abram's son, Aaron Paddock, settled nearby and that Aaron's daughter, Jane, is believed to have been the first child born within the future village.

Because of these contributions, Abram Paddock is widely regarded as the pioneer of Phoenix, even though the village was not officially incorporated until 1848.

Alexander Phoenix: The Village's Namesake

Alexander Phoenix did not establish the settlement, but his connection to the land gave the village its name. He acquired the Phoenix Patent, a large tract of land that included the growing community. In 1828, residents adopted the name 'Phoenix' in his honor.

The adoption of the name reflected both the legal ownership of the land and the community's emerging identity. Although Alexander Phoenix was not involved in the day-to-day development of the settlement, his name became permanently linked with the village.

A Community Takes Shape

Following the arrival of the Paddock family and the adoption of the Phoenix name, the community grew steadily. The construction of the Oswego Canal transformed the settlement into a busy transportation and commercial center. Sawmills, gristmills, stores, taverns, churches, and industries followed, helping Phoenix become one of northern New York's important canal villages.

Legacy

Today, the history of Phoenix is best understood by recognizing both men's roles. Abram Paddock represents the courage and determination of the first settlers who built a community from the wilderness. Alexander Phoenix represents the land ownership and identity that gave the village its enduring name. Together, they occupy a central place in the history of Phoenix, New York.

Key Historical Facts

- Abram Paddock is generally recognized as the first permanent settler of present-day Phoenix.
- Alexander Phoenix purchased the Phoenix Patent, from which the village took its name.
- The settlement officially adopted the name Phoenix in 1828.
- The Village of Phoenix was incorporated in 1848.
- The Oswego Canal played a major role in the village's growth and prosperity.

Toward the Village of Phoenix

Construction of transportation routes and, later, the Oswego Canal transformed the area into an important commercial center. Businesses, mills, and homes clustered near the river, laying the groundwork for the future Village of Phoenix.

Timeline

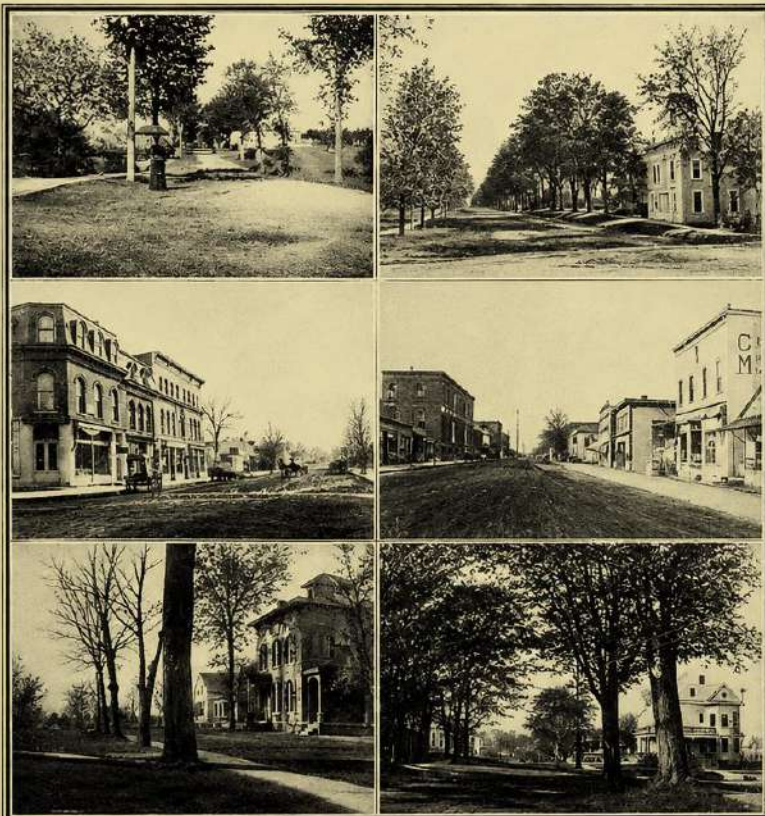
- Prehistory: Indigenous peoples inhabit the region for thousands of years.
- 1600s-1700s: European exploration and fur trade.
- Late 1700s: Permanent Euro-American settlement begins.
- Early 1800s: Farms and mills expand.
- Mid-1800s: Canal era accelerates growth.

