

# **This Week in Saratoga County History**

## **The Restless Italian: A Merchant on the Erie Canal**

**Submitted by John L. Scherer, April 23, 2025**

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*Erie Canal Lock 44 Grocery Store of John Brizolara*

Thousands of immigrants poured into the United States during the mid nineteenth century. Coming mostly from northern Europe, many arrived in New York City and from there spread out to every region of our country. One such immigrant who eventually found his way to Clifton Park was a restless Italian by the name of John C. Brizolara.

Brizolara was born January 1, 1822, in the village of Magniasco, Town of St. Stefano, County of Chiavary, Sardinia. At age 15, after two years of public school and further education at Bobbio Seminary, he was engaged in hotel keeping. At age eighteen he became a clerk in the city of Milan, and in 1845 when he was twenty-three, Brizolara, embarked at Genoa for New York on the sailing vessel "Constantino". After a stormy and rather perilous voyage of eighty-eight days the "Constantino" entered New York harbor, and landed her passengers on July 31.

Brizolara could not speak English and was unable to find employment in New York, so he remained there for only a short time. He went to Boston and shortly after to Bangor, Maine where he eventually found a job. The harshness of the climate, however, impelled him to move to Albany about 1848, and then to Fonda's Basin here in the Town of Clifton Park.

Fonda's or Fundy's (as the locals pronounced it) Basin no longer exists today, but in the mid nineteenth century it was a small canal side settlement near Lock 20 between Vischer Ferry and Rexford. If Droms Road extended past Riverview Road to the Mohawk River you would be at the site of Fonda's Basin. This area is now under water due to the damming of the river in 1907 to create Lock 7 of the Barge Canal. It was here that Brizolara worked for three years as a clerk for the Fonda family, probably at a small canal side store that existed at this site.

Brizolara next moved several miles east along the canal to Willow Spring. This small canal side settlement was located about one mile east of Vischer Ferry and centered around the present-day home of Jim and Nancy Douglass. Their home was built in 1832 by John Clute, and during the canal era there was a station barn where fresh mules were available to canallers to pull their boats. There was also a small canal store, now a garage on the neighboring property, and a spring from which canallers could get fresh water. Above this spring was a willow tree from which the settlement derived its name. Today a small development across Riverview Road has assumed this identity.

Brizolara engaged in business for a time at Willow Spring, probably working in the canal store. It was while working here that he met Elizabeth Vandenberg, born August 15, 1824, whom he married. In the spring of 1853, he moved west to Rexford Flats where he found employment at another canal store. This store was larger than the stores at Fonda's Basin and Willow Spring and Brizolara actually operated the store rather than just clerking. Here he engaged in the business of a butcher, grocer and gardener. The store was located near Lock 22.

After four years at Rexford Flats, Brizolara, his wife Elizabeth and two young children, Kate and Albert, left the Town of Clifton Park for East Frankfort in Herkimer County. Here he purchased in 1857 the canal store and hotel at Lock 44 from George Folts. He was still engaged in selling canal supplies at this location in 1879 when the History of Herkimer County was published by F. W. Beers. An engraving of J. C. Brizolara's store and hotel appears in that publication. It was his restlessness - the three years with the Fondas at Fonda's Basin, further clerking at Willow Spring, and the four years running the Rexford store - that gave him the experience necessary

to make his own store successful. Brizolara died in 1900 and is buried in the Oakwood Cemetery in Frankfort.

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On Saturday, May 3 at 10 AM, the Town of Clifton Park will dedicate a new historic marker at the site of Willow Spring, the canalside settlement where J. C. Brizolara once worked. The home of John Clute that once served as a canal inn and the remains of the canal store still exist. The unveiling of the marker will be followed by a walking tour to Lock 19 led by Historian John Scherer.

This event will kick off Clifton Park's bicentennial celebration of the Erie Canal. A series of events are planned, including lectures, an Erie Canal exhibit at the Historic Grooms Tavern, a bike tour along the towpath, and a talk on clothing of the 1820s. A bus trip will feature a canal boat ride on a restored section of the Erie Canal and aqueduct at Camillus and a stop at the Dry Dock Museum at Chittenango. The Clifton Park Halfmoon Library, also participating in the celebration, will host an exhibit from the Erie Canal Museum in Syracuse and a series of talks on the canal. These commemorative programs will culminate in a weekend long event in Vischer Ferry on October 11 and 12 featuring antique cars, re-enactors, musicians, a parade, hay wagon ride tours to Lock 19, exhibits, food vendors and a play involving life on the Erie Canal. Check the web sites for the Town of Clifton Park and the Clifton Park Halfmoon Library for further information.

*Sources: History of Saratoga County, Nathaniel Sylvester, 1878,  
History of Herkimer County, published by F. W. Beers in 1879.  
Family and genealogical information from Ancestry.com.*