The Erie Canal: How a ‘big ditch’ transformed America’s economy, culture and even religion

Matthew Smith, Visiting Assistant Professor of History, Miami University

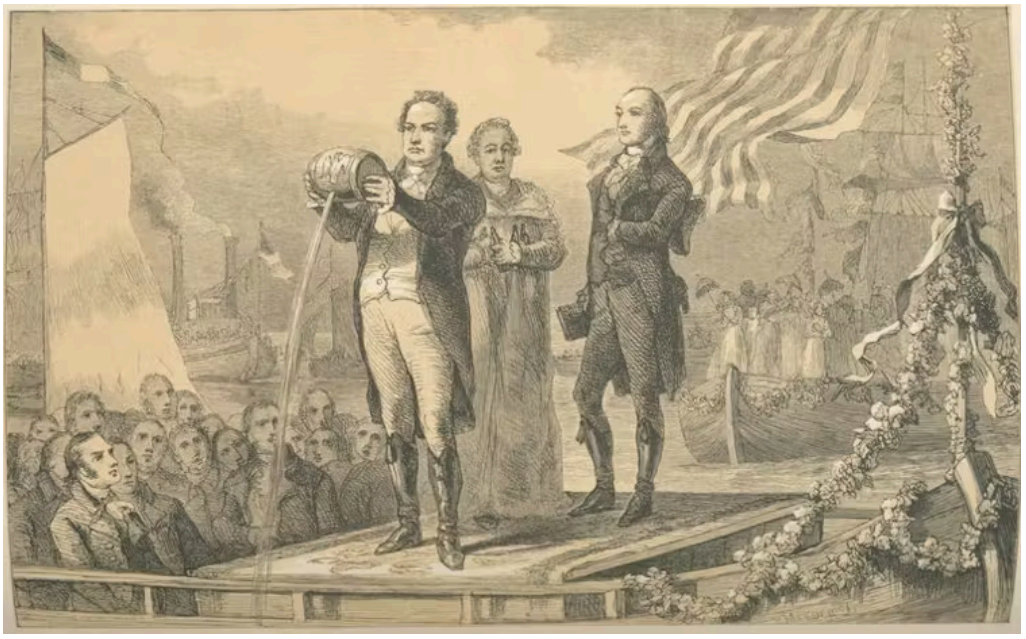
Published: October 20, 2025 9:45am EDT

The Erie Canal, seen here in Pittsford, N.Y., opened up western regions to trade, immigration and social change.

Andre Carrotflower via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA

Two hundred years ago, on Oct. 26, 1825, New York Gov. DeWitt Clinton boarded a canal boat by the shores of Lake Erie. Amid boisterous festivities, his vessel, the Seneca Chief, embarked from Buffalo, the westernmost port of his brand-new Erie Canal.

Clinton and his flotilla made their way east to the canal’s terminus in Albany, then down the Hudson River to New York City. This maiden voyage culminated on Nov. 4 with a ceremonial disgorging of barrels full of Lake Erie water into the brine of the Atlantic: pure political theater he called “the Wedding of the Waters.”



DeWitt Clinton pouring water from Lake Erie into the Atlantic, engraved by Philip Meeder.
The New York Public Library via Wikimedia Commons

The Erie Canal, whose bicentennial is being celebrated all month, is an engineering marvel – a National Historic Monument enshrined in folk song. Such was its legacy that as a young politician, Abraham Lincoln dreamed of becoming "the DeWitt Clinton of Illinois."

As a historian of the 19th-century frontier, I'm fascinated by how civil engineering shaped America – especially given the country's struggles to fix its aging infrastructure today. The opening of the Erie Canal reached beyond Clinton's Empire State, cementing the Midwest into the prosperity of the growing nation. This human-made waterway transformed America's economy and immigration while helping fuel a passionate religious revival.

But like most big achievements, getting there wasn't easy. The nation's first "superhighway" was almost dead on arrival.

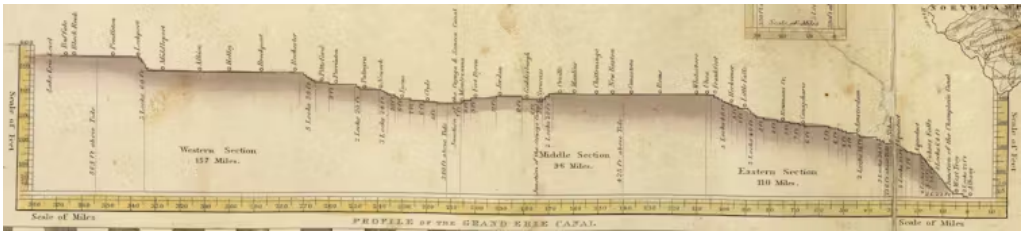
Clinton's folly

The idea of connecting New York City to the Great Lakes originated in the late 18th century. Yet when Clinton pushed to build a canal, the plan was controversial.

