



The last of a special three part series in which author Leo McNeir explores the canals of New York State



CRUISING USA ★

PART 3: *East is East*

Islands in the stream – the wide open spaces of the Mohawk River that links with the eastern sector Erie Canal and Champlain Canal.



Right: Our boat, Richard William II, at home base of Waterford. In the background are other craft in the fleet and the first of the huge locks into the Champlain Canal.



Left: The Erie-Champlain Canal Boat Company has an appropriate address at its wharf in Waterford NY.



The eastern end of the Erie Canal in New York State runs into and in company with the Hudson and Mohawk rivers. Then it joins the Champlain Canal at the start of its 60-mile run north to Lake Champlain and Canada. This is a landscape of even wider open spaces than we experienced in our earlier journey in the west; everything seemed to be on a grander scale. We certainly didn't feel that our second week of cruising in NYS was merely a repeat of the first.

We took charge of our boat, *Richard William II*, from the base of the Erie-Champlain Canal Boat Company in the busy river port town of Waterford. Its owner, Captain Richard Powell, gave us a thorough orientation to make sure we knew how to conduct ourselves on the canalised river network branching out from Waterford.

With his background as a former senior detective in the Albany Police Department and a full Professor of Social and Behavioural Sciences at the State University of New York, it was not surprising that he liked things to be done by the book. When we expressed interest in the course in boating that he teaches in the well-equipped Welcome Center, he immediately invited us to take the course and the written test.

As a result, we were awarded the New York State Boating Safety Certificate. Both here and on the western stretch of the



Above: A welcoming interior – the table set for dinner for two and an orchid on the table.

Left: A traditional American patchwork quilt sets off a comfortable bed.

Right: A new wood-burning stove – part of the comprehensive refurbishment programme of the whole fleet.



Erie Canal we gained the impression that our American friends take training and orientation seriously, not only from the point of view of safety but out of a sense of pride at doing a job well. As boat-hirers, it gave us the satisfaction that we knew the ropes.

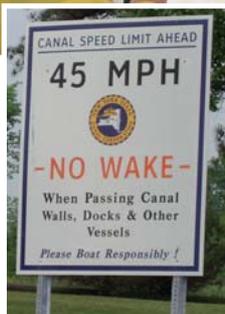
Dick Powell acquired his small fleet of boats – part of the original fleet constructed in the 1980s by the Mid-Lakes Navigation Company of Peter Wiles Sr – in 2003 and has set about refurbishing them with his customary thoroughness and vigour. The upgrading programme has included new woodstrip flooring in oak and black walnut, additional safety handrails for rooftop sunbathing, attractive wood-burning stoves for cool evenings and air-conditioning units. It was good to see these solid craft re-equipped and ready to continue in active service for years to come.

Out on the broad waterways we were grateful for the Yanmar engines giving over 50 horsepower. The Mohawk and Hudson

rivers and the Erie and Champlain canals are not tidal but they flow steadily, and it was comforting to know we could eat up the miles, when required, at a steady 7 mph with power in hand.

We had a big surprise on leaving the Waterford flight of five huge locks (elevation, 169 feet) to see a sign announcing the speed limit hereabouts. Convinced it must have been a spelling mistake, I blinked and read it again. Sure enough, there it was in black and white: 45 mph! Yes, what you have just read was no typing error missed by the editor.

Obviously this was some theoretical limit calculated on a



Above: Captain Richard Powell, owner of the fleet, gives a detailed briefing as part of the training package.

