

National Canal Museum

30 Centre Square
Easton, PA 18042

<http://www.canals.org>

610-559-6613

Delaware Canal

Although it functioned as an extension of the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company's Lehigh Navigation, the Delaware Canal was constructed by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as a part of its state-owned canal system. The Delaware Division was authorized by the Pennsylvania Legislature on April 9, 1827, and construction began later that year. The 60 mile long canal was built along the west bank of the Delaware River from navigable water at Bristol, to Easton, where it connected with the Lehigh Navigation. It employed 23 lift locks, a guard lock, a tide lock and nine aqueducts to climb 165 feet to Easton's elevation.

Unfortunately, the contractors hired by the Commonwealth to construct the Delaware Canal proved to be incompetent, and when opened in 1832, the waterway leaked so badly that it was soon shut down. The Pennsylvania Canal Commissioners then asked Josiah White, co-founder of the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company to rebuild the Delaware Division. Although he had initially opposed the construction of the canal, preferring instead to improve the Delaware River through the use of dams, locks, slackwater pools and chutes. White realized the value of the Delaware Canal to his own Lehigh Navigation. He rebuilt the canal, but was not permitted to widen its 11 foot wide locks to match the 22 foot width of the Lehigh Navigation's locks. This greatly hindered the development of both waterways since it effectively imposed a 100-ton cargo limit on any vessel that planned to use both waterways. Lehigh Coal and Navigation had constructed a dam across the mouth of the Lehigh River to supply the water necessary to operate the Delaware Canal, but White found it necessary to design a waterwheel pumping device built near New Hope to supply additional water for the lower sections of the Canal. Josiah White did his task well, and in 1834 the Delaware Canal was reopened for navigation.

The Delaware Canal carried a large part of the Lehigh Navigation's anthracite traffic onward to Philadelphia. Traffic increased after 1848 when an outlet lock and cable ferry was constructed at New Hope to connect it with New Jersey's Delaware and Raritan Canal feeder at Lambertville. The Delaware Division was the only consistently profitable part of the state-owned canal system. However, the debts of the rest of the state-operated canal system forced Pennsylvania to sell its canals. On April 21, 1858, the Delaware Canal was sold to the Sunbury and Erie Railroad which in turn sold it to the Delaware Division Canal Company, a subsidiary of the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company. The peak traffic volume on the Delaware Canal was reached in 1860 when 792,000 tons of cargo passed through it. However, a gradual decline in cargo tonnage soon became apparent. By 1900 less than 250,000 tons of coal was transported on the Delaware Canal and by 1915 this volume had fallen to 135,000 tons per year. In 1923 the connection to the Delaware and Raritan Canal was severed. In 1931, 65,600 tons of anthracite passed from the Lehigh Navigation to the Delaware Canal and the canal was formally closed. However, due to the demands of coal dealers who could not readily find an alternative source of anthracite, the Delaware Canal was briefly reopened during

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1932. After almost a decade of legal wrangling, the abandoned canal became the Roosevelt State Park, and in 1978 it became a National Historic Landmark. It remains today the most intact of all of America's towpath canals.

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