

Delaware & Raritan Canal Fact Sheet

The Delaware and Raritan Canal went from Bordentown on the Delaware River, across the narrow waist of New Jersey to New Brunswick on the Raritan River, a distance of 44 miles. Its source of water was from the Delaware River at Raven Rock, 22 miles north of Trenton. From here, a navigable feeder brought water to the summit level in Trenton, 58 feet above sea level. The water then flowed south to Bordentown and northeast to New Brunswick. The canal was a fairly level one with only 14 locks on the main canal to overcome the elevation changes of 115 feet. It was a critical factor in the 19th century industrial and commercial development of the region through which it passed.

Although simple in construction and engineering compared to the Morris canal, it overshadowed its northern neighbor in many ways. It was a large canal with a depth of 8 feet and locks that were 24 wide by 220 feet long. The banks were “rip-rapped” with stone so that vessels could move at a reasonable speed without washing the banks into the canal. All of its bridges were “swing bridges” that pivoted horizontally so that vessels of any mast height could go through the canal. The locks were operated by steam powered winches and valves after 1868. A large volume of traffic moved through the canal. Boats from the Schuylkill Canal and from the Delaware Division Canal, both in Pennsylvania used the canal. The tonnage in 1866 was 2,857,233 tons – 83% of which was coal. Troops and war supplies moved through the canal in three wars and the canal was a link in the Inland Waterway that is missing today.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Delaware & Raritan Canal was the large variety of boats that passed through it. These included mule-towed canal boats and sail boats, steam tugs towing barges, freight boats, millionaires’ yachts and naval vessels. Canal boats from most canals on the East Coast traversed the canal at one time or another.

The canal was chartered in 1830. In 1831 the Delaware & Raritan Canal and the Camden & Amboy Railroad, the precursor of the Pennsylvania Railroad, were combined as “Joint Companies”. The canal opened for through navigation in 1834. The last season was 1932 and the State of New Jersey assumed control in 1934. In 1974, Governor Byrne signed a bill creating the Delaware & Raritan Canal State Park. Today, the main canal from New Brunswick to Trenton and the feeder canal form a linear park used extensively for recreation. Under the direction of the New Jersey Water Authority the canal serves as a water supply for approximately 600,00 people.