

## **The Little Falls Cheese History Trail**

### **Stage 2: CANAL PLACE AND BENTON'S LANDING**

A light-controlled crosswalk leads you across busy Route 5 to the train underpass. On the way through, admire the work of local artist Oscar Stivala, whose colorful, fanciful mural is the first stage of improvement for this underpass. At the top of the stairs on the south side of Little Falls, the Piccolo Cafe restaurant is to your left, in the building that was once the Little Falls railway station. In front of it is Showcase Antiques, on a site that was once a canal basin. Picture the basin jammed with barges, a few unloading, but most loading with those distinctive round cheese boxes. This basin was reached by an extension of the canal that came between present-day Ann Street Deli and George's Lumber--walk over to the gap between the two to see where the canal once lay. Also to the left is one of Feldmeier's local production facilities.

Continue along Ann Street and onto the bridge over the scenic Mohawk River. A few yards downstream (viewed from the left, or south, side of the bridge), observe two manmade piles of rocks. These are the remnants of the supports for the aqueduct that carried the canal extension over to the basin (the aqueduct was essential a water bridge for boats). Its route towards the former basin is now barred by buildings. Proceed across the bridge and you'll find another display board with the story of the aqueduct and a period illustration of it to help you envision what a "water bridge" looked like; notice a boat upon it and displaced water spilling over the sides. Upstream, or from the north side of this bridge, you can admire the main area of rapids and waterfalls that give Little Falls its name, and which the Canal had to bypass.

Complete the trail by climbing the few steps onto flag-bedecked Benton's Landing, on the Erie Canal. On the back of what looks like a small garden shed you can find out who Benton was.

Picture the canal of 1870 bustling with barges drawn by mules plodding steadily along the towpath. Just to your left is where cheese-laden barges emerged from the canal extension (where the black rails end) and turn left, carrying their load to New York City, perhaps ultimately bound for Europe. In those days, the canal was narrower than the

present one and barges leaving the extension had to merge with the main canal traffic and compete for a place in the lock just yards downstream. Today we have road rage, but back then “canal rage” often led to fistfights as bargemen sought a place in the locks.

This canal made the United States what it is today. Through here came the farmers of Vermont and New York seeking better, cheaper land. Through here came thousands of immigrants seeking a better life out West. Through here, carrying all they possessed, came many of those who went on to cross the Great Plains in covered wagons. Hammers and nails, saws and axes, furniture and cooking pots, farm tools and implements, clothes and bedding, and most of what was needed was carried on barges, gliding by in a steady parade at walking pace. Coming back from the West were wheat and flour, lumber and cotton from the newly opened lands of the interior. The Erie Canal was the main commerce road of its day, connecting the young land’s interior with the major market hubs and harbors of the East Coast.

If you’ve remembered to take a picnic with you, there are benches here just waiting for you to enjoy. If you haven’t, back over the bridge you can find coffee or ice cream, lunch or dinner.

From here you can return to the Festival, or continue along the canal for Stage 3 of the Cheese Trail.