

# 13 Bellows Falls Canal

Depot Street, Bellows Falls, Vermont

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By the late 1700s, growth in New England was centered along sources of water, especially the Connecticut River, which became the country's first major waterway to be improved upon for transportation. Lumber, produce and other goods were transported down the river on barges propelled by long poles, square sails, and the current; however, the narrow and highest 52-foot "Great Falls" created a difficult challenge and required cargo to be unloaded and reloaded on either ends of the falls. The solution was the country's first canal company, Bellows Falls Canal, financed by British investors and chartered in 1791, to provide power to mills and allow lumber and barges to bypass the gorge through a series of nine locks.

Along with the improved navigation for transporting commodities, the \$105,000 canal allowed for control of water to power new factories. Over the next few decades, manufacturers producing textiles and paper, among other goods, built their plants along the canal's edge.

In addition to the industrial use, the waterway served as a destination location when a large hotel called the Island House was built near the depot. Its luxurious interiors and manicured grounds attracted tourists in search of cool summers and excursions into the White Mountains. In the antebellum period, a large part of the clientele came from the steamy southern states. The falls also challenged daredevils who attempted to survive their descent unscathed.



By the mid-1850s, railroads had replaced river travel as a more efficient means of transporting goods and people, and by 1898 the canal's function transitioned to generating electricity. In 1982, a modern fish ladder was established to aid migration, and a New England power company established a visitor center to help community members understand the eco system around the canal.

Public parking is available along Depot Street and within walking distance to the historic downtown area.

## Sources:

<http://www.hanaxtell.com/bf/bfcanal.html>

<http://www.greatamericanstations.com/Stations/BLF>