

D&H Transportation Heritage Council

July 23, 2025 Meeting Minutes

Held at the Ellenville Public Library, Ellenville, NY

Participants:

President Bill Merchant, D&H Canal Historical Society and Museum, High Falls
Vice-President Cliff Robinson, Jr., Neversink Feeder and Canal Conservancy
Secretary Laurie Ramie, Upper Delaware Council
Treasurer Donna Durland, Mamakating Historical Society
Sean Moore, Sullivan County Delaware & Hudson Canal Interpretive Center, Summitville
Bob Johnston, Lock 50 Interpretive Center, Summitville
Kenny Christianson, Lackawaxen River Conservancy and Rowland Cooperative
Janet Lybolt, Village of Wurtsboro D&H Canal Bicentennial Planning Committee Co-chair
Debbie Bigelisen, Phillipsport Community Center
Kerron Barnes, Town of Mamakating; Wurtsboro Bicentennial Planning Committee Co-chair
Virdanna Lawrence, Town of Mamakating and Village of Wurtsboro Historian
Sally Talaga, Wayne County Historical Society, D&H Canal Park at Lock 31
Bill Dudko, Town of Deerpark 1863 Schoolhouse Museum, Huguenot
Judy Gumaer Testa, Neversink Valley Museum of History and Innovation, Cuddebackville
David Lybolt, Mamakating Local Development Corporation
Bill Bollinger, Bollinger & Rutter Video Services

Call to Order: President Merchant called the business meeting held at the Ellenville Public Library to order at 1:05 p.m. following an optional morning walk on the NY O&W Trail in Ellenville and lunch at Ricke Lens Restaurant in Napanoch.

Acceptance of April 23, 2025 DHTHC Minutes: On a **motion** by Durland, seconded by Bigelisen, the April minutes were approved, with all in favor.

Treasurer's Report: Durland provided a written financial report showing transactions with an end balance of \$2,115.04 as of 7/23 and a list of 16 paid members. Several individuals handed her 2025 dues on behalf of their organizations.

October Meeting Plans: Merchant said the DHTHC's regular 3rd Wednesday date on **October 22** happens to coincide with the re-enactment of the 365-mile journey of *The Seneca Chief* packet boat down the length of the Erie Canal, on to New York City. The boat will be in residence at the Hudson River Maritime Museum on October 22-23. This would be a good opportunity to meet there in Kingston and request an exclusive tour. Members agreed that Merchant should contact the museum's new education director to make those arrangements. He noted that we previously toured *The Lois McClure* boat at this site.

Bylaws Revision: Ramie reported that the following clause was proposed to be added to the DHTHC Bylaws to Article V. Officers, Section 2. Nomination and Election of the Board of Trustees officers: "g. If any trustee is absent without notice from more than four consecutive Board of Trustees meeting, those unexcused absences will be regarded as a resignation from the Board." Notice of this proposed change was circulated for review to the full membership on June 27. Talaga said the motivation is to assure a quorum for Trustee meetings, which take place four times a year in Narrowsburg, NY and/or by Zoom. Merchant said the trustees serve as the required fiduciaries for this 501(c)3 organization in full that now meets three times per year. On a **motion** by Durland, seconded by Bigelisen, the DHTHC bylaws change was approved, with all in favor. There are currently eight trustees following Barnes' decision to step down in favor of

remaining on this larger committee and Don Drewett's resignation by default, according to Ramie. The eight trustees are Merchant, Robinson, Durland, Ramie, Talaga, Gumaer Testa, Christianson, and Jane Varcoe. Merchant invited anyone interested in joining the Board of Trustees to please contact him. He added that one outgrowth of the Council's 501(c)3 designation is that the DHTHC could serve as trail stewards for any maintenance coverage gaps in the Open Space Institute's trails expansion project. Robinson said he would like to meet with OSI representatives before any final decisions are made on the trail route involving D&H towpaths.

