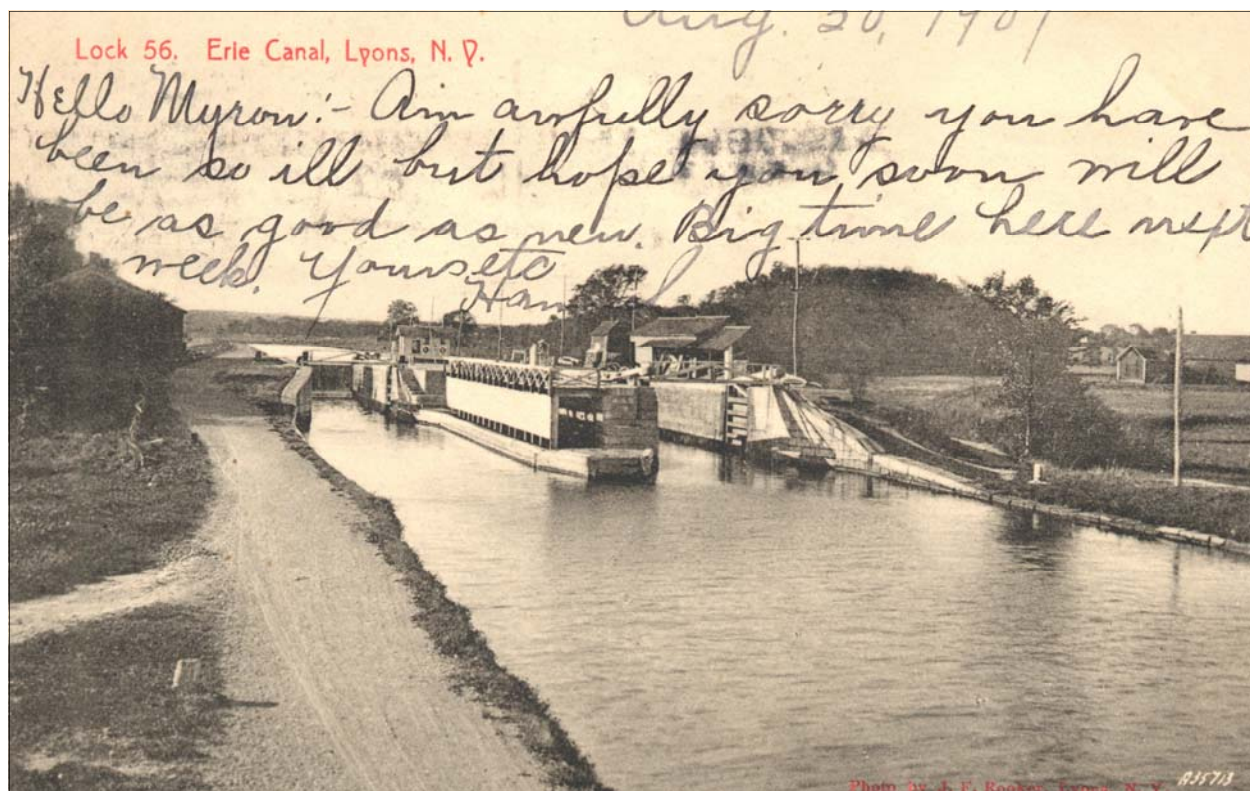


1907 Postcard of E-56 Interpreted



From time to time we are pleased to discover new information about a particular site. Recently, Mark DeCracker, of E.R.I.E. sent me this post card he had acquired from a friend. The post card was sent to an ailing friend in August wishing him well and that something exciting was happening in Lyons within a week. What is unusual or possibly not is the message was written on the “front” of the card. Since this is a reproduction from the original, we don’t know what may have been written in the message space on the back.

