

Digging deep through history

[History](#)



A new nation in the process of expanding and growing needs a more efficient way of transportation. Massive tracts of land unsettled in Illinois are being sold and a giant movement to expand west is beginning. High rates of agricultural transportation show a deep need for a cheaper alternative to make farming in the new territories viable. The only option of transportation is by horse-drawn wagons. This was not only slow and taxing but required a huge amount of vehicles and time to transport all of the produce. The stage was set for the young America's first great engineering feat referred to by many as the 8th wonder of the world. During the 1800's, the idea and push for a canal began to take shape and this architectural achievement changed the financial and economic future of the surrounding regions.

The first idea for such a project was in 1699 when French engineer Vauban suggested a canal between Lake Erie and Ontario. ¹ This idea was expounded upon and several small canals were made but nothing major. The next event which began the project on the Erie canal was a letter between Robert Fulton and President Washington in which Robert Fulton says: For the mode of giving easy Communication to every part of the American States, I beg leave to draw your Particular attention to the Last Chapter on Creative Canals; and the expanded mind will trace down the time when they will penetrate into every district Carrying with them the means of facilitating Manual Labor and rendering it productive. ²

Robert Fulton realized that not only would this bring the country together by faster means of communication but also opened the way for improved transportation of goods and people.

This speculation and push for the project continued until 1808 when New

York legislature authorized the surveying of the land planned for the canal with the project at a budget of 7. 1 million dollars. 3 After several years of work, the survey was submitted and the project was moved forward to construction starting in Rome, NY on July 4, 1817. 4

According to an article on the US News, the beginning workforce on the canal was, " A few dozen workers supplied with nothing more than shovels and draft animals started digging in both directions in Rome." 5 The construction started in two opposite ways. According to Us News, " One crew headed west toward Buffalo, and another started digging east toward Albany." 6 The work was grueling and slow but the project continued with the canal section from Genesee River to Pittsford being completed and opened to use. 7

Some individuals looked to the project as a way to prove the capabilities of the Americans were equal if not superior to the European counterparts. A traveling British captain records his experiences in his journal saying:

Out of more than 8000 souls in this gigantic young village, there was not to be found in 1827 a single grown-up person born there, the oldest native not being then seventeen years of age. The population is composed principally of emigrants from New England that is from the States of Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. Some settlers are to be found from other parts of the Union; and these, together with a considerable number from Germany, England, Ireland, and Scotland, and a few natives of Canada, Norway, and Switzerland, make up a very singular society. Much of all this prosperity may be traced to the cheapness of conveyance on the Erie Canal."

He also discussed rapid growth occurring in agricultural business saying, " Here and there we saw great warehouses, without window sashes, but half filled with goods, and furnished with hoisting cranes, ready to fish up the huge pyramids of flour barrels, bales, and boxes lying in the streets. I need not say that these half-finished, whole-finished, and embryo streets were crowded with people, carts, stages, cattle, pigs, far beyond the reach of numbers; and as all these were lifting up their voices together, in keeping with the clatter of hammers, the ringing of axes, and the creaking of machinery. 8

Not all of the development was received positively. This canal deepened the divide between southern and northern states, The History channel stating: Before the opening of the Erie Canal, New Orleans had been the only port city with an all-water route to the interior of the United States, and the few settlers in the Midwest had arrived mostly from the South. 'Southerners had been moving up the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers into southern Ohio and southern Indiana, which did become sympathetic to slavery,' according to Jack Kelly, author of the new [HYPERLINK](https://www.amazon.com/Heavens-Ditch-Gold-Murder-Canal/dp/1137280093)

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'Heaven's Ditch: God, Gold and Murder on the Erie Canal.' The Erie Canal checked that trend as the new settlers from New England, New York and Europe brought their abolitionist views with them to the newly established Midwest states. 'The New Englanders and Europeans beginning to stream across the canal were opposed to slavery, and it set up this confrontation,' Kelly says. 'Southerners became more hardened and Northerners more <https://assignbuster.com/digging-deep-through-history/>

adamant.' Kelly adds that the transformation of the Midwest into America's breadbasket by the new settlers also 'reduced the dependence of the industrial North on the agriculturally dominant South.'