Museum Note

Modern historical interpretation recognizes that Indigenous history did not end with European settlement. The Onondaga Nation and the other Haudenosaunee Nations remain living communities whose history continues today.

CHAPTER 2

THE DEVELOPMENT OF PHOENIX



Six Views in Phoenix.—Upper row: at the corner of First Ave. and Adams St.; looking north on First Ave.; lower four, showing residence, business and residence streets.

Photos by S. J. Moyer.

The above views were all taken during the early days of Phoenix, when the streets were broad, clean and those most largely used are macadamized. The village is lighted by arc lights well distributed through the streets.

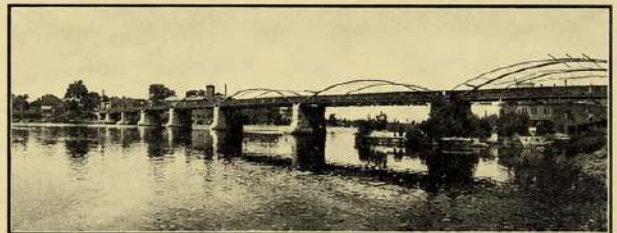


THE OLD RIVER BRIDGE.

Borrowed Photo.

Its power is obtained from three water wheels and

The Lighting Plant is wired for 1,500 incandescent and thirty arc lights and has a capacity for more than double that number of both lights.



THE NEW RIVER BRIDGE.

Mrs. S. J. Moyer, Photo.

Earliest Settlers of Phoenix.—The following came the Syracuse Storage Battery Co., followed by the Phoenix Hot Water Heater Co.

Maxfield, Stephen Cathart; Joseph and Richard Fralick; Josiah, John and Hiram Fox; John and William Payne; Dr. Samuel Avery, Samuel Flynn; accompanied by a party of Frenchmen, under the command of Sieur Dupuis, and several tribes of Indians.



THE RIVER, OPPOSITE PHOENIX.

Mrs. S. J. Moyer, Photo.

Its location in the center of a rich, well-watered region of unsurpassed fertility and its nearness to the Oswego River where now the industrial life of a busy village has taken the place of the dark recesses of a frontier settlement.

Chapter 2:

The Development of Phoenix, New York

Introduction

The story of Phoenix, New York, is one of perseverance, industry, and adaptation. Situated along the Oswego River, Phoenix developed because of its strategic location on one of New York State's most important transportation routes. The arrival of the Oswego Canal transformed the community into a thriving commercial center, and over time Phoenix grew into a bustling village with mills, factories, businesses, schools, churches, and neighborhoods.

The Importance of the Oswego River

Long before roads connected Central New York, the Oswego River served as the region's primary transportation corridor. It provided transportation, waterpower, fishing, and connections to Lake Ontario and the Erie Canal system.

The Oswego Canal Changes Everything

Completed during the 1820s and later enlarged, the Oswego Canal connected the Erie Canal with Lake Ontario. Canal boats carried lumber, grain, flour, salt, coal, agricultural products, and manufactured goods. Warehouses, docks, mills, hotels, taverns, blacksmith shops, and stores flourished along the waterfront.

Becoming a Village

Phoenix incorporated as a village in 1848, allowing residents to establish local government, improve infrastructure, and support a growing population.

Industry Comes to Phoenix

Industries included flour mills, lumber mills, grist mills, foundries, machine shops, furniture manufacturing, agricultural equipment production, and feed mills.

The Railroad Era

Railroads eventually complemented canal transportation, allowing Phoenix businesses to reach wider markets while remaining an important transportation hub.

Life in a Growing Community

Churches, schools, volunteer fire organizations, civic groups, newspapers, and local businesses became central to community life.

Main Street Businesses

Downtown Phoenix featured general stores, pharmacies, hardware stores, banks, restaurants, hotels, barber shops, clothing stores, and more, serving residents and travelers alike.

Bridges and Transportation

Movable bridges connected neighborhoods while allowing canal traffic to pass. This tradition continues with the iconic Phoenix lift bridge.

Challenges Along the Way

Floods, economic downturns, harsh winters, industrial changes, and fires tested the village. The devastating Great Fire of 1916 would become the defining event explored in the next chapter.