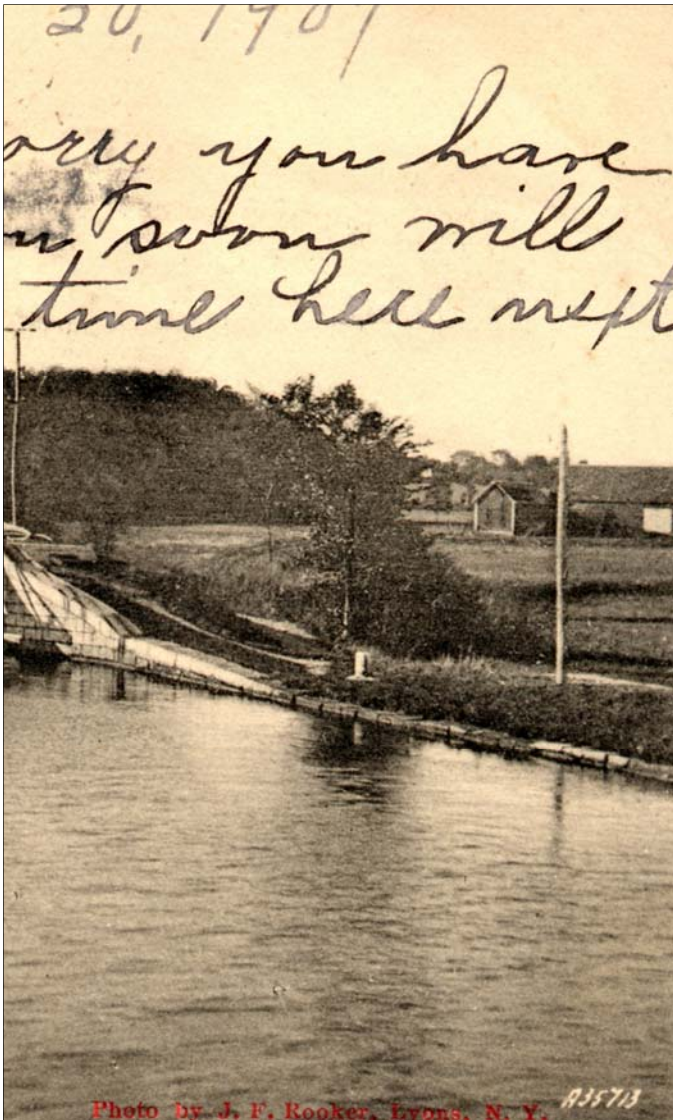
Reproductions are never accurate copies, but often mask original details by being of higher contrast. Details in the shadows are often lost. Also, unless care is taken the original image itself can be cropped (that is, cut off). In this case I believe we have the full image.

The first step in interpretation is to establish from where the image was photographed. This is easily seen by the red inscription stamped onto the original photographic card. Cards of this type were first printed as photographic images and then stamped with the description. This was a popular business in those days making cards for tourists to chronicle their adventures. On site and other images of this scene verify it to be Enlarged Erie Canal Lock #56.

Next we determine the Point of View (POV). At first I thought it to be looking east, as the buildings in the right sector of this image appear to be the E-56 “grocery”. The POV is not east but instead west. There are two reasons, first in the left sector shadow (obscured) is the “grocery” and also the towpath that went along the south side of the canal at this point. Today the New York State Barge Canal, or recently renamed the Erie Canal pass in the right sector of this image.

The last major consideration is the time of year. I think it is late spring as seen by the sun’s shadow. The vegetation also seems to be fresh and consistent in color and fullness.

One of the joys of old photographs is looking at the details. A photographic image is a ruthlessly accurate representation of an actual scene. Limitations are only the resolution and the quality of the reproduction. In 1907 large format cameras were frequently used, such as a 4" x 5" view camera. These cameras have at least 16x the resolution of 35mm or most professional digital cameras. Postcard images were often photographed with the 4" x 5" camera and then contact printed. If we had an original "contact print" much more detail would be available, however, this example still has vital details.



In this interpretation I will begin with four major sections, Right Sector, Middle Sector, Left Sector and Panoramic of Lock Sector. Each have their story some familiar, others pure speculation.

In the **Right Sector** is the "quiet side" of the canal. Here there is no towpath but what appears to be a simple country lane and footpath past the north side of the lock. Farm buildings also appear in the background. Lyons, which is located just east of E-56 was famous for peppermint production. The Hotchkiss Company was world famous for color and purity of its peppermint. Farms in the area grew this crop, so its possible that the fields we see here are peppermint. They are fairly dense and short in stature. Peter Hill owned the land on both sides of the lock and may have been involved in the peppermint business. Also present are "telegraph" poles. They begin and disappear along the north side. Rural electrification was not largely available to all those in the countryside. In fact, when the New York State Barge Canal (NYSBC) was built (slightly north of this picture) around 1912, the state placed dedicated power stations for the new "electric" locks. This was mainly because of the unpredictable nature of early rural power systems. Lastly is the "hill". I do not believe it is there today. During construction of the NYSBC this hill may have been diminished and used to build up berm on the north side of the new canal.

