

The Erie Canal

1825

In the beginning of the 19th century, New York State and the Hudson River Valley in particular were beginning to undergo an industrial transformation. However, the nation was growing and the region needed a connection to the West. The Governor of New York, DeWitt Clinton, proposed a canal to link the Hudson River with the Great Lakes; however, many thought it was a fruitless idea and referred to it as “Clinton’s folly.”¹ Despite doubt about the feasibility of the canal, in 1817, the State Legislature allocated \$7 million for construction of the Erie Canal, and assembly began shortly after.²

Regardless of the inexperience of most of the construction team, the Erie Canal began to take shape. The work was slow and mostly completed by animal and manpower.³ It was hailed as a true engineering marvel and was finally completed after eight years.⁴ When completed, the Erie Canal was 363 feet long, and in most places 40 feet wide and 4 feet deep.⁵ On October 26, 1825 the Erie Canal was opened at last and Governor Clinton made the journey on the *Seneca Chief* from Buffalo to Albany, then down to New York City.⁶ When he made it to the Atlantic, he emptied casks of water from the Great Lakes into the ocean, symbolizing the “marriage of the waters.”⁷

The effectiveness of the Erie Canal greatly boosted New York’s economy. Before the completion of the Erie in 1825, it took about two weeks for goods to travel between Albany and Buffalo by

¹ Frank E. Sadowsky, “New York State Canal System,” *The Erie Canal*, accessed February 22, 2010, <http://www.eriecanal.org/system.html>.

² New York State Canal Corporation, “The Erie Canal: A Brief History,” accessed February 23, 2010, <http://www.nyscanals.gov/cculture/history/index.html>.

³ Erie Canalway National Heritage Center, “Learn: History and Culture,” accessed February 22, 2010, http://www.eriecanalway.gov/learn_history-culture.htm.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ New York State Canal Corporation.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

stagecoach.⁸ However, along the Canal it would take only five days.⁹ The Erie Canal not only increased the speed of the journey across New York, but also the efficiency of the trip. The amount of goods and people that the canal boats could carry was much greater than what could be carried over land. The cost to transport items dropped from \$100 per ton by road to \$10 per ton by canal.¹⁰

Improvements in trade caused commerce to explode along the Canal and throughout New York State. People, raw goods, and manufactured goods travelled along the Canal, connecting the Eastern seaboard with the Great Lakes and the West.¹¹ Within fifteen years of the Canal opening, New York City was one of the busiest ports in the United States.¹² So in addition to the cities the length of the Canal developing, cities along the Hudson on the way to New York City grew as well. Another importance of this new link for the Hudson River Valley was the availability of new resources and new markets for this region's growing industry.¹³

Though the focus of the nation on the Erie Canal has declined, it is still used today, and is the oldest continuously operated canal in the US.¹⁴ The legacy of the Canal is also significant in understanding the industrialization of the Hudson Valley and New York State as a whole. Despite the initial skepticism, the Canal proved to not be a "folly," but became a major part of New York's expanding commerce and industry.

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⁸ Erie Canalway National Heritage Center.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ New York State Canal Corporation.

¹¹ Erie Canalway National Heritage Center.

¹² Sadowsky.

¹³ Erie Canalway National Heritage Center.

¹⁴ Ibid.

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