9 This growing divide between the northern and southern states would grow into one of the bloodiest wars in American history with millions of people losing their lives in the civil war.

On October 1, 1823, the eastern section of the canal was completed from the Genesee River to Albany and Lake Chaplain. 10 The canal attracted different types of shipping and uses. The produce and goods ranged from grains, corn, wool, whiskey, and sometimes even meat. In the early stages of the canal boats called packets were used. According to Jo Anne Sadler:

The Packet boats were first class boats towed by three horses or mules, they had priority at the locks, better food, more spacious quarters as they did not haul freight and their luggage could be stored below deck. There is mention of washrooms aboard. Since it carried no freight, it was much lighter. Taking a canal trip was a popular tourist experience, but usually they would only travel on a partial segment of the canal. 10

The second largest boat used on the canal was the line boat:

The Line boats hauled cattle, wheat and other agricultural products from the Mid-west to the Eastern Seaboard. On the westbound trip, they offered a low cost passage for the immigrants. The boats were barely cleaned out from the eastbound trip and there was no place for anyone to sit except on the passenger's trunks or on the top of the cabin. They were slower as they only

had two horses pulling them. Passage rates were quoted with and without meals. 11

The third and largest ship used on the canal was the freight boat:

The Freight/cargo boats exclusively hauled freight and usually, the operator and his family lived aboard, with a few exceptions, and they did not carry passengers. While the Packet and Line boats were operated by boat companies, the Freight boats were independent operations and had their own horse stables located in the bow of the ship. 12

These types of ships dominated the canal and its uses.

Finally, on October 26, 1825, the canal was opened. The entire length of the canal was 363 miles, the width was 40 wide, and the depth was 4 feet. 13 In the coronation ceremony in Manhattan, "Clinton poured a keg of Lake

Erie water into New York Harbor to symbolize 'the wedding of the waters.'"

14 According to US News:

The canal's impact was felt nearly immediately. A cross-state journey that could take weeks was now cut to as short as six days. The expense of hauling goods from one end of New York to the other by horse-drawn wagon was cut to a fraction of its earlier cost. The canal connected the crowded Eastern Seaboard to the Midwest, creating markets for various goods and products and opening upstate New York and points farther west for settlement. New York City grew into the nation's busiest seaport thanks to the canal, while canal-side villages in Utica, Syracuse, Rochester and Buffalo became industrialized cities from the commerce the waterway provided. 15

The canal underwent several repairs and constructions widening it in the latter years, " The original canal was deepened and widened before the Civil War and enlarged again a century ago when the Erie and more recently built canals became part of the state's Barge Canal System."

The completion of the Erie Canal also created an influx of settlers into Michigan. Previously the roads were swampy and almost impassable by wagon but now the canal provided a safer and faster way to Michigan changing what would have taken months into a few days. The main point of entry into the Michigan peninsula was Detroit, which became an important trade city.

Due to the success of the Erie Canal, other entrepreneurs started to make their own canals. According to History Stories, " Within a decade of the opening of the Erie Canal, tolls paid by barges had paid back the construction debt. The Erie Canal's commercial success, coupled with the engineering knowledge gained in its building, led to the construction of other canals across the United States. None, however, could replicate the success of the New York waterway."

16 This influx of canals soon faded away as the railroad began to take over. Canals were beginning to be a thing of the past as one local newspaper in Indiana writes, " The Wabash and Erie Canal, That in the childhood of Indiana, served as an nursing bottle for the young giant developing its recourses and making manifest the splendid possibilities of the most productive state of the union, has gone into the sere and yellow leaf, slipped into a neglected old age, and from being the pride and glory of all Hosierdom is now only the

object of their sneers and execrations." 17 The canal became a representation of changing times and old technology fading away.

Today, the canal serves a different purpose. This American relic is an important part of our history and was a great accomplishment at its time and served as an example of American resolve and ingenuity.

