

1869 North Lake Dam Breach

On April 21, 1869, the **North Lake Reservoir** dam ruptured, flooding the Black River watershed and damaging downstream communities, industries, and infrastructure. [New York State Archives](#)

New York State Canal Board records say the flood destroyed mills, bridges, and other property all the way to Watertown. An 1869 law authorized an investigation, and Canal Appraisers held hearings in Utica to examine the failure and claims. [New York State Archives](#)

The Canal Board compiled **hydrologic and engineering data** on the dam, reservoir, and flood, plus property-damage accounts. Three-part testimony was bound in two volumes. Surviving materials include:

- Dam and reservoir measurements and descriptions
- Reports on the flood's course and effects
- Accounts of destroyed structures
- An 1871 state brief defending the government

The **New York State Archives** preserves these records online.

The Black River fed the Erie Canal network. The **Black River Canal** ran from Rome through Boonville, linking inland waterways to the state canal system. [Adirondack Explorer](#)

North Lake Reservoir supported this system. Its dam failure disrupted navigation and industry, becoming a notable nineteenth-century U.S. dam disaster.

The breach changed Black River Canal management by prompting:

- Greater scrutiny of dam design, maintenance, and safety
- More detailed hydrologic and engineering reviews
- Ongoing debate over state liability for infrastructure failures

The 1869 North Lake dam breach devastated the Black River watershed. Its records document the destruction and its influence on canal management, engineering review, and dam safety.

[#1 — Canal Commissioners' Annual Report, 1861–73 | HathiTrust](#)

Cover, title, and information pages saved in Atwell file

[Canal Damage Awards | New York State Archives Finding Aid](#)

[#243 — Canal Commissioners' Annual Report, 1861–73 | HathiTrust](#)

North Lake Dam

Breached April 21, 1869

**Disrupted navigation and
industry, becoming a major**

**19th-century U.S. dam
disaster that spurred safety**

Criteria for Historical Marker Inscriptions

Historical markers are designed to span generations. By obtaining one, you're doing a service to your community and the public at large. To help ensure the highest quality marker inscriptions, we have established the following criteria to guide you when selecting a subject, location, and inscription.

The subject of the marker must be historically significant to the larger community or beyond, and this must be documented with primary sources.

Think about "What history happened here?" If the subject is not significant beyond one person or family, it will not qualify for a marker.

The subject of the marker must fall within the time frame, which is between 1683 and 100 years prior to the date of the application. In other words, the historical event, place, or person must be older than 100 years.

The marker inscription must be proven using primary source documentation. See our page on Primary Source documentation for more information.

We will not approve any applications for markers that duplicate existing signage or markers. The subject matter must be entirely original, highlighting aspects of history that are not already commemorated, unless the marker is a replacement.

For more guidance pertaining to Buildings, Cemeteries, Farms, Places of Worship and Schools, see the section below.

Text and Inscription Criteria

Inscriptions must be clear about why the subject (person, place, thing, event) is historically significant.

Every single fact written on the marker must have a primary source to support it. See our Primary Sources page for more information on what is accepted as a primary source.

At least one key date must be included to contextualize the marker; however, the inscription should not be written simply as a list of dates.

Inscriptions should maximize available character limits. All five lines must be used.

Inscriptions have one title line of 15 characters and five body lines with 27 characters each.

Inscriptions should try to tell a short story that piques interest and motivates people to want to learn more. We always write a longer description for our website marker map. We want the marker to inspire curiosity despite its brevity.

Inscriptions need to be accessible to everyone, including students and visitors. We recommend writing it with a 4th/5th grade audience in mind and avoiding jargon and complex language.