Reports on 200th Anniversary Events: Barnes said that the D&H Canal Bicentennial Celebration in Wurtsboro on July 13 was a wonderful day. U.S. Congressman Josh Riley, NYS Assembly Member Paula Kay, and Senator Peter Oberacker's aide Camille O'Brien were all there, along with many descendants from the Wurts and Dr. Morrison families. It kicked off with a parade featuring cannon fire and the ringing of church bells. The processional ended at Dr. Morrison's home where the 85 Sullivan Street property owners coordinated the set-up of living history displays, activities, and musical performances. The New York State Policy provided safety, the Mamakating Library handled communications, Sullivan Catskills Visitors Association did publicity, Janet Lybolt co-chaired the planning committee and oversaw the groundbreaking reenactment ceremony, David Lybolt read an excerpt of Phillip Hone's historic speech, and there was coverage by at least two newspapers. William Wurts donated a painting to the Town of Mamakating. The evening's costume ball had 70-80 guests. Barnes provided copies of the events poster, promotional postcard, the lunch invitation for dignitaries, and the Bicentennial 2025 calendar that Kohl's subsidized for the DHTHC records. The program lists all of the organizers. One very positive outcome of this whole event was that it created a committee structure for the town that can be reactivated in the future. They are doing a time capsule next. Merchant commented that it was a very nice day but there was never any mention in the print materials or the speeches of the DHTHC as the organization which had initiated the 200th anniversary planning. J. Lybolt said there were a lot of moving parts to this over the one year and 5 months of planning, so she apologizes for that oversight. She said there were nine adults and two children from the Wurts family across the country that had never met each other. This was a good "Wurts-stock" reunion occasion for them and they were excited over how their lineage's significance to the region's history continues to be commemorated. The free activities at the Morrison property included beeswax candle making, a historical fashion show, operation of a bilge pump, old-time photos, homemade ice cream churning, and horse & wagon rides. They hired the Sullivan County Department of Public Works to paint red, white & blue stripes down Sullivan Street. The banners looked great and a new mural was unveiled. Lawrence said she led the Wurts family on a walking tour, Barnes guided a Towpath trail walk, and the Mamakating Library did a storybook project on the canal with 16 stanchions set up. That will continue that project going towards Ferguson Lane with the children's book selection changing quarterly. Lybolt said the time capsule will be buried on **Sept. 13** during an 11 a.m. ceremony at the library. She welcomes DHTHC to contribute any items. The capsule will be opened in 50 years. Durland reported that the Wurts family said they'll come back in 2028 when we commemorate the closing the D&H Canal.

The D&H Canal Historical Society in High Falls held its Canawler's Days on June 14 and 15 during the NYS Path through History weekend. On a rainy Saturday, they had around 60-75 participants and closer to 175 when conditions improved on Sunday. Dolly and Daisy, the towpath mules, were big hits in providing free wagon rides to 5 Locks Walk. Next year, they will plan this event for later in June and book the mules for both days. The hands-on activities were popular. Bigelisen attended in period costume.

Merchant presented a "Postcard History of the D&H Canal" slideshow on July 12 at the Lock 50 Interpretive Center that was recorded and will be featured on the D&H TV platform. He's open to offering this presentation for other 200th anniversary events. He will present "The D&H Canal and Gravity Railroad on its 200th Anniversary" on July 25 at High Falls, "John Roebling and the

D&H Canal” on **Sept. 21** at 3 p.m. at the 1863 Schoolhouse in Huguenot for the Town of Deerpark Museum, and “Engineers of the D&H Canal” for the New Paltz Historical Society in October. The D&H Canal Historical Society’s annual gala will take place on **Sept. 27** at the Wiltwyck Country Club in Kingston with the theme of “J.P. Morgan, John Roebling, and the D&H Canal Company in the Gilded Age.”

2026 200th Anniversary Planning: 2026 will represent the third year of 200th anniversary commemorative events. As mentioned, Merchant is considering **June 27-28, 2026** as the dates for another Canawler Festival. Members can think about other events for discussion at the next meeting. The year 2027 can mark when the canal opened from Port Jervis to Rondout. 2029 will be Wayne County’s turn to commemorate the Stourbridge Lion.

National Register Revision: Merchant reported that he continues to wait for the National Park Service to complete its review of the D&H Canal’s National Register of Historic Places listing update documentation that he submitted in 2023. He’s about 80% finished with the guidebook that he is writing to accompany the listing but won’t release that until the National Register revision is done. There has also been no movement on a proposed National Historic Trail designation for the D&H Canal, though it got so far as to craft legislation under U.S. Congressman Pat Ryan’s tenure a year and a half ago before his District boundary changed. New U.S. Congressman Josh Riley (NY’s 19th District) attended the Wurtsboro D&H celebration but Merchant said he didn’t have any opportunity to speak with him and will send a message asking about this bill’s sponsorship. This is a non-controversial, nonpartisan initiative, he said. J. Lybolt offered to assist Merchant with the outreach to Rep. Riley.

Announcements of Member Accomplishments, Concerns, and Upcoming Events:

Kenny Christianson – The Rowland Cooperative is now open seven days a week. They are working with local farmers and offering classes such as flower arranging for the public. The Lackawaxen River Conservancy gave up on the idea of seeking National Wild and Scenic River designation for the Lackawaxen due to a lack of support. They will hold their Day on the River Aug. 2 at 206 Towpath Road in Rowland with a National Park Service ranger presentation on butterflies.

Janet Lybolt – Their next event will be the time capsule burial on **Sept. 13**, to which everyone is invited.

David Lybolt – Barnes wrote the successful application for a \$38,500 Sullivan County Legislature grant that paid for the 200th anniversary event in Wurtsboro.

