

# Speculation on the Enlarged Erie Canal Lock 56 and the Grocery\*

By John R. Groves\*

Sometimes when there is not concrete evidence to support a notion, speculation is a viable course of action. The E-56 site has defied any credible explanation as to why a building can exist so close to a lock chamber and be used privately as a “grocery” over a period of some 70 years. I believe that building has an interesting story to tell, even though there may not be credible evidence to support it.

In a court of law, what I’m presenting could be considered circumstantial evidence, that is, evidence based on circumstance or particular incidences that probably occurred in the mid 1800’s, when Peter Hill purchased and moved to the land.

## **Who Owned the Land**

Peter Hill came to Wayne County in 1835. That same year, the Canal Commission decided that the present canal system was too long, had too many locks and was simply not wide or deep enough to accommodate present or future boat traffic. Peter Hill was considered a prominent farmer in an area famous for peppermint. The H.G. Hotchkiss Co., an Erie Canal based industry, was world famous for Essential Oils, or peppermint oil. Peppermint was grown throughout the county as a major cash crop. Peter Hill, being a prominent farmer, probably grew peppermint for Hotchkiss. His farm’s close proximity and the fact that the land he owned was probably wetlands, supports this. Harvesting and shipping peppermint to the Hotchkiss works would have been relatively simple.

Peter Hill’s son, Edmund, born in 1835 (Junius, Seneca County), became a lawyer and practiced until 1879, when he inherited the 90 acre estate from his father, Peter Hill. The land was still under cultivation, which he continued. In 1879, the land was different. By then, it was bisected by the Enlarged Erie Canal and may not have been as much of a wetland, since the canal probably changed the ecosystem of that area. Therefore, it cannot be certain if the land was used entirely for peppermint growing.

## **What Happened to the Land and Building with the Advent of the Enlarged Erie Canal?**

I believe the following happened. Peter Hill, prior to 1839, lived in Junius, New York, a short distance from Lyons. Being a man of abilities he may have realized that there were better opportunities north in Wayne county, growing peppermint for Hotchkiss. He may have even been growing peppermint in Junius, but was losing money on poor land and costly shipping of his harvest. In any case he visited the Lyons area and purchased the land in 1839. The question is, were there buildings on the land at that time? I believe there were. I believe there was a barn and residence on that property. The barn exists today as the “grocery”. The residence, about fifty yards to the west (see map), may be discovered as ruins of a foundation sometime in the future. Peter Hill purchased the land, which had a residence and building, because he had a family (Edmund, born 1835) and he wanted to immediately begin his growing, without losing time in building construction. By 1839, it must have been well known that the canal was going to be built across his land; he may have even known about the lock. The person selling him the land certainly knew this and got “rid” of it because of the possible damage the canal would do to the land. Peter Hill took the risk, I think, because he got a good price for the acquisition.

## **What Circumstantial Evidence Supports the Theory of the “Grocery” Existing Before the Lock?**

First of all, we need to assume that Peter Hill was a peppermint farmer, prominent in the Lyons area. He had recently purchased the land where Lock E-56 is located. Then the land was “wetland”, very suitable for peppermint cultivation.

First of all if we look at the Enlarged Erie Canal as it crosses the land it does two things, first it bisects the land and second the canal itself is built as a causeway. To build a causeway across wetland requires that large amounts of dirt used for berms be moved. This dirt was taken nearby from what may have been Peter Hill’s peppermint

fields. This would have ruined his fields and caused significant economic loss. He was probably told to move the barn “grocery” from the lock site as well. Peter Hill complied, and began in 1840 to dismantle the barn, (wood being costly), to build at another site nearby. In 1841 his efforts to dismantle the barn and move it were done concurrently with those who were busy moving dirt and laying the lock pallet and the first few feet of the lock’s wall.

Then, suddenly, New York State ran out of money (1842). All canal construction stopped. There are serious doubts the canal will even be completed. Peter Hill, once compliant, was now outraged by having unnecessarily dismantled his barn and experienced the permanent destruction of his valuable land, which was moved to build the canal berm/causeway.

What would any of us do in this circumstance? I suspect that Peter Hill, already invested in the area, turned disaster into success. He continued to grow peppermint and waited, like everyone else to see what the State would do about the canal. What was left of the barn languished for the five years, until 1847, when canal construction resumed. Turning disaster into success for Peter Hill probably was expressed in the workings of a deal with the state.

Peter Hill may have asked, “In exchange for the damages to my land, will you allow me to keep the barn site intact and rebuild it into a business, alongside the lock?”. I think it was agreed to allow him to do that very thing. This may account for the fact that the building was on state land, as indicated by the blue line, yet allowed to exist as a private business. It is thought by some that the “grocery” was in fact built for the first time in 1847; I believe this is true to the extent that it was simply “rebuilt”, that is, converted from a barn to a canal side business.

A combination of extensive ecological damage to Peter Hill’s lands, with the subsequent stopping and starting of the canal’s construction produces a scenario that logically could have happened. But scenario’s are easy to create; is there any actual evidence of the prior existence of the buildings at the E-56 site? Yes, I believe there are.

