

“Mortified and Disappointed”: The Reading Canal’s Failed Grand Openings to Complete the Schuylkill Navigation

by Stuart Wells

May 20, 2025, will mark the 200th anniversary of the Schuylkill Navigation Company’s 108-mile slackwater-canal system. Built to tame the Schuylkill River, it extended from tidewater Philadelphia to Mount Carbon, and later to Port Carbon, both near Pottsville, Pennsylvania. But choosing an anniversary for the Schuylkill Navigation, a.k.a. the Schuylkill Canal, is not so simple as one might imagine. The Navigation had many openings and completions. It was chartered in 1815, construction started in 1816, the first short canal reaches were operational by 1819, and the final 2.4 miles to Port Carbon at the top weren’t added until 1828. So why did we choose 1825, and what happened on May 20th?

The Schuylkill Navigation was constructed simultaneously from both ends of the works towards the center, Reading. Twenty-seven separate canals were linked by slackwater navigation on dammed sections of the Schuylkill River, and different sections of the navigation were completed in different years. By 1821, canal boats already were able to travel from Mount Carbon in Schuylkill County down to Hamburg in Berks County. And in June 1824, when the Schuylkill Navigation Company resolved an issue with the Philadelphia Watering Committee (now the Philadelphia Water Department) regarding the height of the Fairmount Dam, the lower section was operational from Philadelphia to Reading. The seven-mile Reading Canal and 22-mile Girard Canal were right in the middle of the Navigation, making them the last works to be completed. The Girard Canal’s grand opening took place on July 5, 1824 as boats carrying dignitaries locked through from below Reading to Lawrenceville, now Parker Ford. This left only the Reading Canal to connect the upper and lower sections of the waterway, mountains to tidewater.

The much-anticipated opening of the Reading Canal, with its eight locks, six road bridges, and one dam, was slated for September 20, 1824. But when the river water was let into the canal it developed such severe leaks into limestone fissures below that the water never even reached all the locks. During the autumn of 1824, the Reading Canal was a source of great embarrassment for the managers of the

Schuylkill Navigation Company, since dignitaries and politicians had been invited to take part in the ballyhoo of failed festivities.

After repairing the worst-leaking sections by planking the bottom of the Reading Canal, a second attempt at opening was made on October 30, 1824. One hundred and five boats and eight boatloads of coal waited above Reading to lock through. But the canal still leaked too badly to let them pass. Again, more repairs were made and finally on December 3, 1824, the first boat, *Pioneer*, was able to lock through. Perhaps this date could be celebrated as the opening of the Schuylkill Navigation. But it hardly marks the “grand” opening since the leaking continued so badly that *Pioneer* spent all day and didn’t manage to lock through the seven-mile canal until after ten o’clock at night! The canal was again shut down with eighty-eight boats waiting above Reading. The whole Schuylkill Navigation was then closed for winter, and this time the entire Reading Canal was planked over the limestone fissures.

The troublesome Reading Canal was reopened on May 20, 1825. Although this section continued to require frequent repairs, boats finally could travel the length of the Schuylkill Navigation unhindered. By summer there was a healthy flow of regular traffic between the coal region and Philadelphia, fueling the Industrial Revolution in Southeastern Pennsylvania and far beyond.

After all that, in just a few years, by 1833 the high maintenance Reading Canal was abandoned. The upper six miles were moved into the river and shortened to five miles of slackwater, with new locks and dams. Below that, the remaining mile of canal was shifted to a new route through the city.

The downtown portions of both Reading Canals have been filled. But today along the Reading riverfront you can still visit Canal Street, a canal mural, and heritage signs, like those of many other proud canal towns along the Schuylkill Navigation.