A Brief History

In the early 1820s canals became an alternative transportation route to the rut-ridden, mud-mired highways. New Jersey’s Morris Canal was different from all the other canals. Unique, this canal defied the terrain, literally climbing mountains by way of inclined planes, as it challenged what seemed like an insurmountable elevation, a total of 1,674 feet of elevation changes. The route contained 23 lift locks and 23 inclined planes; 7 of each were in Warren County.

George P. Macculloch, a businessman from Morristown, envisioned an artificial waterway stretching across northern New Jersey as a means of bringing Pennsylvania coal to the fuel starved furnaces of the east and distributing raw materials to the industrialized areas of the state. The Morris Canal was chartered on December 31, 1824 “to form an artificial navigation between the Passaic and Delaware rivers”.

In 1831, the Morris Canal was opened to through traffic from Phillipsburg to Newark. By 1836 it reached Jersey City for a total of 162 miles. Lake Hopatcong was the main source of water and near the summit of elevation change. The technology used on the Morris Canal was simple but innovative. Flat bottomed canal boats were steered with a tiller while the boat was pulled by two mules guided by a young mule driver. The boats traveled through locks and over inclined planes.

It was the water from the canal entering the powerhouse that set the water powered turbines into motion to raise or lower cradled boats on the inclined plane by means of a cable. This operation was unique to the Morris Canal.

With the advent of the faster, more efficient railroads, business on the canal declined. By 1924, despite all efforts, the canal was abandoned, drained, and all but forgotten.

Preservation Efforts

In 1981 the Warren County Board of Chosen Freeholders made the Morris Canal a part of the County’s open space plan and established the Morris Canal Committee as a special committee of the County Planning Board. The goals of the Committee are preserving and protecting the remains of the Morris Canal and increasing the awareness of its great historical significance. Since that time the Canal Committee has worked with the County Board of Recreation Commissioners, Land Preservation Office, and the Planning Board staff toward those goals.
Those traveling on the canal east through the county would begin their journey in Phillipsburg, on the Delaware River, and travel for thirty-three miles until they reached the county line near Waterloo Village. The route of the canal provides reminders of its glory days – inland ports of call that includes Port Warren, Port Washington, Port Colden, Port Murray, and Rockport as well as sites with descriptive identities such as Green’s Bridge, the Bread Lock, and Guinea Hollow.