Sean Moore/Bob Johnston – The D&H Canal Interpretive Center in Summitville for which Moore serves as the site manager has hired Bob Johnston as a new staff member. Johnston said this has been a complete eye-opening experience for him. He had never heard of this group before. He is pleased and impressed with the way that Sullivan County supports its history. Moore said that his long-term goal to host students from the Emma Chase Elementary School in Wurtsboro was fulfilled with four groups coming to tour the center and grounds. They provided advance lessons in the classroom as well. He hopes this sets an annual precedent for return visits. Fiona Feltman from the Sullivan County Parks division is helping with a campaign to encourage young people’s interest in history. Moore asked whether anyone has experience with bringing historians into schools. Bigelisen noted that she is a licensed teacher in NYS and would volunteer to go into classrooms to offer D&H Canal lessons if needed. Gumaer Testa said she interpreted history from 1779 over a three-day period in Kelly Decker’s classroom at the Port Jervis School which was well-received. The Interpretive Center hosted lectures recently by Sullivan County Historian John Conway, Merchant with the postcard history, and on **August 16**, Robinson will

speak about the Port Jervis to Phillipsport section of the D&H Canal in a 2 p.m. program. Moore handed out copies of the Shawangunk Journal that included D&H Bicentennial coverage.

Kerron Barnes – He conveyed to Moore that he had received a grant from Sullivan 180 to talk to 5th grade classes at Chase School about local canal history, then students were bused two blocks for a program in which their ideas for the park were submitted to the Town of Mamakating. Every student received a piece of anthracite. Chase School's principal is interested in the canal as a resource. An art teacher selected a 1,500 foot-section of the canal towpath for a plein air program also. Barnes passed around copies of Sullivan County's updated O&W Trail brochures. He has packages of these to distribute if anyone would like a supply.

Bill Dudko – He serves as vice-president of the Town of Deerpark Museum board, which will host Frank Salvati on July 27 on the topic of the "Pahaquarry Copper Mines & Old Mine Road." The historical society also has the responsibility to maintain the old Grange Hall now. They need more help but it's hard to get people involved. Norma Schadt continues to do amazing work as the town historian at the age of 90. They have a new display on silent films that were shot in the region and are trying to reorganize their files.

Debbie Bigelisen – The Phillipsport Community Center will host their "Grateful We're Not Dead" concert at the Poplar Grove Cemetery on August 2. She will bring maps and brochures to the Borscht Belt Museum. Bigelisen has a monthly food column in the Shawangunk Journal for which she welcomes receiving recipes.

Laurie Ramie – The Upper Delaware Council has two of its signature events coming up, the 37th Annual Family Raft Trip on Aug. 3 from Barryville to Pond Eddy and the 37th Annual River Valley Awards on **Sept. 14** at Central House Family Resort in Beach Lake, PA, for which public nominations in numerous categories are being accepted until **August 11**. See details and forms at www.upperdelawarecouncil.org, Facebook and Instagram.

Virdanna Lawrence – She will be displaying historic collections at the Summitville Schoolhouse Museum and has been conducting walking tours in Wurtsboro offered by the Town of Mamakating and the Mamakating Historical Society. She continues to work on Revolutionary War 250th anniversary preparations as well.

Donna Durland – The Mamakating Historical Society's Summitville Schoolhouse Museum is open on Wednesdays from 6-8 p.m. and the first and third Saturdays from 12-2 p.m. Dave Lewis took their Longhouse Display to the 4th grade class at Pine Bush Elementary School in May. It generated a lot of attention from the children.

Sally Talaga – She served as guest curator for a new exhibit at the Wayne County Historical Society's main museum in Honesdale which opened on May 3. It offers 13 large prints by Thomas Johnson, a Scranton photographer who was hired by the D&H Canal Company around 1863 to document the canal's operation from taking coal out of the ground to the breakers to the Gravity Railroad. Twenty-three of his 31 glass plate photos were donated to their collection in 1923. Captions provide details for each of the images. This Torrey Gallery exhibit will be in place for one year or more. On May 29, 4th graders from three school districts visited the D&H Canal Park at Lock 31 and the Dorflinger Glass Works at no cost. The organizations provided materials and resource links to the Local History Club at Wallenpaupack High School, who served as the docents for the younger students. Talaga distributed the WCHS 2025 events schedule. The 12th Annual Canal Festival will be held on **August 16** from 10-4 at the canal park in Hawley. It's intended to be the last one as they shift their programming until they can get more volunteers and sponsors. Visitors will not be able to enter the Lock 31 house. They are under a Stop Work order since a truck ran into a corner of the 1820 Daniels farmhouse last September, which shifted the

structure off its foundation and damaged the plaster. They must assure that it's structurally sound before they can get a building permit and inspection. It will be repaired using the insurance settlement. Her volunteer offer to convert Locktender House #33 in White Mills that Dr. Walter Barbe had restored into an Airbnb is still under consideration by the Dorflinger Suydam Wildlife Sanctuary.