A Legacy of Community

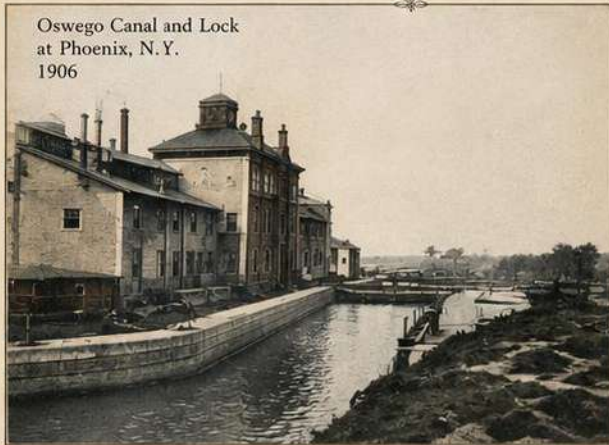
Phoenix's history reflects resilience, volunteerism, historic preservation, and pride in its canal heritage.

CHAPTER 3

THE OSWEGO CANAL & THE BARGE CANAL

*From early waterways to the
birth of a new era, 1906–1917*

Contract 10—View west of opening made in coffer dam about
Sta.661+50 for flooding excavation. Feb.5, 1908.



Oswego Canal and Lock
at Phoenix, N.Y.
1906



CONSTRUCTION WORK CANAL BARGE CANAL PHOENIX, N.Y.
Construction Work on Barge Canal, Phoenix, N.Y.
c. 1910



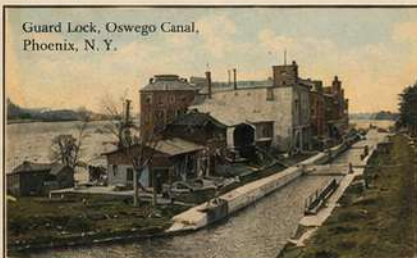
Barge Canal Work, Phoenix, N.Y.
c. 1912



Barge Canal Work, Phoenix, N.Y.
c. 1912



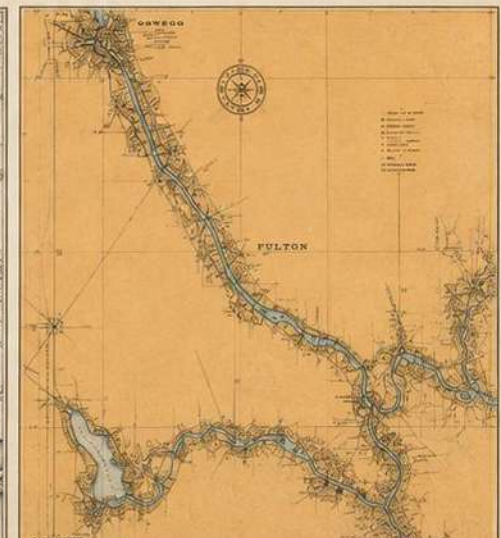
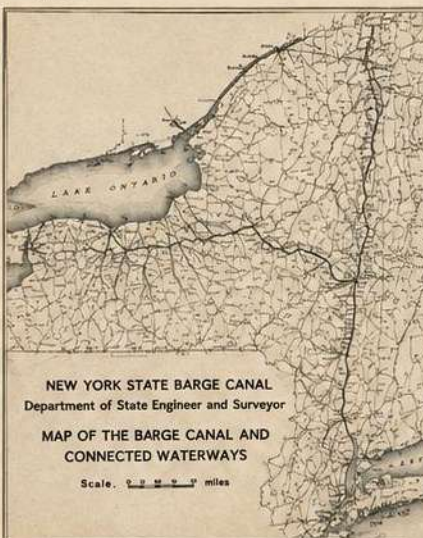
New Lock in Barge Canal, Phoenix, N.Y.
c. 1914



Guard Lock, Oswego Canal, Phoenix, N.Y.
c. 1906



View of Lock on Oswego Canal, Phoenix, N.Y.
c. 1912



Chapter 3:

The Oswego Canal and the New York State Barge Canal

The Waterway That Built Phoenix

Introduction

The history of Phoenix, New York, is inseparable from the history of the Oswego Canal. Long before highways and railroads connected communities across New York State, canals served as the primary transportation routes for people and commerce. The construction of the Oswego Canal transformed what had once been a small settlement along the Oswego River into a thriving canal village. Businesses flourished, mills expanded, hotels welcomed travelers, and generations of residents found work because of the steady movement of boats through the community.

