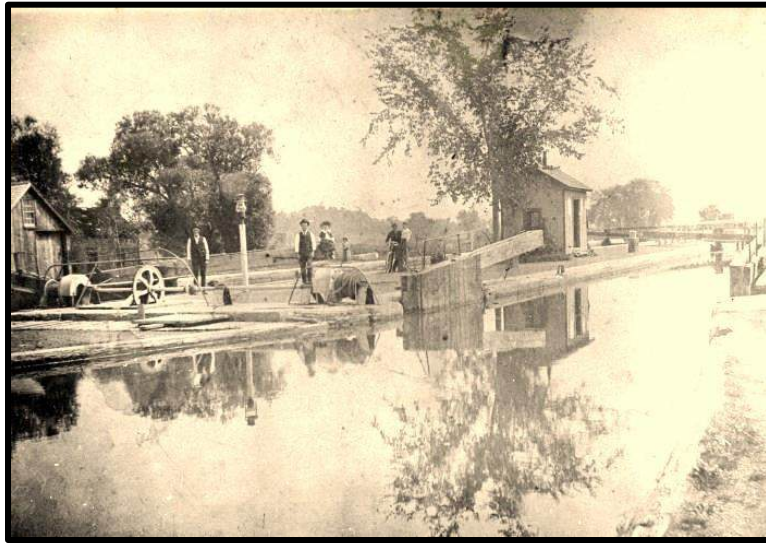


# This Week in Saratoga County History

## Canallers Were a Rowdy Bunch

Submitted by John L Scherer September 10, 2025

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*Erie Canal Lock 19 at Vischer Ferry*

As we prepare to celebrate the Bicentennial of the opening of the Grand Erie Canal in October 1825, we look back on life along that engineering wonder, billed as the eighth wonder of the world. This artificial 365-mile-long river connecting the Hudson River with Lake Erie had a system of locks to raise boats to different levels as they headed west and lowered them as they headed east. The canal crossed rivers and streams on aqueducts, and passed dry docks where the boats could be constructed or repaired. Life along the canal became the subject of folklore, stories of the cooks, the hogeers who led the mules and of course the canallers themselves.

Canallers had a reputation for leading a rough life. It seems as though they were always fighting one another, drinking, or fraternizing with the cook. Some even hired professional fighters to

ride their boats to give them an edge on getting through the locks first. Some professional prize fighters such as John L. Sullivan actually got their start on the Erie Canal. The canallers who passed through Vischer Ferry and Rexford were no different. Justice of the Peace records for the Town of Clifton Park seem to bear this out.

A number of complaints concerning canallers at Lock 19 were found some years ago along with other records stored in an old trunk at the former Kowalchuk home on the north side of Riverview Road east of Vischer Ferry. John Witbeck Van Vranken built this house in 1847. He was Justice of the Peace for the Town of Clifton Park during the 1850's and 1860's. These complaints confirm the stories of fights at Lock 19 to see who would enter the lock first.

Joseph G. Cronkhite, lock tender at Lock 19, filed a complaint on October 6, 1866 against Warren Dutcher who ran the Canal Boat Humbolt. Dutcher evidently incited and encouraged one of the men on his boat to whip Cronkhite, saying to him, "damn it why don't you strike him." A man whose name was unknown, but was described as "being of medium height, wearing dark colored clothes and of spare face with dark whiskers or small mustache," violently assaulted and beat Cronkhite.

Another member of the crew of the Boat Humbolt also incited the aforesaid person to assault Cronkhite by using violent and exciting language toward him. Cronkhite filed his complaint in hopes that Warren Dutcher and the crew of the Boat Humbolt would be apprehended and held to answer to his complaint. However, by the time this complaint was filed the Boat Humbolt and crew were probably miles away.

Sometimes canallers would ram other boats in an effort to race them in to the lock. On September 29, 1866, Frank Slater filed a complaint against John Doe, Richard Roe, James Jackson, and John Jones, persons whose real names are unknown, but who are the Master and crew of the canal boat Thomas G. Alvord. The Thomas G. Alvord rammed into Slater's boat. The Master and crew were not residents of Saratoga County.

A similar incident occurred a year later on September 26, 1867 when John W. Uber's boat was rammed by four men (names unknown) navigating the canal Boat D. F. Stafford. Uber was a resident of Saratoga County, but the men who rammed his boat were not. They were probably never caught.

On June 18, 1864, Oliver Dresler of Montgomery County complained that three men, the captain and crew (names unknown) of the canal Boat Ocean, stole his towline. Again, the men were not residents of Saratoga County, and were probably never apprehended.

Another complaint describes an unusual incident about one poor loser at Lock 19. He threw a rope around the lumber on a competing canal boat as it was entering the lock and pulled the lumber off the deck of the boat. After the lumber was retrieved, the culprit was hauled to justice Van Vranken to settle the feud. Needless to say, both parties went on their way after a reprimand from the justice.

Town Justice John W. Van Vranken (1820-1869) lived alongside the canal making it easy for canallers to file their complaints as they happened. These complaints offer us a glimpse of life along the Erie Canal one hundred and fifty years ago when 175 boats per day passed through Lock 19 at Vischer Ferry and Locks 21 and 22 at Rexford.

*Clifton Park's celebration of the Erie Canal's Bicentennial will be held on October 11 and 12 at Vischer Ferry. Canal Fest will feature a parade, antique cars, canal exhibits, wagon rides to Lock 19, canal songs by George Ward, walking tours, children's games and a play of canal stories and music produced by Andy Spence of Old Songs.*

*Source:*

*Justice of the Peace records of John W. Van Vranken located in the History Room of the Clifton Park Halfmoon Library. See library's web site [Local History - Clifton Park-Halfmoon Public Library](#)*