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## “The Marriage of the Waters”: The Erie Canal and the Opening of the Midwest

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The Erie Canal connects the Hudson River at Albany with Lake Erie at Buffalo. Construction on the canal began on the 4th of July, 1817, and the entire canal was finished in 1825. It opened the states of the Old Northwest Territory, now the Midwest, to easier travel and transportation of goods and agricultural products. This caused an economic boom, allowing Midwestern agricultural products to be transported to the eastern United States and to overseas markets.

The economics of a canal were simple: a horse could move two tons along a smooth road—and at the turn of the 19th Century smooth roads were few and far between—while the same horse could haul a canal boat carrying 50 tons of goods.<sup>2</sup>

The Erie Canal was an engineering marvel, “the longest canal, [built] in the least time, with the least experience, for the least money, and to the greatest public benefit.”<sup>3</sup> Building the canal provided jobs to thousands of laborers, many of them

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<sup>1</sup> State Engineer and Surveyor State of New York, “Map of Sections of Present [Erie] Canal Cut Off from Barge Canal, and also the Champlain Canal,” 1913; accessed on “Erie Canal,” *FamilySearch Wiki*, [https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Erie\\_Canal](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Erie_Canal)

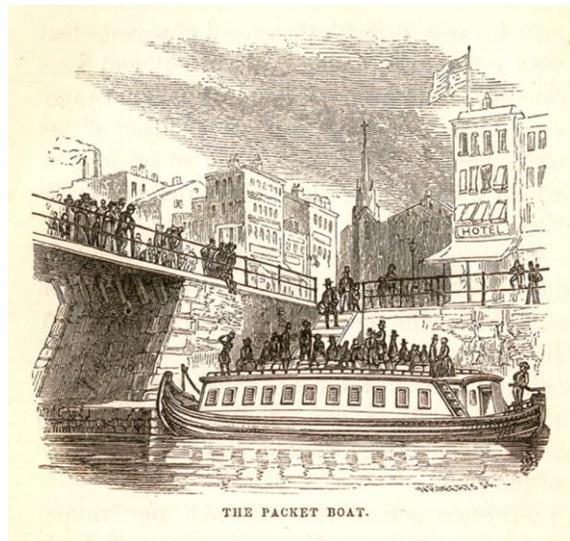
<sup>2</sup> Kelly, *Heaven’s Ditch*. New England Historical Society says a wagon and a team of oxen could haul three tons and a canal barge could haul 30.

<sup>3</sup> Lionel E. Wyld, *Low Bridge! Folklore and the Erie Canal* (Syracuse University Press, 1962).

Irish immigrants. And the canal made it easy for immigrants arriving at the port of New York to settle in the Midwest.

So what's so hard about building a canal? Well, for one thing, the elevation of Buffalo is 564 feet higher than Albany. A canal needs to be level, so locks have to be built to lift the boats up or down. Because much of the terrain between the two cities was hilly, canal builders would have to fill in low spots and cut through high ones. Then there was the problem of cutting through primeval forests and across marshlands. The canal has to bridge streams and rivers on aqueducts. And local water sources along the way were critical to run the locks and keep canal sections from drying up. Many complex engineering issues had to be resolved in order to build the canal. As plans for the canal were taking place, the War of 1812 broke out, and New York was on the front lines, delaying the start of the project till after the war ended.

<sup>4</sup> After construction began, for the next eight years, thousands of workers dug a canal over 300 miles long, much of it with spades and wheelbarrows. The canal work prompted the invention of new tools: a modified farm plow to break up virgin sod, a winch to uproot trees, a



stump puller. Initially, the canal authority contracted with local men to dig sections of the canal, but that didn't provide a big enough labor force, especially as the canal pushed into sparsely inhabited areas. In the end, most canal workers were Irish immigrants. The living conditions were dismal and unhygienic, and disease was rampant among the workers.