Right Sector

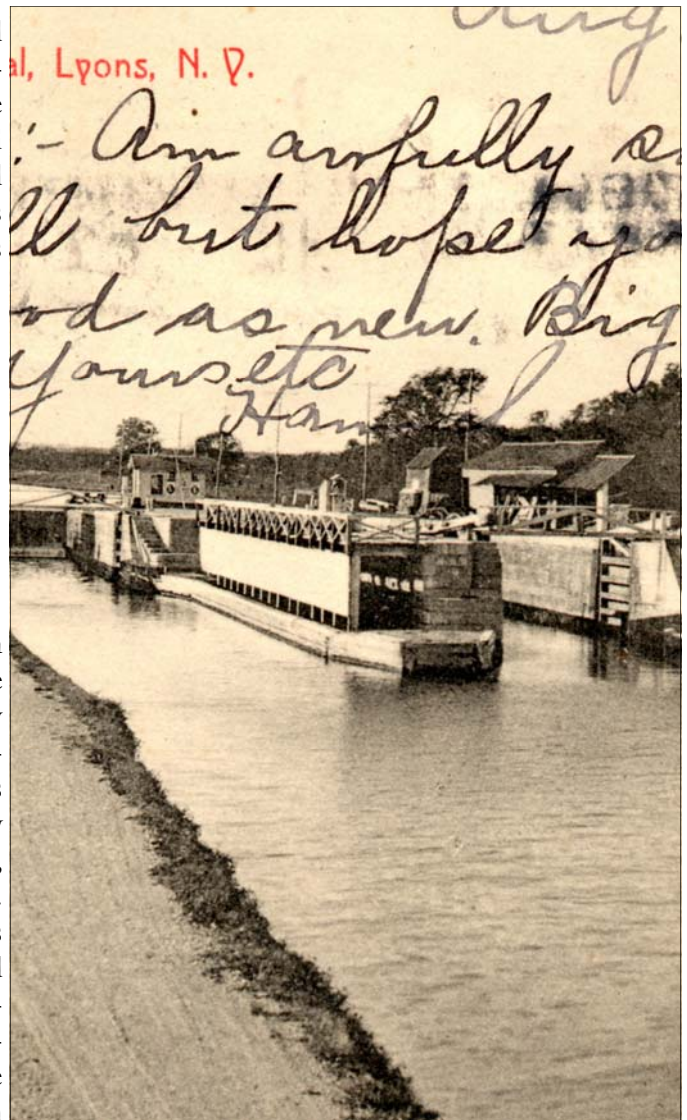
In the above Right Sector of the original postcard image is seen a farm building. The building at the right is a farm building found on Old Lyons Road. It bears a remarkable resemblance and is found at about the same location as the one in the postcard. The foundation of this building is of field stone, popular during the period of E-56. The land north of E-56 was farmland, some of which today is occupied by the current Erie Canal. Also of interest are the buildings on the crest of the hill in the distance. These are to be investigated at a later date. Much of the hills in the area were cleared of trees, not entirely true today.



The **Middle Sector** shows the lock chambers. Near the end of the Enlarged Erie Era locks were doubled and lengthened. This was to accommodate more traffic and move barges faster. The competition from the railroads mandated these changes, even though in the final analysis, they proved to be unsuccessful in practice. The north/south chambers are low. This might indicate that barges are anticipated as coming from the east. The lift of this lock was about 10'.

The lock gates are opened and rest in the recesses of the lock wall. These recesses were necessary to protect the gates from barges entering and exiting the lock chamber. Between the lock chambers is an area where the lock tender's "shanty" house was located. This shanty provided shelter in bad weather and had a place to keep a record of barges passages.

The **Left Sector** shows the towpath passing on the north side of the "grocery". There is a path leading east from the main towpath, possibly used to switch mule teams or allow persons from Lyons access to the grocery. The grocery being located so close to the canal probably determined its unique purpose. That is, having items principally used by canallers. These would include items of food and clothing, as well as, specialized items used on the barges themselves. The grocer seems so attached to the canal that its business must have been exclusively canal related. I suspect it would be unlikely that this building had much to do with the thriving peppermint industry surrounding it. Between the towpath and the south lock wall appears to be a grassy area free of encumbrances that would impede commerce between canaller and store proprietor. Although obscured in this image, the twin chimneys of the building and its signature shape are clear evidence that it is indeed the "grocery". Lastly, on the towpath of the Enlarged Erie Canal all bushes and other obstructions were removed to allow smooth passage of mule teams and tow ropes. Today, when visiting this lock, you can still see tow rope burns deep in the cap stones of the lock!