There are maps at the DOT Offices in Syracuse which show a survey conducted on the Enlarged Erie Canal in 1862 This is about 30 or so years after the first survey of the Enlarged Erie Canal was done. The 1862 survey appears to have used the original prism survey (i.e. 1830’s) and was merely checking canal alignments. This is evident by the fact that the survey lines and notes are just written in ink and pencil over the top of the existing maps. Once this survey was completed, the atlas was rebound and labeled survey of 1862.

### **Why would the original Enlarged Erie Maps be used?**

1. They may have been readily available and saved the tedious effort of redrawing.
2. Superimposing 1862 canal alignments over the original maps may have served the purpose of discovering changes over a 20 or so year period.
3. There was no time or money to re-draw the maps in 1862; a period when the United States was engaged in a terrible civil war.

On map Section 69 (1862) is shown the Lyons E-56 lock. Clearly shown are two buildings, one labeled the “grocery” the other “barn”. In 1862 this may have been true. The barn being used for the profitable peppermint business, the “grocery” as a canal side business. There are some interesting features to be noted on this map section:

1. All the survey lines are drawn over the drawings of the buildings. This indicates they were added after this map was drawn.

2. The technique of drawing buildings is consistent with those used in the 1830's, that is, they have a shadow effect. This can be seen on other map sections in the 1862 atlas.
3. The "bleed" of the inks used in the building drawing is identical to that used to draw other original features on the map.
4. The word "grocery" appears to be added, mainly because the style of writing doesn't seem to be consistent with the style on the map. The style of writing on the map seems a bit formal to have been used in 1862, for a mere survey, indicating again its earlier origins.

The real question to be asked is when were these maps produced for the 1862 survey? Are they in fact extra copies of the 1830's maps reissued in 1862? In 1862, were the new maps made for the survey copied from the original 1830's map, which to be accurate must have included any building present. What is obvious, however, is the fact that it appears the buildings were there first, before the 1862 survey lines were added. The conclusion here is, if the 1862 survey maps were either original 1830's maps or accurate copies, then it seem reasonable to assume the buildings predate the lock.

Lastly, what actually was the building used for? Being outside, but nevertheless close by to Lyons and located very closely to a lock would indicate a very specialized use. Yes, there may have been some grocery business, however, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century most food was not preserved and was purchased fresh. Canal boats passing through the lock may not have had sufficient time to buy fresh produce and the tow volume of sales may have made selection limited. In the early 1800's and (still there today) Lyons had a large and easily accessible public square, which may have provided a greater variety of fresh farm goods for canallers and residents alike. So what would such a business supply the canaller? I think it was much like a truck stop, that we can encounter today where truck drivers can get the "stuff" they need, not found anywhere else. In the case of the canaller, this could be rope, wood for repairs, iron parts, tar for seams, liquor, feed for mules, mule harnesses, signal horns, sturdy clothes, pots and pans, paint and other essentials needed to operate line boats passing through. Boat captains might have even left orders to be picked up on return trips. Yes, there was some food available (preserved), but mainly I believe it was a very specialized, canal-oriented business. Those not familiar with the needs of canallers simply labeled it a "grocery" for the lack of a more suitable name. Possibly later, after 1900, it became more of a grocery, as more foods were preserved and canal needs changed.

The E-56 site is more than merely a lock and house. It is a bit of canal history which, when fully discovered may interpret our canal heritage much more than we know it now. It seems to have a story that involves not only canallers, but ordinary people like Peter Hill and his generations. It impacts on the canal history from the earliest days of the Enlarged Erie Canal to today. What we are doing now is a continuation of that history, the desire to restore the site. Anything that we do today will be a part of that story, yet to be learned, yet to be told.

*\*This article was originally written for The Erie Express, in the spring of 1996. At that time the author was fascinated by the location of the "grocery" and its proximity to Enlarged Erie Canal Lock #56.*

*The Erie Canal was an important transportation resource, much like the present New York State Thruway and every effort was made to keep it in operation. Among those efforts was the maintenance of the canal prism (prism is the cross-section of the canal) to prevent erosion leading to leakage. In this effort considerable attention was paid along the canal to ensure nothing encroached upon the prism.*

*At E-56, the "grocery" north foundation is literally part of the south berm. Did the state allow this structure to be built infringing on the berm or was it there before the lock? This mystery was the prime driver for the article presented here.*

*It combines fact with speculation. Much about this site is clearly un-documented. The article hopefully raises this awareness.*

# Chronology of Lock E-56 at Lyons, New York

*Lock E-56 is located about 1.5 miles west of the Village of Lyons and raised the level of the Enlarged Erie Canal 10.12 feet.*

**1840** - Preliminary site work was begun

**1841** - White Oak pallet located beneath the lock, for stabilization, was completed. Lock walls of the single chambered lock were built to a height of 3 feet.

**1842** - New York State instituted the Stop Act, during which time the state had no money for canal construction. Essentially the state was broke and there was serious thought whether the Enlarged Erie Canal would again be funded.