Today, although commercial traffic has changed dramatically, the canal remains one of Phoenix's defining landmarks. The river, locks, bridges, and historic canal structures continue to tell the story of nearly two centuries of transportation history.

Before the Canal

Before the canal era, the Oswego River served as a natural route connecting central New York to Lake Ontario. Indigenous peoples had traveled these waterways for centuries, using canoes to transport goods and move between settlements.

Early European settlers quickly recognized the importance of the river. However, rapids, waterfalls, and changing water levels made commercial navigation difficult. Goods often had to be unloaded and carried around obstacles, making transportation slow and expensive.

As New York State grew rapidly after the American Revolution, leaders realized a better transportation system was needed.

The Erie Canal Changes Everything

The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 connected the Hudson River with Lake Erie, revolutionizing transportation across New York. State leaders understood that another canal was needed to connect the Erie Canal with Lake Ontario and the important port city of Oswego.

Construction of the Oswego Canal began in the 1820s. When completed, it linked Syracuse and the Erie Canal to Lake Ontario, creating a direct route for international trade through the Great Lakes. Phoenix quickly became one of the important communities located along this new transportation corridor.

Building the Oswego Canal

Constructing the canal required thousands of workers. Using picks, shovels, horses, and black powder, laborers dug sections of canal, built locks, constructed towpaths, and created dams that allowed boats to overcome changes in elevation.

Canal locks functioned like giant water elevators. Each lock raised or lowered boats so they could continue traveling despite changes in the river's height.

Life Along the Canal

By the mid-1800s, canal boats passed through Phoenix almost daily. Life in the village revolved around canal traffic. Boat captains stopped for supplies, families purchased food from local merchants, blacksmiths repaired equipment, hotels welcomed travelers, and children watched mule teams pull boats along the towpaths.

Commerce Comes to Phoenix

Products commonly transported included lumber, grain, flour, salt, coal, building stone, farm products, and manufactured goods. The canal dramatically lowered transportation costs and encouraged Phoenix to grow into a busy commercial village.

The Importance of the Oswego River

Unlike many artificial canals, much of the Oswego Canal follows the natural Oswego River. Engineers combined natural waterways with man-made improvements to create a dependable transportation route.

Canal Boats

Early canal boats were narrow wooden vessels pulled by horses or mules along towpaths. Although they traveled only three to four miles per hour, they carried far more cargo than wagons.

Phoenix's Bridges

Movable bridges allowed both road traffic and canal boats to use the same crossing. Bridge operators worked from structures like the historic Bridge House, opening and closing bridges as boats approached.

The Barge Canal Era

Beginning in 1905, New York State modernized its canals into the New York State Barge Canal System. Completed in 1918, the new system featured larger locks, wider channels, deeper waterways, and improved engineering. The Oswego Canal became an important section of this statewide network.

Phoenix During the Barge Canal Era

Larger steel barges replaced many earlier wooden canal boats. The canal continued transporting grain, coal, building materials, and manufactured goods while supporting local businesses.

Recreation Replaces Commerce

Following World War II, trucking gradually replaced canals for commercial freight. Today the Oswego Canal serves primarily recreational boaters while continuing to preserve Phoenix's rich canal heritage.

The Canal Today

The canal remains an active part of the New York State Canal System, supporting tourism, recreation, community events, and historical preservation.

Historical Highlights

- 1825 - Erie Canal opens.
- 1828-1829 - Oswego Canal opens.
- Mid-1800s - Phoenix becomes a busy canal village.
- 1905 - Construction begins on the Barge Canal.
- 1917 - Phoenix Bridge House is completed.
- 1918 - New York State Barge Canal opens.

Did You Know?

- The Oswego Canal is approximately 24 miles long.
- Locks use gravity and water pressure rather than pumps.
- Canal boats were originally pulled by horses and mules.
- Thousands of recreational boaters travel through Phoenix every summer.

Without the Oswego Canal, Phoenix would likely have remained a small riverside settlement. Instead, the canal transformed the village into a thriving transportation hub whose history continues to shape the community today.



CHAPTER 4

THE GREAT FIRE OF 1916

— How Phoenix Rose From the Ashes —

September 23-24, 1916
A devastating fire destroyed the heart of Phoenix.
But from the ashes came courage, community, and a stronger tomorrow.



