

The Little Falls Cheese History Trail

Stage 3: MOSS ISLAND AND LOCK 17

From Benton's Landing, follow the road downstream, or east, along the canal bank. Geese, ducks, and herons are common here, buzzards wheel and soar overhead on updrafts, there's the occasional cormorant, and a bald eagle puts in a rare appearance. The roadway dips, reminding us that the canal is in an artificial cut, now well above river level. The old brick building on the left, once used by the Adirondack Woolen Company, is a reminder that this area of grass and trees was once a jumble of small factories, crowded into the narrow space between the placid Canal and the rapids of the Mohawk River.

Further on a grating forms a bridge over rushing waters surging from canal to river. This is the site of a Hydroelectric power station; the rush of water generates some 13 MW of power. Yes, this would be more than enough to power the City of Little Falls, but these days, all goes into the national grid. The strange machine on rails on the canal side collects trees and other river borne debris to keep the power station intakes clear. To the left, the river is now well below canal level, and the last of the rapids and waterfalls are visible.

Beyond is rocky Moss Island. The small brown shed is a recently installed composting toilet, open for public use. The rocks of Moss Island provide ideal training and practice grounds for rock climbers, and there are few weekends without brightly colored ropes hanging from the crest of the cliff, climbers clinging to the rock wall like flies, and knots of observers below offering helpful advice.

Should a train pass, it will be on the north side of the river, but strong echoes may make you think it was on the south side of the canal. There once was a railway there, but it is now being converted into a trailway, which, when complete, will stretch from Albany to Buffalo. Those steep slopes do more than create echoes. Legend tells of young Mohawk lovers being pursued by the tribe and, in desperation, leaping from the clifftop to their deaths on the rocks below.

A jagged rock face juts out over the path, and beyond that lies Lock 17. Built barely a century ago, it was once the highest lift of any canal

lock *in the world!* It still lifts traffic higher than any lock on the Panama Canal. Like all Erie Canal locks, it is a public park, and the lockkeeper will be happy to explain how it all works. He can tell you if there is any traffic due to arrive, in which case you might wait to see the gates in action and the boats being raised or lowered from one level to the next—a fascinating process. These are recreational boaters, from all over the world. They pass this way either heading east to the Hudson River and beyond, or to the west towards the Great Lakes. While the lock fills, you may be able to chat with them and hear about their adventures. No, the Canal presently is not being used for commerce.

From the east side of the lock, look down to the south side of the long, curving road bridge over the river. The stonework you see is the lock from an earlier version of the canal. To see it more closely, negotiate the steep metal stairs at the southeast corner of Lock 17.

There are trails on Moss Island, but these are rough trails, and poison ivy is known to be at the eastern end of the island. Still, if you are curious, careful, and wearing good walking shoes, you may enjoy a short hike over criss-crossing trails through shady woods that feature lowbush blueberries, ferns, and yes, moss.

Remember that jagged rock you passed earlier? On the way back towards town, see if you can see the profile of someone you recognize; it isn't called "Profile Rock" for nothing. Keep an eye open for more birds, and imagine the canal almost a century ago when it was freshly opened. Steam power had replaced mules, and the deep-laden barges puffed and spluttered along. Once a major artery of commerce, the canal has earned its place as a historical monument to the growth and development of the modern United States, and is now an important leisure and recreation resource. Enjoy.