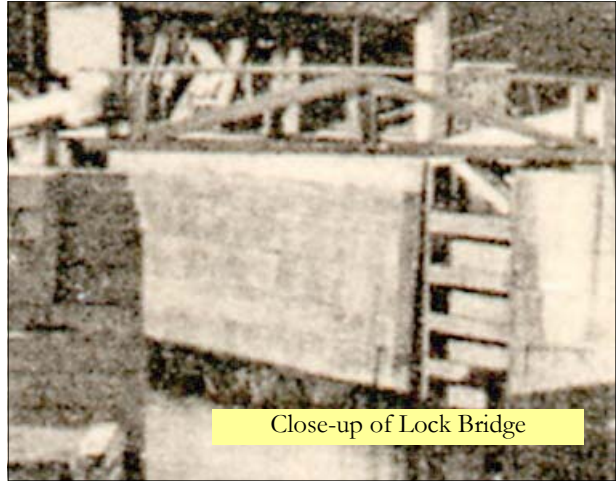
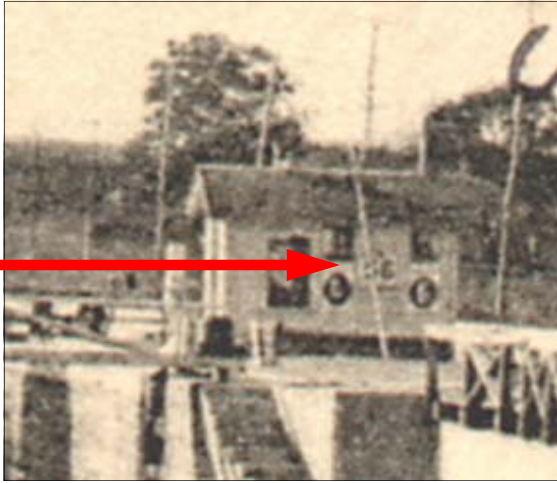


Middle Sector

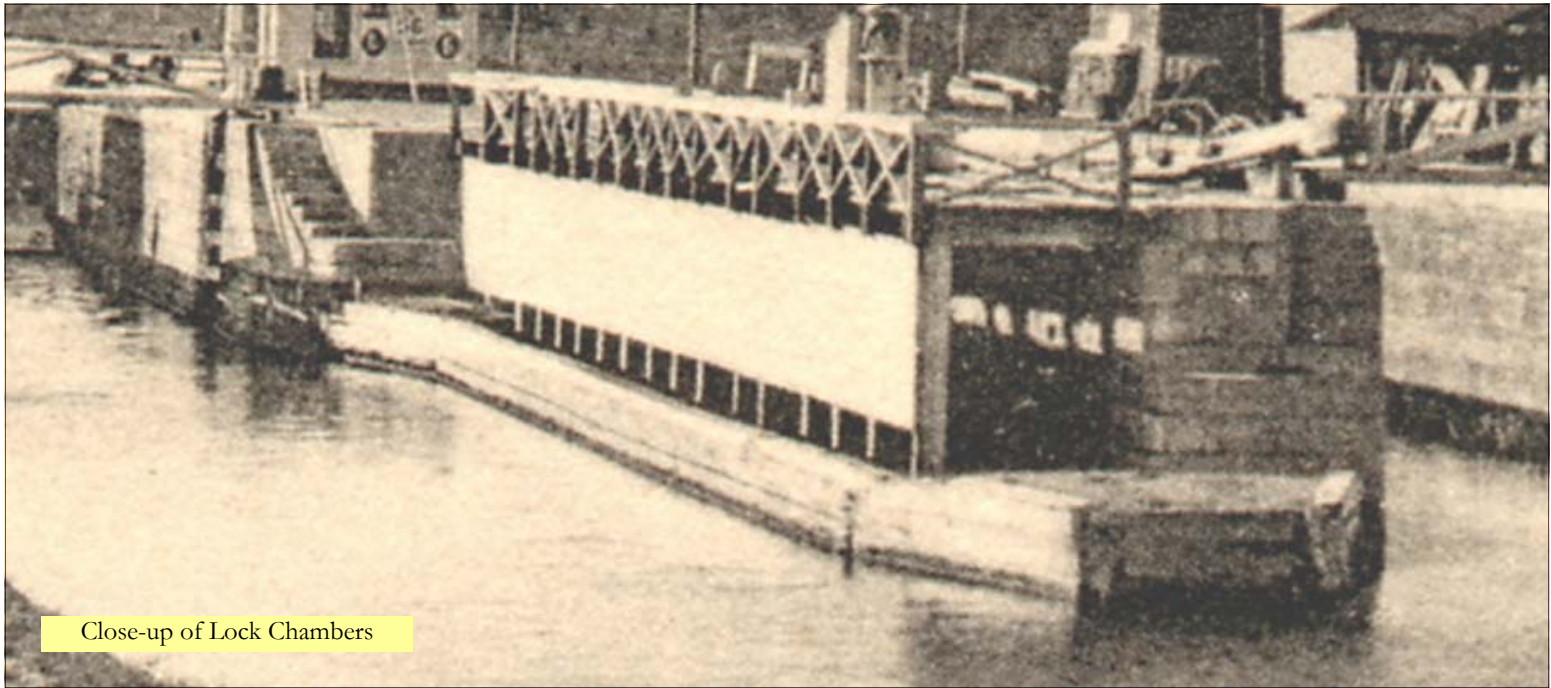


Panoramic of Lock Sector

Each Erie Canal Lock had a large sign showing the lock number. The number here can just be made out.



Close-up of Lock Bridge



Close-up of Lock Chambers