The governor and his supporters secured funding through Congress in 1817, but President James Madison vetoed the bill, considering federal support for a state project unconstitutional. New York turned to state bonds to finance the project, which Madison's ally Thomas Jefferson had derided as "madness."

Some considered "Clinton's big ditch" blasphemy. "If the Lord had intended there should be internal waterways," argued Quaker minister Elias Hicks, "he would have placed them there."

Construction began on July 4, 1817. Completed eight years later, the canal stretched some 363 miles (584 kilometers), with 18 aqueducts and 83 locks to compensate for elevation changes en route. All this was built with only basic tools, pack animals and human muscle – the latter supplied by some 9,000 laborers, roughly one-quarter of whom were recent immigrants from Ireland.



An 1832 lithograph by David H. Burr shows elevation changes along the Erie Canal.

David Rumsey Map Collection via Wikimedia Commons

Boomtowns

Despite its naysayers, the Erie Canal paid off – literally. Within a few years, shipping rates from Lake Erie to New York City fell from US$100 per ton to under $9. Annual freight on the canal eclipsed trade along the Mississippi River within a few decades, amounting to $200 million – which would be more than $8 billion today.

Commerce drove industry and immigration, enriching the canal towns of New York – transforming villages like Syracuse and Utica into cities. From 1825-1835, Rochester was the fastest-growing urban center in America.

By the 1830s, politicians had stopped ridiculing America's growing canal system. It was making too much money. The hefty $7 million investment in building the Erie Canal had been fully recouped in toll fees alone.

Religious revival

Nor was its legacy simply economic. Like many Americans during the Industrial Revolution, New Yorkers struggled to find stability, purpose and community. The Erie Canal channeled new ideas and religious movements, including the Second Great Awakening: a nationwide movement of Christian evangelism and social reform, partly in reaction to the upheavals of a changing economy.

Though the movement began at the turn of the century, it flourished in the hinterlands along the Erie Canal, which became known as the "Burned-Over District." Revivalists like Charles Grandison Finney – America's most famous preacher at the time – found a lively reception along this "psychic highway," as one author later dubbed upstate New York.

Some denominations, like the Methodists, grew dramatically. But the "Burned-Over District" also gave birth to new churches after the canal's creation. Joseph Smith founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, often known as Mormons, in Fayette, New York, in 1830. The teachings of William Miller, who lived near the Vermont border, spread west along the canal route – the roots of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

A camp revival meeting of the Methodists , circa 1829.

Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Getty Images

Door to the West

As Clinton predicted, the Erie Canal was "a bond of union between the Atlantic and Western States," uniting upstate New York and the agrarian frontier of the Midwest to the urban markets of the Eastern seaboard.

In the mid-1820s, Ohio Gov. Ethan Allen Brown praised America's canals "as veins and arteries to the body politic" and commissioned two canals of his own: one to link the Ohio River to the Erie Canal, completed in 1832; and another to link the Miami River, completed in 1845. These canals in turn connected to numerous smaller waterways, creating an extensive network of trade and transportation.

Like New York, Ohio had its canal towns, including Middletown: the birthplace of Vice President JD Vance and a city emblematic of America's shifting industrial fortunes.

While America's canal boom brought prosperity, this wealth came at a cost to many Indigenous communities – a cost that is only slowly being acknowledged. The Haudenosaunee, often known by the name "Iroquois," especially paid the price for the Erie Canal. The confederacy of tribes was pressured into ceding lands to the state of New York, and further displaced by ensuing frontier settlement.

Past and future

As the U.S. nears its 250th birthday on July 4, 2026, the official website of this commemoration urges Americans "to pause and reflect on our nation's past … and look ahead toward the future we want to create for the next generation and beyond."

As the recent federal government shutdown suggests, however, the nation's political system is struggling.

Overcoming gridlock demands bipartisan consensus on basic concerns. Technology changes, but the demands of infrastructure – from rebuilding roads and bridges to expanding broadband and sustainable energy networks – and the will needed to address them, persist. As the Erie Canal reminds us, American democracy has always been built upon concrete foundations.

Matthew Smith does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.