Traveling Along the Canal

The completion of the Champlain Canal in 1823 transformed Whitehall from a minor port at the head of Lake Champlain into a bustling transhipment point for goods destined for Troy, Albany, New York City, Buffalo and the West. Lumberyards, icehouses and shipyards soon stretched along the waterfront from the lock to "Fiddler's Elbow," a tight turn in Wood Creek half a mile from the village. Hotels, taverns and shops served the parade of travelers. Stables and mule barns provided winter quarters for hundreds of animals. Canal families came to call Whitehall home and their boats filled up the harbor when ice brought navigation to a stop.

Whitehall Harbor in 1823, the year the canal was completed to Waterford.

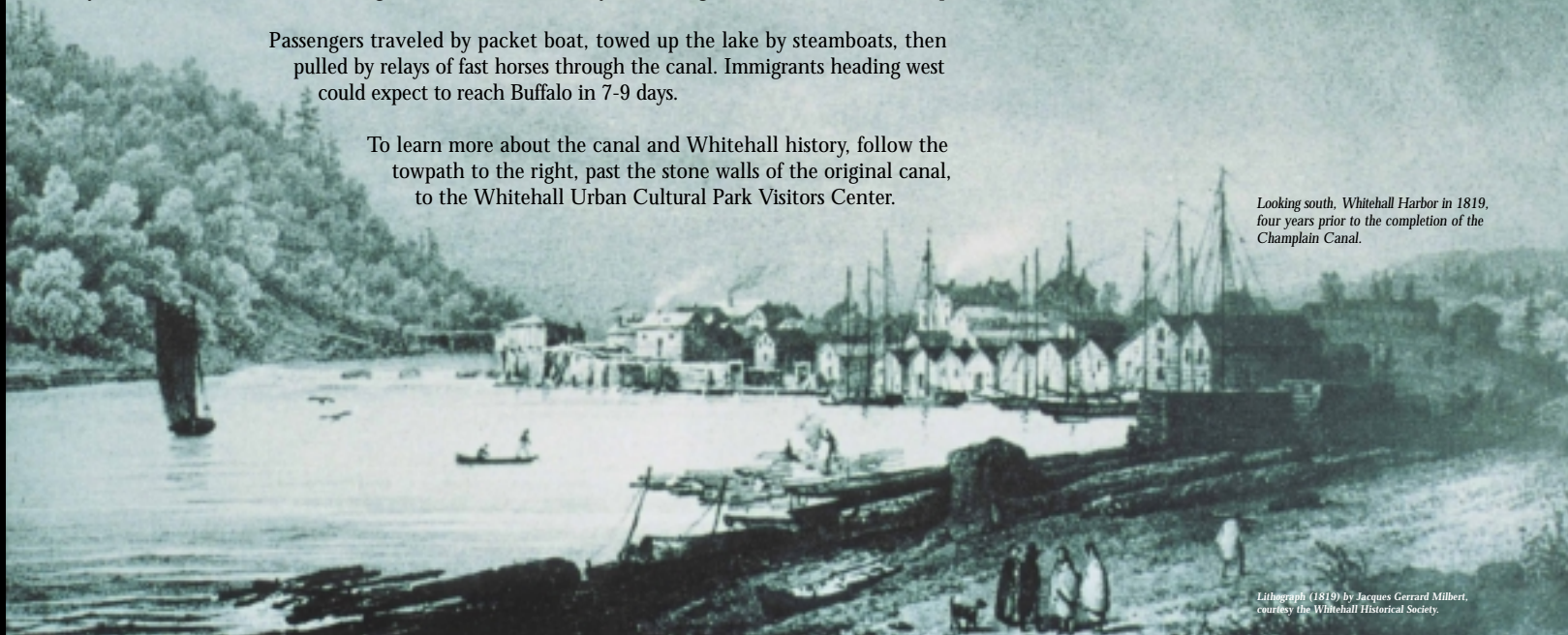Courtesy the Whitehall Historical Society. Artist unknown.

During the 19th century, sailing vessels and canal boats brought lumber from Canada to be planed in the mills of Whitehall Harbor and shipped south. Pulp wood was also a large cargo.

Day Before Yesterday, Doris B. Morton, courtesy the Whitehall Historical Society.

Before the arrival of the railroad during the mid-19th century, passengers enjoyed travel between Whitehall and the Hudson River on horse-drawn packet boats.

Enhanced adaptation from lantern slide, courtesy the Liberty Eatery, Whitehall, NY.

Cargo sloops and schooners packed the wharves waiting to transfer their loads of lumber, iron ore and marble to canal boats small enough to fit through the locks. Soon ingenious shipbuilders designed a sailing canal boat that could raise its centerboard, lower its masts, hitch a towline to a mule and move directly into the canal. Owners of sailing canal boats saved 4-5 days of waiting at the wharves on each trip.

Passengers traveled by packet boat, towed up the lake by steamboats, then pulled by relays of fast horses through the canal. Immigrants heading west could expect to reach Buffalo in 7-9 days.

To learn more about the canal and Whitehall history, follow the towpath to the right, past the stone walls of the original canal, to the Whitehall Urban Cultural Park Visitors Center.

Looking south, Whitehall Harbor in 1819, four years prior to the completion of the Champlain Canal.

Lithograph (1819) by Jacques Gerrard Milbert, courtesy the Whitehall Historical Society.