<sup>5</sup> Two kinds of canal boats traveled the Erie Canal in the early years: passenger boats and freight boats. The passenger boats were called Packet Boats, and they were different sizes, but most commonly they were from

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<sup>4</sup> "Immigrants: The Foundation of the Canal," *Building Illinois: The Legacy of the Illinois and Michigan Canal*, <https://59642010.weebly.com/immigrants-the-foundation-of-the-canal.html>

<sup>5</sup> W. Roberts, "The Packet Boat," from Jacob Abbott, *Marco Paul's Voyages & Travels, Erie Canal* (New York, Harper Bros., 1852); <http://www.eriecanal.org/boats.html>

60 to 80 feet long and about 14 feet wide. The cabin was a single room that served as seating space, dining room, and sleeping room. For overnight trips, a curtain would be put up to separate the men and women and bunks would be hung from hooks in the ceiling. There was also a kitchen in the space. Sometimes as many as 100 passengers would be aboard, so you can imagine how crowded it could be. Because the cabin was usually stuffy in spite of its many windows, passengers would often sit on the roof of the cabin.

Passenger lists for travel on the canal were only required in 1827 to 1829, and those lists are housed in the New York State Archives. The Archives also has over 200 collections related to the canal. Their digital collections include over 700 items on the canal available on line.

One collection includes records of payments to contractors who worked on the canal between 1817 and 1871. There are collections of survey maps, as well, many of which show the names of property owners along the canal route.

The Erie Canal Museum in Syracuse, New York, has manuscripts, maps, and other material related to the canal. Among their digital collections they have one called “Working on the Erie Canal,” which contains images that provide insight into what it was like to work on the canal in the time period from 1820 to 1930. In addition, they’ve digitized a number of items from their manuscript collection, including receipts for travel and payment vouchers for workers on the canal.

## Resources

“Digging Clinton’s Ditch: The impact of the Erie Canal on America, 1807–1860,” *American Studies at the University of Virginia*, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA02/volpe/canal/firstpage.html>

*The Erie Canal*, <http://www.eriecanal.org/index.html>

“Erie Canal,” *FamilySearch*, [https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Erie\\_Canal](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Erie_Canal)

“Experience the Great American Adventure Story of the Erie Canal,” *Erie Canal Museum*, <https://eriecanalmuseum.org/>

Harvey Chalmers II, *The Birth of the Erie Canal* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1960); accessed on *Hathi Trust* <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015006424090;view=1up;seq=8>

*History of the Great Lakes,*

<http://www.maritimehistoryofthegreatlakes.ca/documents/hgl/default.asp?ID=c014>

Horatio Gates Spafford, *A Pocket Guide for the Tourist and Traveller along the Line of the Canals, and the Interior Commerce of the State of New-York*, 2<sup>nd</sup>. Ed., (Troy: William S. Parker, 1825); *Hathi Trust*,

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015081795083;view=1up;seq=7>

Jack Kelly, *Heaven's Ditch: God, Gold, and Murder on the Erie Canal* (New York: St, Martin's Press, 2016).

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<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hn2gha;view=1up;seq=14>

James L. Barton, *Commerce of the Lakes, and Erie Canal* (Buffalo: Seaver's Power Presses, 1851); accessed on *Hathi Trust*

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<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=inu.30000054446558;view=1up;seq=7>

*New York State Archives*, search in "Digital Collections" for "Erie Canal,"

[http://digitalcollections.archives.nysed.gov/index.php/Search/Index?search=erie+canal&s=&target=ca\\_objects](http://digitalcollections.archives.nysed.gov/index.php/Search/Index?search=erie+canal&s=&target=ca_objects)

*New York State Archives*, search in "Finding Aids" for "Erie Canal,"

[http://iarchives.nysed.gov/xtf/search?text=Erie+Canal&nameindex=Finding+Aid&text\\_join=&title=&nameindex=Finding+Aid&identifier=&nameindex=Finding+Aid&creator=&nameindex=Finding+Aid&accessterm=&nameindex=Finding+Aid&text-exclude=&nameindex=Finding+Aid&smode=advanced](http://iarchives.nysed.gov/xtf/search?text=Erie+Canal&nameindex=Finding+Aid&text_join=&title=&nameindex=Finding+Aid&identifier=&nameindex=Finding+Aid&creator=&nameindex=Finding+Aid&accessterm=&nameindex=Finding+Aid&text-exclude=&nameindex=Finding+Aid&smode=advanced)