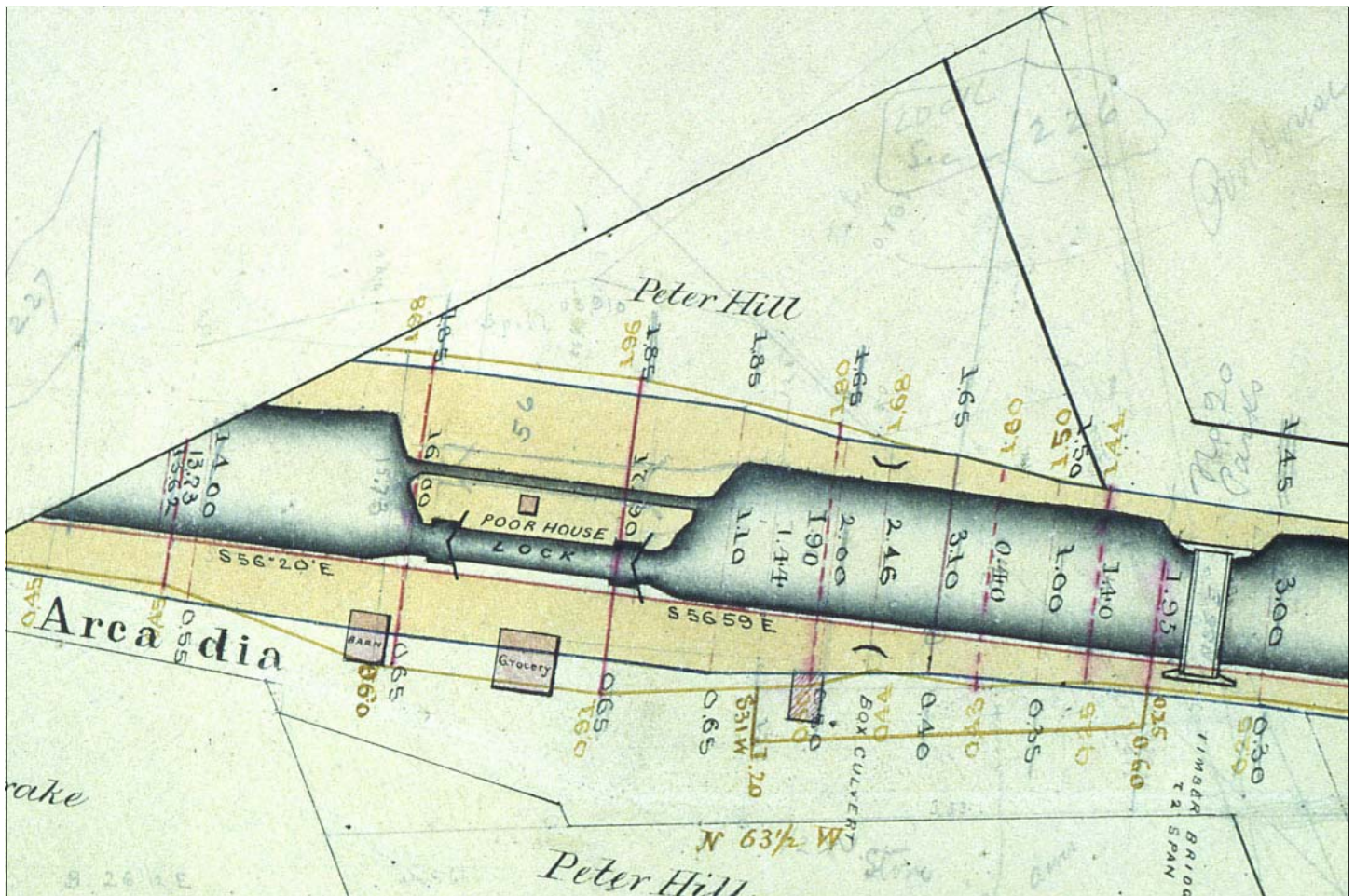
**1847** - Funds restored to the Enlarged Erie Canal project and work resumed on E-56.

**1849** - Lock E-56 was open and first used. It was a single chamber lock allowing only one-way traffic.

**1869** - Traffic increases and the need for greater speed at lock sites forced the Canal Commission to double locks along the enlarged Erie Canal. E-56's north chamber construction was begun this year.

**1874** - The north chamber was completed.

**1887** - Line boats on the canal were often tied together and towed as pairs. To accommodate these lengthened craft, locks were also lengthened. E-56's north chamber was the last such lock on the Enlarged Erie Canal to have a chamber lengthened. Sometime during this period (1885), tumble gates were also installed to speed lock operations. Tumble gates are located on the miter sill (high water) end of the lock and they could be simply dropped to speed transit of boats.



This is the 1862 Enlarged Erie Canal survey map mentioned in this article. The grocery is well within the blue line with other buildings nearby. A canal crossing bridge is seen east of the lock, from which early photographs were probably taken.