

# The Farmington Canal 1828-1847

The Farmington Canal was the longest canal in New England & is on the National Register of Historic Places. It connected New Haven to Northampton, Massachusetts and the upper Connecticut River Valley. A plan to build it began in Farmington on May 1822. At that time, Farmington was Connecticut's third largest town, so it had a large role in the planning & financing of the canal project. The privately financed Farmington Canal Company was formed & construction began in 1825.



The essential ingredient for the success of this canal was an adequate water supply and this came from Unionville. A 10 foot high stone Feeder Dam was built across the Farmington River opposite today's Farmington Town Hall. The 3 mile long Feeder Canal carried river water from the Dam to the Farmington Canal, ending just west of the Aqueduct. Unionville's Feeder Canal was the major source of water for the Farmington Canal in Connecticut

The Farmington Canal Company also had a long term plan that went beyond connecting Long Island Sound with the Upper Connecticut River Valley. Their plan was to eventually continue north to the St Lawrence River in Canada and west to the Hudson River in New York. The Erie Canal was going to have some competition. The Feeder Canal, therefore, was not just going to be

a water source, it would be part of the future transportation system. It was constructed to the same dimensions as the Farmington Canal and was completely navigable.

When the Farmington Canal opened in June 1828, Unionville became able to economically transport finished goods & receive raw materials. It also had sources for water power. In 1831, a power dam was built and factories were formed. This combination of power & transportation, helped to transform Unionville into the industrial section of Farmington.

The map below is found on the Farmington Canal Plaque at the Farmington Land Trust's Aqueduct property off Rt 10. The key to canal engineering and economics is keeping it level. The thin red line represents the Farmington Canal. The Canal Aqueduct allowed it to cross the river to a site better suited for canal construction. The thin green line is Unionville's Feeder Canal. The shortest distance between the



Aqueduct & the Feeder Dam would be a straight line, but that would be very expensive since it is not level. Following the contour was the best way. This is a current map, because Dunning Lake did not exist then.

## Auto tour of the Farmington Canal in Farmington Village



This tour begins at Tunxis Mead Park. Drive east to Meadow Road. As you look across the flats, remember that the water level of the Canal would be about 30' above the road. As you pass by the former sandstone arch bridge over the Pequabuck River (a National Historic Place in 1984) you will be approaching the crossing of the Canal, which occurs 50 feet before the first driveway on your left.



Take a left onto Main St, slowing as you pass 130 Main St, on your left. This was the home of General George Cowles. The Farmington Canal Company was formed here in May 1822. James Hillhouse, a lawyer from New Haven, met with 17 representatives from other towns at the Cowles house. Hillhouse hired Ben Wright, engineer of the Erie Canal, to validate his canal plan. Massachusetts was part of the plan. A few months later, they approved a charter extending the Canal to Northampton and the Connecticut River. The Farmington Canal opened on June 1828.



Continue to 60 Main St, which is just before the stoplight. This was the Union Hotel, built in 1830, for passengers traveling on the Farmington Canal. It is now part of Miss Porters School. Take your next left onto Porter Rd, then left onto Garden St. Take a right into Riverside Cemetery's North Gate & follow the road as it parallels the river. You will be driving on the canal. Look down to see how high you are above the river. The aqueduct is 3 miles north from this point.

Take a left as you exit the cemetery and another left into 128 Garden St. Park at the first space on the left. In front of you is Pitkin's Basin, which was like a harbor where boats were loaded & unloaded. To your right is the Canal House where the business transactions took place. Walk down the rest of the driveway and notice the small white sign on a post to your right. It presents a brief history of the "James Hillhouse" and the Phoenix Hotel.



Continue driving north on Garden St. Just before the route 4 stoplight, Hobart St comes in on the left. The canal crossed here at 45°. On your right is the Farmington Inn. The parking lot below the Inn was the North Basin. Farmington was a busy village & needed an extra basin.

Take a right on route 4 and a left on Waterville Road. 2.5 miles north, you will see the sign for the only Aqueduct in Connecticut. Park here and enjoy this wonderful site developed by the Farmington Land Trust. It is a short walk along the towpath to the river. You first walk by the basin where boats had to wait their turn to cross. On your left, notice how high you are above the river. The walk has two informative plaques and a model of the Aqueduct. Be sure to look across the river to spot the west abutment. The piers were removed after the 1955 flood, since they created a debris dam & major flooding damage.



**Auto tour map of the Farmington Canal in Farmington Village.**

The thin blue line that parallels the river is the canal. The roads mentioned above are located on the map below (Meadow Rd, Main St, Porter Rd, Garden St, Hobart St, Waterville Rd)