Judy Gumaer Testa – Reporting as secretary of the Neversink Valley Museum of History and Innovation, Gumaer Testa said they have remained locked out of the facility since Fall 2022 over a property dispute with Orange County after the county decided to restructure their parks system. Since then the board has lost its chairman, Steve Skye, and historian, Seth Goldman, to death. Merchant said there was a claim that the organization would not turn over financial data. Gumaer Testa replied that only pertained to revealing the identity and personal information of donors or non-public documents. Merchant wondered if the board has been submitting IRS 990 reports. If that has not occurred for three years, the organization would be automatically dissolved. He advises that they call a meeting to elect a board and revitalize their membership since Executive Director David Lawrence has no legal standing otherwise.

Cliff Robinson, Jr. – He met with Orange County Department of Parks, Recreation, and Conservation Director Travis Ewald a couple times about the damaged Neversink Feeder Dam in Cuddebackville that he's been working on since 2009. They walked the site to discuss the report by an engineering firm commissioned by Orange County which had estimated costs of \$2.3 million to \$5.7 million to repair or rebuild it. Robinson wrote a retort disagreeing with that report's conclusions and provided what he considers to be a simpler, non-bureaucratic, and far less expensive solution to fill in a hole, use gabion cages, and secure them with mounds of dirt. That could be accomplished in a couple of days. He consulted with a New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) representative about this plan. It's not their jurisdiction if the dam is below 6 feet tall and isn't on state-owned property, but the county could ask NYS to investigate it. Ewald indicated that he's willing to meet again at the site toward the end of August. D. Lybolt suggested that Robinson arrange to have the DEC representative there at the same time. Robinson said he hasn't given up on this. Orange County has made some wonderful improvements to that site, but there's still no access to this feeder and it hasn't had water in it for 10 years. Robinson said he's looking forward to the World Canals Conference in Buffalo from **Sept. 21-25**. Immediately afterwards, he is organizing a tour from **Sept. 25-29** to see other sites in New York (Letchworth State Park, Corning Museum of Glass, several waterfalls) and D&H Canal sites (Roebing's Delaware Aqueduct, Wurtsboro, the Neversink Aqueduct, High Falls, and Kingston). He will have a 15-passenger van for transportation and hotel lodging is also included in the \$950 per person cost. Contact him for further details.

Bill Merchant – Merchant displayed a photo he had bought on eBay three months ago of an upside down Model T Ford at Lock 50, which proves the lore that has always existed about a car at the Pie Lock. He's unsure if it's still there or not.

Other Business:

- 1) **DHTHC Historic DVDs** – The DHTHC has restocked its chapters of the historic DVD series that were low or depleted. Bollinger went to New Jersey to pick up the order. Since the new company gave extras, the Council needed to purchase additional jewel cases which Durland handled. The cost was \$576 to copy 400 DVDs. For the Chapter 6 video, Bollinger wants to focus on cement, bluestone, and topics that haven't been covered yet like the guard lock. He will wait until the leaves are down in November to do more filming and work with Merchant to arrange sit-down interviews in the meantime. Chapter 6 will be the end of the series but the group has discussed filming a 7th video that would encompass the entire canal and gravity railroad system, showing excerpts from the prior

videos and providing contact information for each DHTHC member site. Talaga said she would like to re-shoot or update the images of the Lock 31 property because that has changed so significantly since the first DVD's release. Bollinger reminded everyone that if they are playing the DVDs for public viewings, he prefers to provide high-definition files to retain their visual quality. Just contact him to request the files. Merchant said he also has those hi-def files and added that DVD chapters are available today for wholesale purchase. When the DHTHC can afford to update its website, we will be sure to do it on a platform that allows the videos to be posted.

- 2) **Facebook Page** – Ramie said that Barnes would like to be removed as an administrator of the DHTHC Facebook page to discontinue the notifications but she had not been successful in trying to do that although she also has administrator status. Merchant said he will handle it. Ramie encouraged everyone to like and follow this organization on Facebook, where we post new content frequently.

Next Trustees Meeting: The next DHTHC Board of Trustees meeting will be on the 4th Wednesday, **September 24**, at noon at 211 Bridge St., Narrowsburg, NY or by Zoom.

Next Council Meeting: The DHTHC full membership will meet on the 4th Wednesday, **October 22**, at the Hudson River Maritime Museum in Kingston. Confirmed details will be sent in advance.

Adjourn: The July 23, 2025 DHTHC meeting adjourned at 3:33 p.m. on a **motion** by Moore, seconded by Durland, with all in favor.

Minutes submitted by Secretary Laurie Ramie, 8/5/25