

Erie canal essay sample



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During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the new nation known as the United States of America began to develop plans to improve transportation into the interior and beyond the great physical barrier of the Appalachian Mountains. A major goal was to link Lake Erie and the other Great Lakes with the Atlantic Coast through a canal. Many surveys and proposals were developed to build a canal but it was ultimately a survey performed in 1816 that established the route of the Erie Canal. The Erie Canal would connect to the port of New York City by beginning at the Hudson river near Troy, New York. The Hudson River flows into New York Bay and past the west side of Manhattan in New York City. From Troy, the canal would flow to Rome (New York) and then through Syracuse and Rochester to Buffalo, located on the northeast coast of Lake Erie.

Once the route and plans for the canal were established, it was time to obtain funds. The United States Congress easily approved a bill to provide funding for what was then known as the Great Western Canal but President James Monroe found the idea unconstitutional and vetoed it. Therefore, the New York State legislature took the matter into its own hands and approved state funding for the canal in 1816, with tolls to pay back the state treasury for upon completion.

New York City Mayor DeWitt Clinton was a major proponent of a canal and supported efforts for its construction. In 1817 he fortuitously became governor of the state and was able to thus oversee aspects of the canal construction, which later became known as "Clinton's Ditch" by some.

On July 4, 1817, construction of the Erie Canal began in Rome, New York. The first segment of the canal would proceed east from Rome to the Hudson River. Many canal contractors were simply wealthy farmers along the canal route, contracted to construct their own tiny portion of the canal. Thousands of British, German, and Irish immigrants provided the muscle for the canal, which had to be dug with shovels and horse power - without the use of today's heavy earth moving equipment. The 80 cents to one dollar a day that laborers were paid was often three times the amount laborers could earn in their home countries.

On October 25, 1825, the entire length of the Erie Canal was complete. The canal consisted of 85 locks to manage a 500 foot (150 meter) rise in elevation from the Hudson River to Buffalo. The canal was 363 miles (584 kilometers) long, 40 feet (12m) wide, and 4 feet deep (1. 2m). Overhead aqueducts were used to allow streams to cross the canal.

The Erie Canal cost \$7 million dollars to build but reduced shipping costs significantly. Before the canal, the cost to ship one ton of goods from Buffalo to New York City cost \$100. After the canal, the same ton could be shipped for a mere \$10. The ease of trade prompted migration and the development of farms throughout the Great Lakes and Upper Midwest. Farm fresh produce could be shipped to the growing metropolitan areas of the east and consumer goods could be shipped west. Before 1825, more than 85% of the population of New York State lived in rural villages of less than 3, 000 people. With the opening of the Erie Canal, the urban to rural ratio began to change dramatically.

Goods and people were transported quickly along the canal – freight sped along the canal at about 55 miles per 24 hour period but express passenger service moved through at 100 miles per 24 hour period, so a trip from New York City to Buffalo via the Erie Canal would only have taken about four days.

In 1862, the canal was widened to 70 feet and deepened to 7 feet (2. 1m). Once the tolls on the canal had paid for its construction in 1882, they were eliminated.

After the opening of the canal, additional canals were constructed to connect the Erie Canal to Lake Champlain, Lake Ontario, and the Finger Lakes. The Erie Canal and its neighbors became known as the New York State Canal System. Now, the canals are primarily used for pleasure boating – bike paths, trails, and recreational marinas line the canal today. The development of the railroad in the 19th century and the automobile in the 20th century sealed the fate of the Erie Canal.