

The Erie Canal

A BRIEF HISTORY

When it opened in 1825, the Erie Canal was the engineering marvel of its day. When planning began for what many derided as “Clinton's Folly,” there was not a single school of engineering in the United States. Roads had to be built every step of the way as work progressed to bring in supplies. With the exception of a few places where black powder was used to blast through rock formations, all 363 miles were built by the muscle power of men and horses.

But more than a feat of engineering, the Erie Canal proved to be the key that unlocked an enormous series of social and economic changes in the young nation. The canal spurred the first great westward movement of American settlers, gave access to the rich land and resources west of the Appalachians and made New York the preeminent commercial city in the United States.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Allegheny Mountains were the western frontier. The Northwest Territories that would later become Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and Ohio were rich in timber, minerals and fertile land for farming. But to reach them took weeks of bone-jarring travel on rutted turnpike roads that baked rock-hard every

summer and dissolved in a sea of mud after each winter.

Governor DeWitt Clinton of New York envisioned a better way: a canal from Buffalo on the eastern shore of Lake Erie to Albany on the upper Hudson River, a distance of almost 400 miles. “As an organ of communication between the Hudson, the Mississippi, the St. Lawrence, the Great Lakes of the north and west and their tributary rivers, it will create the greatest inland trade ever witnessed,” Clinton wrote in 1816.

Trade would be funneled straight down the Hudson to New York City. “The city will, in the course of time, become the granary of the world, the emporium of commerce, the seat of manufactures, the focus of great moneyed operations,” said the governor. “And before the revolution of a century, the whole island of Manhattan, covered with inhabitants and replenished with a dense population, will constitute one vast city.”

In 1817, Clinton convinced the state legislature to authorize \$7 million for construction of a canal 363 miles long, 40 feet wide and four feet deep.



Eight years later on October 26, 1825, Governor Clinton set out from Buffalo in the canal boat “Seneca Chief” along with two other boats to open the Erie Canal. As he left, a relay of cannons fired across the state and down the Hudson, carrying the news of his departure to New York in less than two hours.

Nine days later, Clinton's little flotilla arrived in New York harbor, greeted by almost 150 vessels and thousands of New Yorkers lining the shore in ranks 10 feet deep. The “Seneca Chief” had carried two barrels of water from Lake Erie that Clinton emptied into the ocean at New York in a ceremony celebrating the “Marriage of the Waters” between the Great Lakes and the Atlantic.

The effect of the canal was immediate and dramatic and settlers poured west. The explosion of trade, prophesied by Governor Clinton, began, spurred by freight rates from Buffalo to New York of \$10 per ton by canal, compared with \$100 per ton by road. In 1829, approximately 3,640 bushels of wheat were transported down the canal from Buffalo. By 1837, this figure had increased to 500,000 bushels; four years later it reached one million. In nine years, canal tolls more than recouped the entire cost of construction.

Prior to construction of the canal, New York City was the nation's fifth largest seaport, behind Boston, Baltimore, Philadelphia and New Orleans. Within 15 years of its opening, New York was the busiest port in America, moving tonnages greater than Boston, Baltimore and New Orleans combined.

With the exception of Binghamton and Elmira, every major city in New York falls along the trade route established by the Erie Canal, from New York City to Albany, through Schenectady and Utica and Syracuse, to Rochester and Buffalo. Looking at a modern map, one can see the impact on the rest of the state. Approximately 75 percent of the state's population still live within the corridors created by the waterways of the New York State Canal System and the Hudson River valley.

The Erie Canal's success was part of a canal-building boom in New York in the 1820s. Between 1823 and 1828, several lateral canals opened including the Champlain, the Oswego and the Cayuga-Seneca.

Between 1835 and the turn of the century, this network of canals was enlarged twice to accommodate heavier traffic. The canals were again enlarged between 1905 and 1918. This time, in order to accommodate much larger barges, the engineers decided to abandon much of the original man-made channel and use new techniques to “canalize” the rivers that the canal had been constructed to avoid—the Mohawk, Oswego, Seneca, Oneida and Clyde—and Oneida Lake.

A uniform channel was dredged; dams were built to create long, navigable pools, and locks were built adjacent to the dams to allow the barges to pass from one pool to the next. When it opened in 1918, the whole system was renamed the New York State Barge Canal.

With growing competition from railroads and highways, and the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959, commercial traffic on the Canal System declined dramatically in the latter part of the 20th century.

Today, the waterway network has been renamed again, and as the “New York State Canal System” it is enjoying a rebirth as a recreational, historic and economic development resource. Tens of thousands of pleasure craft ply the canals' waters each year, and thousands of visitors and local residents alike take advantage of the miles of bike and hiking paths, parks and historic sites along the canals.



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