Unionville's Feeder 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 May 1822 in Farmington. 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 route 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.

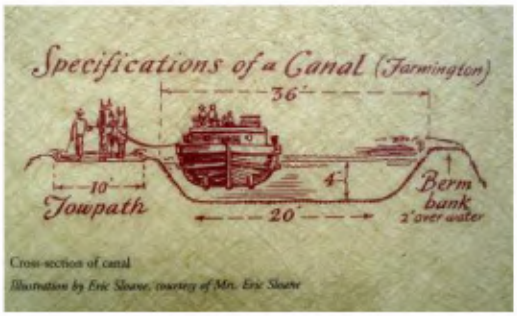
Auto tour of the Unionville Feeder Canal

The tour begins at the Gridley House (aka Staples House) on Monteith Drive. Elijah Gridley was 26 years old when the Canal opened. He was the captain of the "Dewitt Clinton". This boat was 11 feet by 70 feet, and carried passengers in 1828. Later it carried agricultural and manufactured products to New Haven, returning with sugar, salt, and spices. Elijah kept his boat moored in the pond upstream from the Dam. Notice the sandstone foundation. This is the same type of rock used in building the Farmington Aqueduct and the Feeder Canal Dam. The Gridley House was built by Elijah's grandfather and later enlarged by his own father in 1792. It became a National Historic Place in 1981. It is now the location of the Social Service Department.

The Feeder Canal Dam was located opposite the Town Hall. Today there is no remaining physical evidence of the Dam. After 1848, the Dam served no useful purpose, as the railroad became the most economic form of transportation. Much of the sandstone blocks used to build the Dam were recycled as foundation material for the growing number of homes in the rapidly expanding industrial village of Unionville. The flood of 1938 took away parts of the Dam, but there was still physical evidence in the early 1950's. Chris Codrey, a long time Unionville resident, played with friends in the shallow pond upstream of the dam. The flood of 1955 took away the remaining evidence.

The photo below is one of the many sandstone ledges crossing this section of the Farmington River. The river level was very low, but in 1827 before flood control dams, late summer water levels could even be lower. The photo was taken in the middle of the "river" since the ledges crossed 60% of it, constricting the river water to a narrow channel along the southern river bank. The dam site needed an elevation almost equal to the Farmington Canal. The 10 foot high dam would then provide the adequate water supply needed for its operation. This location was 70 feet upstream. The white building in the center is the Apricots Restaurant.

Turn left at the stoplight for Monteith Drive and route 4. As you approach the next stoplight, look to your right to observe that the apartment building, sidewalk, driveway, and fence are all at a 45° angle to route 4. The Canal crossed here at that angle, and the properties were parallel to it. The Canal has now become a drainage culvert. After passing the stoplight, you will see the same 45° angle formed by a stockade fence, on your left. After you drive under the bike path, the Canal crossed the northern end of the pond on your left. It then continued across Winding Trails and into Devonwood.



Cross-section of canal
Illustration by Eric Sloane, courtesy of Mrs. Eric Sloane

Turn left at the stoplight for Winding Trails and continue onto Devonwood Drive. As you approach the blue Devonwood sign, pull over to let any cars pass. Just inside their stone entrance, on the right, is the almost 200 year old Unionville Feeder Canal. It is also on your left, but minus the berm, which was recycled. Continue on Devonwood Drive toward the exit at Town Farm Road. 0.1 miles before this junction, you will again cross the Feeder Canal, but it will not be as easy to see, since it is also missing a berm. The wider towpath on the right, however, gives the best clue.

Take a left on Town Farm Road. After 0.3 miles, pull off to the side of the road. The Feeder Canal is on the left, at about a 30° angle heading back toward Devonwood. There is a telephone pole slightly to the north of it. Look overhead for the power lines. The power lines were placed on the Canal's right of way. You will see them running parallel to the Farmington Club driveway. This is the path of the Feeder Canal, but is very hard to see due to the thick vegetation. The attached painting would be at the same location.