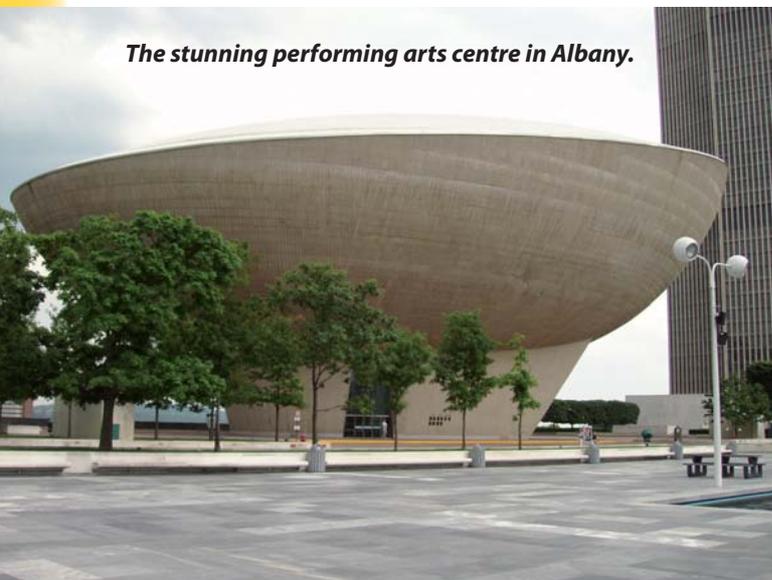
Left: Yes, really! We did our best to keep within the limit ...

computer, based on the depth of the water, the width of the rivers and other technical considerations. I first realised I was wrong about this when I spotted a powerboat some way off, blasting along with something in tow. The something turned out to be a small child – naturally equipped with regulation type B life jacket – sitting in a minute rubber dinghy, bouncing over the waves, grinning and waving happily. Seconds later, two jet skis followed having a private race.

In all my years of boating I have never been so assiduous in looking over my shoulder. Just as well, because we were overtaken that afternoon by two vessels that we Brits are unlikely to encounter in our home waters.

The first was a State Trooper launch which was going faster – and leaving a bigger wake – than the other speed merchants combined. The reason for the sheer speed of their passage was evident in the earnest expressions of the two-man crew. I guessed they must have been late for the end of their shift and were worried they might miss the start of the New York Yankees baseball game on TV.

The stunning performing arts centre in Albany.



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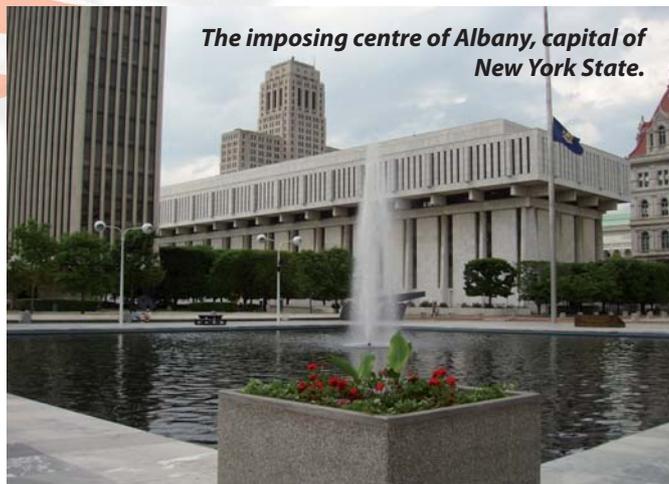
The second was a vast passenger ship of the American Canadian Caribbean Line that suddenly appeared behind us, powering along at an impressive pace. At first sight, I tried – and failed – to keep my jaw from dropping. It was not just the immense size and speed of it, though that was startling enough, but the strangeness of its dimensions. It looked as if no-one had told the skipper about low bridges. It seemed to have sped up river, losing its topmost superstructure on the way. It overtook us near just such a bridge (impressive how *Richard William II* could jump sideways when required), and I held my breath as the liner slipped under it with apparently only inches to spare.

It was all a far cry from the Grand Union Canal or even the broader expanses of the Thames.

With the exception of the occasional speedster, the Mohawk River proved to be a delightfully restful place. Cruising along gently in warm sunshine, with the fresh smell from the water and woodland all around, it was easy to relax, following the channel marker buoys as they meandered, and let the mind wander. For anyone looking for peace and harmony, this would be hard to beat.

