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Steamboat Celina Provided Efficient Shipping by Way of Canal

Matthew R. Ballard

Orleans County Department of History, matt.ballard@orleanscountyny.gov

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Steamboat *Celina* Provided Efficient Shipping by way of Canal



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Western New York and Orleans County owe its success and growth of the 19th century to the Erie Canal. Breaking through the wilderness of our region, the Canal opened the Niagara Frontier to the world, distributing raw materials and importing necessities. This image shows the steamboat *Celina* docked at the canal terminal at Medina. The White Hotel is likely the most recognizable landmark in this photograph.

Part of the Buffalo & Rochester Transit Company's Steamboat Express line, the *Celina* was regarded as one of the earlier freight steamers in this area. The vessel was operated by James Chamberlain and Judson Webster, father-in-law of Charlie Howard. The company operated eight boats in total, including the *John Owens*, *C.H. Francis*, *William B. Kirk*, *C.H. Johnson*, *Frankie Reynolds*, *Tacoma*, *Deland*, *Consort*, and *Celina*. Ruth Webster Howard recalled riding on this boat, stopping at Medina for dinner at the stately White Hotel. In 1902 the company was purchased by a group of wealthy investors in Rochester and merged with the Rochester &

Syracuse Steamboat Company. Judson Webster had sold his interest in the business in 1901 to Isaac Radford, a real estate dealer in Buffalo.

Hazel Oderkirk Arnett, another resident of Orleans County, recalled life on the Erie Canal at the turn of the century. Before the years of steamboats, bullheads, lakers, and scows were the common vessels operated on the waterway. Pulled by teams of mules, the boats travelled approximately 3 miles per hour and a trip from Buffalo to Troy was 7-10 days. Mules were stabled in the hull of the scow and Hazel recalled, "The bridge which led up from the stables in the hole to the bank was narrow, steep and often slippery. Mules were ordinarily surefooted but sometimes they didn't negotiate the trip. There was no way to save them once they were in the canal. I remember that the sight of dead mules floating in the canal was not too rare a sight."

To a young child, the trips were uneventful and lacking in excitement. The trip was broken up by the occasional visit to canal stores located along the canal path, where boaters could stock up on supplies to feed the crew and family onboard. Upon reaching Albany, boats were grouped together and pulled to New York City by steam vessels. Today, the canal is emptied in November and filled in May; a typical operating season in the 19th century ran April 1st through December 1st and boats were dry-docked for the winter.

According to Cary Lattin, shipping goods such as wheat cost farmers approximately \$.25 per bushel before the Erie Canal was completed. After 1825, the price dropped to \$5.00 per ton, allowing Western New York to become the "bread basket of the world."