Chapter 4

The Great Fire of 1916

Phoenix, New York: Disaster, Courage, and Rebirth

Introduction

By 1916, Phoenix had grown into a busy canal and river community. Wooden commercial buildings stood close together along the main streets, making the village especially vulnerable to fire. Businesses, homes, churches, and public buildings reflected decades of growth tied to the Oswego Canal and later the Barge Canal.

The Fire Begins

On a hot, windy day in 1916, a fire broke out and quickly spread through the heart of the village. Strong winds carried embers from building to building, overwhelming local firefighting efforts.

The Fire Spreads

Within a short time, flames consumed blocks of businesses and homes. Residents formed bucket brigades, removed furniture and merchandise from threatened buildings, and assisted neighbors as surrounding communities responded with additional firefighters and equipment.

The Human Story

Although buildings were lost, the determination of Phoenix residents became the defining story. Families sheltered one another, volunteers worked around the clock, and local businesses helped supply food and necessities during the recovery.

Aftermath and Rebuilding

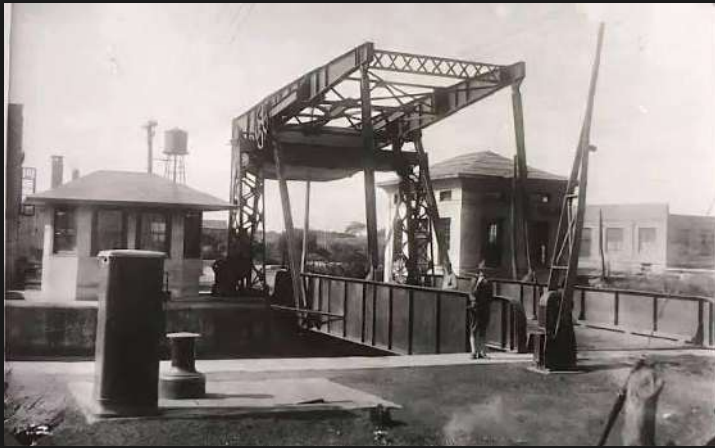
The fire reshaped the appearance of downtown Phoenix. New construction emphasized more fire-resistant materials such as brick, wider firebreaks, and improved firefighting capabilities. The rebuilding effort demonstrated the resilience of the community.

The Bridge House

The existing Bridge House, constructed in 1917, became a symbol of Phoenix's recovery. It served the bridge operator responsible for opening the bridge to river traffic and today houses the Phoenix Museum, preserving the story of the village and its people.

Legacy

The Great Fire of 1916 remains one of the most significant events in Phoenix history. It transformed the village physically and economically while strengthening the community spirit that continues to define Phoenix today.









VIEW OF LOCK IN OSWEGO CANAL PHOENIX, N.Y.

BRIDGE HOUSE

1917



Chapter 5

The Construction and
Operation of the 1917
Bridge House,
Phoenix, NY

A LEGACY THAT
STANDS THE TEST OF TIME





Chapter 5

The Construction and Operation of the 1917 Bridge House. Phoenix, New York

Following the devastating Great Fire of 1916, the Village of Phoenix undertook the reconstruction of critical public infrastructure. Among the most significant projects was the construction of the Bridge House in 1917 at what is now Henley Park. The small but essential building was designed to support the operation of the movable bridge that crossed the Oswego River, allowing both road traffic and the heavy commercial boat traffic of the Oswego and later Barge Canal to coexist.

The Bridge House served as the workplace for the bridge operator. Inside were the controls and mechanical equipment used to open and close the bridge. When canal boats approached, the operator would stop road traffic, activate the bridge machinery, and safely swing or lift the bridge (depending on its design at the time) to allow vessels to pass. Once the waterway was clear, the bridge was returned to its roadway position and traffic resumed.

Operating the bridge required constant attention. During the canal navigation season, operators often worked long shifts and maintained detailed records of bridge openings, weather conditions, and unusual events. Reliability was especially important because the bridge connected neighborhoods, businesses, and farms while also serving commercial shipping on one of New York State's busiest inland waterways.

The Bridge House itself was built for function rather than appearance, but its location along the river made it a recognizable landmark. Its windows provided clear views up and down the river, allowing operators to monitor approaching vessels. The sturdy construction reflected the community's determination to rebuild more strongly after the fire.