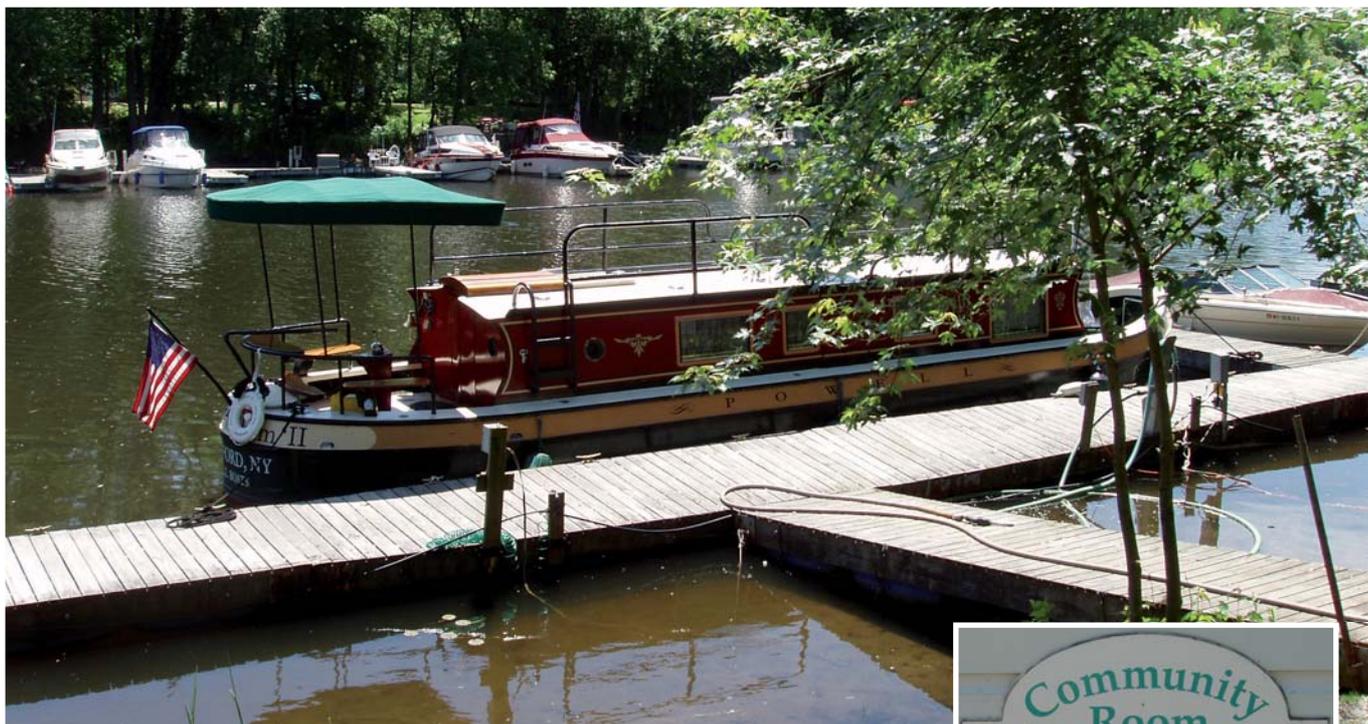
Heading north up the Hudson River, with densely wooded banks leading down to a rocky shore, we entered the Champlain Canal at Lock 1. Here we followed the twists and turns of the channel, clearly marked to provide a depth of twelve feet.

The imposing centre of Albany, capital of New York State.



At times we were overlooked by attractive houses, many flying the Stars and Stripes in typical American fashion. During the whole week of our travels we encountered little traffic. The locks were spread out every few miles beside broad rushing weirs, and we wondered what the lock-keepers did all day in their relative solitude. They were unfailingly friendly, helpful and efficient, and invariably phoned ahead to arrange for the next lock to be made ready for us.

On these long restful sections we were never short of company. Swallows followed us, swooping and diving around the boat at a discreet distance. Geese flew overhead in formations, urging us on with their primeval honking cries. Far off we saw eagles and buzzards gliding on air currents, cormorants skimming low over the water and everywhere the blue heron. On successive days we spotted chipmunks when ashore on the banks of the Hudson, deer in the forest and one solitary red fox who eyed us coolly before turning off into the undergrowth.