18 According to History Stories:

The Erie Canal is purely a tourist attraction today, but it also attracted vacationers in the 1800's as well. Thousands of tourists, including Europeans such as Charles Dickens, flowed down the canal on excursions from New York City to Niagara Falls. Instead of staying at inns along the way, sightseers slept on packets boats pulled by mules through the night. 'It was considered a real novelty to sleep while traveling,' Kelly says. 19

In conclusion, this canal played an important part in the centralization of America in its infant phase. It turned New York into the powerhouse it is today, and created a monument that can be attributed to the great republic of America.

Notes

1. Sadowski, Frank E., Jr. " Erie Canal Chronology." Erie Canal - Locks. 2012. Accessed June 24, 2018. <http://www.eriecanal.org/chron.html>. This Article is a timeline of the major events regarding the Erie Canal.
2. " Letter from Robert Fulton to President Washington." Erie Canal - Locks. Accessed June 24, 2018. <http://www.eriecanal.org/texts/Fulton-1797.html>.

This letter from Robert Fulton to President George Washington describing the uses and benefits of a possible canal from Lake Erie to New York.

3. Sadowski, Frank E., Jr. " Erie Canal Chronology." Erie Canal - Locks. 2012. Accessed June 24, 2018. <http://www.eriecanal.org/chron.html>.
4. Ibid Carola, Chris. " Work on Erie Canal Began 200 Years Ago and Changed History." U. S. News ; World Report. July 3, 2017. Accessed June 24, 2018. <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/new-york/articles/2017-07-03/work-on-erie-canal-began-200-years-ago-and-changed-history>.

This article gives an overview of the events pertaining to the construction and results of the Erie Canal Ibid

5. Sadowski, Frank E., Jr. " Erie Canal Chronology." Erie Canal - Locks. 2012. Accessed June 24, 2018. <http://www.eriecanal.org/chron.html>.
6. OpenStax. " United States History I." Lumen. Accessed June 24, 2018. <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/ushistory1os/chapter/primary-source-a-traveler-describes-life-along-the-erie-canal-1829/>.

This is an excerpt from Basil Halls, a British captain touring Canada. He describes the life around the canal.

7. Klein, Christopher. " Ways the Erie Canal Changed America." History.com. July 19, 2016. Accessed June 24, 2018. <https://www.history.com/news/8-ways-the-erie-canal-changed-america>This article shows and explains the impacts that the Erie Canal had on US History.
8. Heritage, Norway. " Early Norwegian Immigrants on the Erie Canal." Wyoming, Guion Line. June 30, 2008. Accessed June 24, 2018. <http://www.norwayheritage.com/articles/templates/voyages.asp?>

articleid= 150; zoneid= 6.

This article gives several Norwegian accounts on their travels on the Erie Canal.

9. Ibid12. Ibid13. Sadowski, Frank E., Jr. " Erie Canal Chronology." Erie Canal - Locks. 2012. Accessed June 24, 2018. <http://www.eriecanal.org/chron.html>.
10. Carola, Chris. " Work on Erie Canal Began 200 Years Ago and Changed History." U. S. News ; World Report. July 3, 2017. Accessed June 24, 2018. <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/new-york/articles/2017-07-03/work-on-erie-canal-began-200-years-ago-and-changed-history>.
11. Klein, Christopher. " 8 Ways the Erie Canal Changed America." History. com. July 19, 2016. Accessed June 24, 2018. <https://www.history.com/news/8-ways-the-erie-canal-changed-america>.
12. Ibid17. " Newspaper Clippings on the Wabash and Erie Canal : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming." Internet Archive. January 01, 1970. Accessed June 24, 2018. [https://archive.org/details/newspaperclippin10inds?q=erie canal](https://archive.org/details/newspaperclippin10inds?q=erie+canal). Pg. 44
This is a compilation of newspaper clippings describing the public opinion on the Erie Canal.
13. Koepfel, Gerard. " Building the Erie Canal Was Messy: It's Worth Remembering That!" History News Network. Accessed June 24, 2018. <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/105398>.
This article is a short recap on the construction of the Erie Canal and includes interesting facts behind the ideas and events leading the construction of the Canal.

14. Klein, Christopher. " 8 Ways the Erie Canal Changed America." History. com. July 19, 2016. Accessed June 24, 2018. <https://www.history.com/news/8-ways-the-erie-canal-changed-america>