As transportation evolved during the twentieth century and commercial canal traffic declined, the need for a full-time bridge operator eventually ended. Rather than being lost to history, the Bridge House was preserved and today serves as the Phoenix Museum. The building now tells the story of the village, the Great Fire of 1916, canal commerce, local industries, and the people who shaped Phoenix.

Today, visitors standing inside the former Bridge House can appreciate not only its engineering purpose but also its role as a symbol of resilience. The preservation of the building provides a tangible connection to the era when the Oswego River and New York's canal system were central to the village's economy and daily life.

The Bridge Tenders and How the Bridge Worked Phoenix, New York

For much of the twentieth century, the bridge spanning the Oswego River in Phoenix, New York, was more than a way to cross the river—it was a vital part of the community and the New York State canal system. Before modern automation, the bridge depended on trained bridge tenders who operated the movable span by hand and later with electric controls. Their work ensured that both road traffic and canal navigation could move safely.

The Bridge House, constructed in 1917 after the Great Fire of 1916, served as the workplace for the bridge tender. From its windows, the tender had a clear view of both the bridge and the river. Inside were the operating controls, communication equipment, records, and the mechanisms needed to manage bridge openings.

Whenever a boat approached that required the bridge to open, the bridge tender followed a carefully practiced routine. The tender first confirmed that the channel was clear, then stopped vehicle and pedestrian traffic using gates, warning bells, or signals. Once traffic had cleared the bridge deck, the locking devices securing the bridge in the closed position were released.

The movable span was powered through a system of gears, motors, shafts, and counterweights. Counterweights balanced much of the bridge's weight, allowing the machinery to raise the span with relatively little power. As the bridge slowly opened, the tender carefully watched both the machinery and the approaching vessel to ensure a safe passage.

After the vessel had completely cleared the bridge, the process was reversed. The span was lowered into position, locking mechanisms engaged, and the bridge was checked to ensure it was fully seated before road traffic was allowed to continue. Even a small misalignment could prevent the bridge from operating safely.

Bridge tenders were responsible for much more than opening the bridge. They inspected equipment, lubricated moving parts, monitored electrical systems, kept detailed logs of openings and closings, reported maintenance issues, and often answered questions from visitors. During severe weather, flooding, or winter ice, their experience was especially important.

The schedule of a bridge tender often revolved around canal navigation. During the busy boating season, multiple bridge openings could occur throughout the day. Coordination with canal authorities and nearby locks helped keep vessels moving efficiently along the Oswego Canal and the New York State Barge Canal System.

The work demanded patience, precision, and constant attention. A bridge tender had to balance the needs of motorists waiting to cross with those of commercial vessels and recreational boaters traveling the canal. Safety was always the highest priority.

Today, the former Bridge House at Henley Park stands as one of Phoenix's most recognizable historic landmarks. As home to the local museum, it preserves the story of the bridge tenders whose daily work connected transportation, commerce, and community life for generations. Their dedication helped keep one of Phoenix's most important transportation links operating reliably for decades.

Preserving the Story of Phoenix

Phoenix, New York, was shaped by the land, the Oswego River, the canal, and generations of people who built their lives along its banks.

From the Indigenous peoples who traveled these waterways long before European settlement, through the growth of a canal village, the devastation of the Great Fire of 1916, and the construction of the Bridge House in 1917, the history of Phoenix is a story of change, resilience, and community.

Today, the Bridge House stands as a connection between the Phoenix of the past and the village we know today, a place where its stories, photographs, and memories can continue to be preserved for generations to come.

**The land. The river. The canal. The people.
Together, they tell the story of Phoenix.**

Sources, Images & Acknowledgments

This history was compiled using historical publications, archival materials, maps, photographs, local records, and other documented resources relating to Phoenix, the Oswego River, and the New York State Canal System.

Historic photographs and maps used throughout this booklet have been presented with the intention of preserving their original historical character. Some chapter artwork, composite images, reconstructed historical scenes, image enhancements, and design elements were created or assisted using artificial intelligence. These elements are intended to help visually interpret the history and should not be considered original historical photographs unless identified as such.

Artificial intelligence, including ChatGPT by OpenAI, was also used as a tool to assist with research, organization, editing, and design.

Phoenix, New York
The History of a Canal Village

Preserving our past for future generations.