One key difference compared with boating on UK canals is mooring. Because the canal is effectively a channel winding through wooded areas flanking the wide river, it is not easy to tie up for the night by the towpath. First, because in those parts there is no towpath. Second, because you cannot always be sure the water will be deep enough at the edges for you to find a suitable mooring place, and there may be rocks below the surface.

At night you will want to find a village dock or a marina. It is worth planning your journey to take advantage of the municipal docks where your stay will be free and you will usually have the benefit of water and electricity at no cost.

If you choose to stay at a private marina the charge per night will be around \$50 (currently about £25), but will include use of restrooms, showers and coin-op laundry, plus wi-fi if you need it and possibly cable TV. The boat hire company can advise you on what facilities are available on what basis at various locations on your itinerary, as will the cruising guide provided on each boat.

To compensate for any charges you may incur for mooring, you can console yourself at the thought of the eating-out

The charming private marina at Schuylerville where we received a warm welcome.

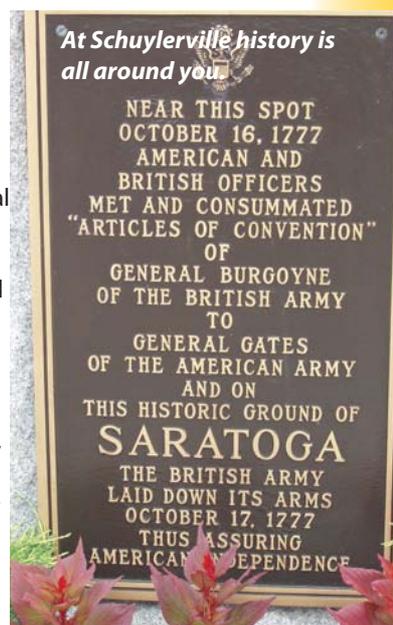
opportunities when you stop. Americans seem to eat out all the time and small wonder, for it is usually much less expensive than in Britain.

You could drop in to a friendly café for breakfast – “\$1.77 gets you two eggs, toast and bacon!” – or one of a multitude of bistros and restaurants. Whatever your preference, you will usually find the prices at present rates of exchange are about half the cost of similar fare in the UK, or even less.

One of the surprises of our American adventure was to find ourselves constantly confronted by history. True, the country cannot boast medieval remains, but it is impossible to travel anywhere here without discovering sites of national historic significance.

Waterford, our ‘home port’, was the new country’s first incorporated village. George Washington founded the army of the American Revolution – in which my own ancestors appear to have served – here at Waterloo. In this region also, the United States Navy had one of its earliest bases at Whitehall, at the head of beautiful Lake Champlain, in the late 1700s. Numerous battles and engagements took place in these parts during the Revolution and the War of 1812, which finally established the independence of the US and its present-day border with Canada.

Attractive canal-side properties abound.





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The state capital, Albany, on the banks of the Hudson, has quarters of charming eighteenth and nineteenth century houses, many of them renovated to look as good as when they were first built. It would be easy to spend a day here just taking in the sights, especially the view from the observation platform on the 52nd floor of the Corning Tower located in the impressive city centre with its remarkable ultramodern museum and performing arts centre.

Schuylerville (pronounced *Skylerville*), which has a welcoming private marina, is the site of the final phase of the battle of Saratoga, where the British General Burgoyne surrendered to the American General Gates, thus confirming the independence of the United States. This was undoubtedly one of the most decisive events in modern history and is commemorated in the Schuyler House at the end of the village's main street.

Schenectady (pronounced *Skenecterdee*), on the Mohawk River, has whole areas of the town that preserve the atmosphere of the early settlements of the region. We wandered through narrow streets of restored houses, with glimpses into charming gardens, or yards as they call them, and came across an unexpected tiny square with a statue and flowers. The style was strikingly different from the usual image of America and felt more like a quiet corner of Brugge or Amsterdam.

