



Shenango's Paddlers Parallel Canal History



by Jerry Bush

photos by the author

At first, paddling a kayak or canoe on the Shenango River may stir thoughts of indigenous Americans who paddled the waterway, but in the mid-1800s, paddlers on the river witnessed a nearly unimaginable accomplishment of their era. The Erie Extension Canal paralleled portions of the river, and evidence of the historic landmark still remains.

The canal was nearly 60 feet wide in some areas, and extended south, 136 miles from Lake Erie. It included 137 floodable locks to overcome a change in elevation of nearly 1,000 feet, which was necessary so barges could transport goods between Erie and Pittsburgh. It was a marvel of its time, created by men equipped with little more than hand shovels and determination.

A good portion of the canal ran alongside the Shenango River, and the towpath that permitted mules to pull the barges is particularly visible near a 10-mile stretch of the river, between kayak launches at

Greenville and New Hamburg. Shenango River paddlers who are willing to exit their vessels at the east riverbank can walk short distances to view large indentations in the earth that remain from the old canal.

A walking trail can be accessed at Kidds Mill Covered Bridge kayak launch, which is about halfway between Greenville and New Hamburg. Much of this walking trail follows what used to be the towpath, and it passes so close to the river that it is easy to imagine tenders of the barges interacting with people on the river.

If needed, kayaks and canoes can be rented at Carried Away Outfitters, an establishment located in Greenville, next to the launch in Riverside Park. They offer shuttle service upstream but only occasionally downstream. Paddlers should assume they'll need a transport vehicle downstream, but it never hurts to ask.

Any person wanting to paddle the river and appreciate its history should visit The Canal Museum at Riverside Park dedicated to the canal's history. Here, onlookers can view an authentic barge and other remnants and photographs from the era. During the summer, the museum is open on weekends from 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., but special appointments can be made to visit the center on weekdays by calling 724-588-3104.



Lock #10, in Sharpsville, is the last remaining lock of the Erie Extension Canal that remains intact.



Examples of cargo carried on an Erie Extension Canal barge.

The Shenango River is normally a calm waterway that rarely offers a challenge. It is a relatively narrow waterway that meanders along farmlands and through lush woodlands, which adds to its charm. If a paddler is quiet and willing to pass slowly, it is nearly impossible to avoid close encounters with beavers, rabbits, squirrels and white-tailed deer, as well as ducks, geese, eagles, ospreys and herons.

It's a good idea to have a rod and reel handy, because various fish species inhabit the Shenango River including bass, carp, panfish, pike, Walleyes and White Bass.

The Shenango Dam, which holds back water to create the Shenango River Lake, prevents boats of any kind from reaching the only remaining floodable lock of the Erie Extension Canal. A short drive is required to see Lock #10, in the nearby town of Sharpsville. Lock #10 is near the bridge over the river, which provides entrance to part of the Shenango Recreation Area and the Mahaney Boat Launch. People can pass through the lock while hiking a riverside path.

Imagine what paddlers of nearly 200 years ago must have thought as they watched men with shovels digging the Erie Extension Canal and later witnessed the accomplishment, as barges were pulled by horses and mules to move goods between communities. ☐



It is nearly impossible to float on the Upper Shenango River Water Trail without seeing a heron.

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