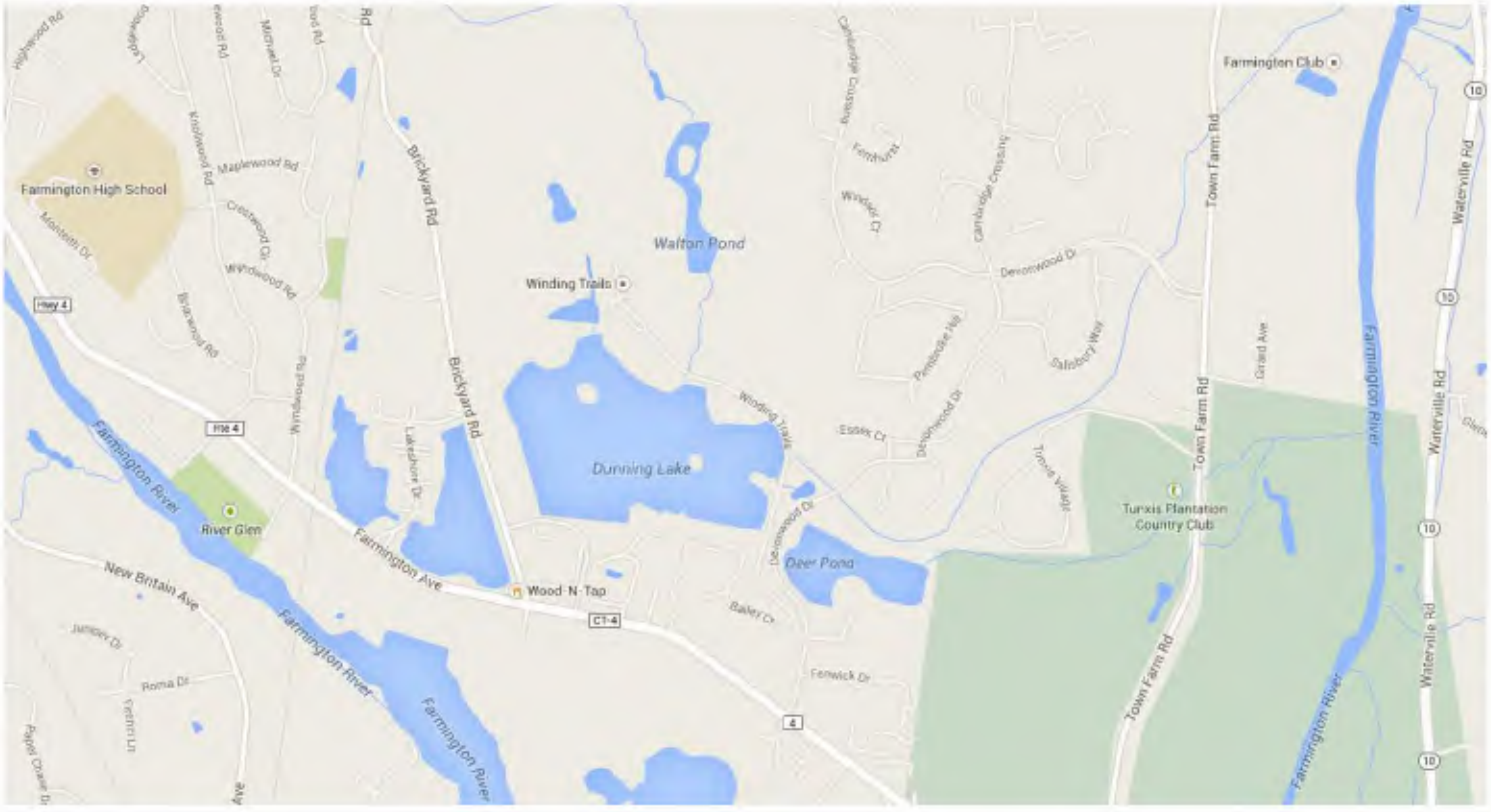

A passenger boat on an excursion cruise approaching the Farmington Aqueduct from the feeder canal on the west side of the Farmington River.

Continue north on Town Farm Road for another 0.1 mile, looking for the white sign marking Farmington's Open Space. You will see yellow blazes that mark a trail. Parking is easiest on the west side of the road. This trail is the highlight of the tour, since it brings you to the junction of Unionville's Feeder Canal with the Farmington Canal. This trail is new and in very good condition. The mostly level walk is short (0.4 miles one way) and is best walked after a few dry days, since the canal crossing might be muddy. Please stay on the trail to preserve the towpath.

The start of the trail is on a large glacial deposit that the Feeder Canal followed. After 0.1 mile, you cross the Farmington Canal and experience its size, which was all dug by hand. To your left you will notice a house with a fairly wide level yard. This was the location of a basin, where boats would have to wait their turn to cross the nearby Farmington Aqueduct. It was the only aqueduct in Connecticut. Continue another 0.3 miles along the towpath. When you see a double yellow blaze, you are 200 feet from the Canal junction. Unionville's Feeder Canal comes in on the right. The Farmington Canal continues straight to the Aqueduct. Both canals were wide enough to allow boats to pass each other. Standing at this junction is almost the middle of the 26 mile "Long Level" of the Farmington Canal. It extends north to lock #6 in Granby and south to lock #7 in Southington. There are no other locks between them This is the end of the walk in the canal section.

You can, however, continue to the river, but it will require a steep 30 foot vertical descent and ascent on return, along the side of the towpath. The footing here can be tricky. Side stepping down and up is recommended for your safety and to reduce erosion. Where the yellow blaze trail takes a sharp left following the river, you should continue straight. At the river, turn around to view the west abutment of the Aqueduct. The Aqueduct's 280 foot wooden trough crossed the river supported by 2 abutments and 6 sandstone piers, that rose 40 feet from a bedrock base. The west abutment is the only support that remains nearly intact. This Aqueduct was one the finest engineering projects of the time. A visit to the Farmington Land Trust's Aqueduct property off route 10 is highly recommended. It has a number of excellent educational displays.

Auto tour map of Unionville's Feeder Canal. The thin blue line is the canal east from Winding Trails, crossing Devonwood Dr & Town Farm Rd. The junction with the Farmington Canal and the Aqueduct, is just off the map. The roads mentioned above are located on the map below (Monteith Drive, Farmington Ave (route 4), Devonwood Drive, Town Farm Road)



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