That feeling was no coincidence because in these parts the Dutch influence is everywhere, from the gables on houses and barns, to the names of towns, counties and villages (Rensselaer, Van Wies, Watervliet ...). The Dutch involvement here was celebrated during our stay by the arrival of the replica



A summer visitor – the replica of Captain John Hudson's Dutch-funded ship of 1609, the Half Moon.

Dutch ship, *Half Moon*, which came here in 1609 commanded by its British captain, Henry Hudson.

The locals' sense of history may sometimes seem 'modern' by our standards, but throughout the spring and summer there are numerous pageants, displays and festivities celebrating a historical figure or event that keep it alive and vibrant.

For the technically minded there are many attractions, usually no more than a taxi or bike road from your boat, such as the railroad museum at Medina or the motor museum at Saratoga.

When it comes to the natural environment, this state is by any yardstick an area of outstanding beauty. We were able to see two of the Great Lakes, Erie and Ontario, and also fitted in a visit to the stunning Finger Lakes region when travelling from one end of the Erie Canal to the next. We even managed a trip into the Adirondack Mountains, but didn't have time to see the Big Apple itself. We're keeping that for another visit.

New York State is certainly not lacking in attractions. I am convinced no one could ever leave here feeling bored.

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There is much to see and do wherever you go in this large state and whatever your tastes. Looking back on the whole of our visit into which we crammed so much, I have to say again that for me the best thing of all was the people. Everywhere we were met with a warmth and friendliness that it would be hard to beat. This is a land of smiley faces and courteous informality.

Would I recommend it? Bet your sweet ... I mean, yes, I certainly would. Would I do it again? Absolutely. I'd go back tomorrow ... and I'm sure I will.

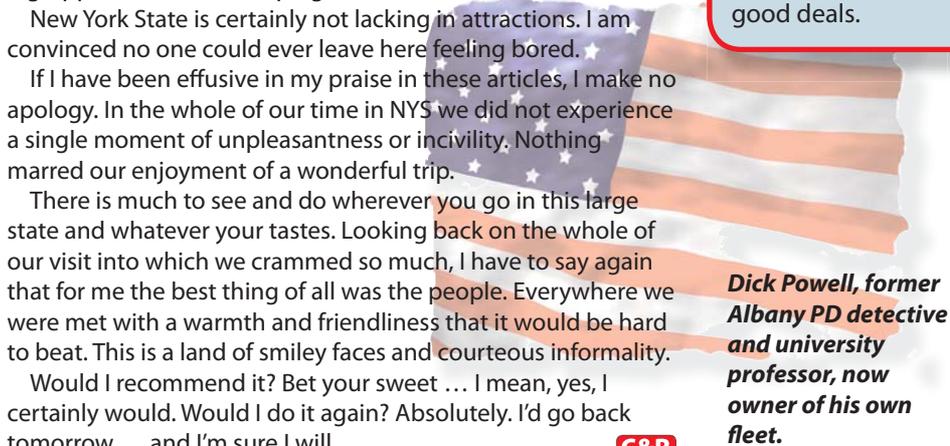
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RESOURCES

For full details about hiring a boat from the **Erie-Champlain Canal Boat Company**, see their website: www.eccboating.com

You can phone them on **00 1 518-432-6094** or **00 1 518-522-2533** or e-mail Richard on: aphowel@aol.com

We found Richard and his team really helpful. For travel to Waterford, flights are available to Albany International airport by several carriers. Try **United Airlines** (via Washington DC) www.unitedairlines.co.uk or **American Airlines** (direct) www.americanairlines.co.uk or **Virgin Atlantic** (direct) www.virgin-atlantic.com We arranged our trip through **Thomas Cook**, who found us some very good deals.



Dick Powell, former Albany PD detective and university professor, now owner of his own fleet.



Miles of tree-lined banks and, Inset: Marker buoys indicate the channel to follow – sandbanks await the unwary.

