

The Erie Canal: “Mother of Cities”

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I. Introduction

The Erie Canal, begun in 1817 and completed in 1825, was then the longest canal in the world. It connected Albany, on the Hudson River, with Buffalo on Lake Erie, and thus opened up the state to travel, immigration, and commerce. Some cities, like Rochester and Lockport, were created because of the canal, giving rise to its most flattering alias “Mother of Cities.” Other established communities, like Geneva and Canandaigua, were eclipsed because the canal bypassed them. Canal construction required a great deal of manpower. Initial reliance on part-time labor by local farm workers proved to be inefficient. The shift to construction crews offered job opportunities that were snatched up by unskilled European immigrants, most notably the Irish. As each section of the canal was put into operation, travel and trade expanded, attracting more settlers into the region. Your ancestors may have been among these new arrivals. Or, if your ancestors were already living in New York State, they may have moved in response to the “Big Ditch.” In this article we examine the effect of the canal on communities on and off its route.

II. Building the Canal

The original Erie Canal was forty feet wide at the top, twenty-eight feet wide at the bottom, and four feet deep. The original locks were fifteen feet wide and ninety feet long. This was just big enough to accommodate two-way traffic using the canal boats of the time. The canal was dug by hand using shovels, men, wheelbarrows, and mules. No power tools. If your ancestor helped dig the canal, it is a good assumption that he was young, strong, a hard worker, and probably unmarried.

A berm was constructed on one side of the canal and a ten-foot-wide towpath on the other side. Numerous bridges were constructed over the canal to enable local farmers to reach their fields. They were less than eight feet above the water level causing boat passengers to hunker down to avoid an unwanted dip.

Construction began on July 4, 1817, in Rome. This site was chosen in part because the canal route west of Rome contained long flat stretches and required relatively few locks. The original route went through a swamp to the south of Rome, rather than through the town center, which greatly displeased the citizenry.[1] The eastern route near Albany was more rocky and harder to dig. The western route near Lockport included a seventy-foot drop in elevation, requiring a complex series of locks. Each section was put into operation as soon as it was completed, the tolls being used to help fund the project. The table below shows when each section was completed.

Year	Canal Section Opened for Use
1819	Utica to Rome
1820	Syracuse to Utica
1821	Rome to Little Falls
1822	Little Falls to Schenectady and Rochester to Syracuse
1823	Schenectady to Albany and Brockport to Rochester
1824	Lockport to Brockport
1825	Buffalo to Lockport

Rome’s rival, Utica, was a tiny settlement before it became a major port on the Erie Canal. The population of this upstart quickly outstripped that of Rome. From 1820 to 1830 the population of Utica rose from 2,947 to 12,782, an increase of 334%. In comparison, the population of Rome in the same time period rose from 3,569 to 4,360, an increase of 22%.

If your ancestors lived in Schenectady at this time, they may have found the canal to be a mixed blessing. Schenectady had been the eastern terminus of the navigable portion of the Mohawk River. The new canal threatened the prosperous warehousing and boat building businesses as well as the inns and taverns that had developed around this transfer point. In fact, from 1820 to 1830 the population of Schenectady actually decreased slightly from 12,876 to 12,347 or -4%.

Other western boomtowns such as Syracuse, Buffalo, Rochester, and Lockport were essentially created by the arrival of the canal. The population growth in these towns was accomplished in part by settlers new to the state, and in part by a shift from established communities not on the new canal route. Take, for example, the case of Lyman Spalding. In 1820 Lyman Spalding opened a grocery store in Canandaigua, the county seat of Ontario County. Located on the northern tip of Canandaigua Lake, Canandaigua had been chosen by [Phelps and Gorham](#) as the site of their land office. It had been connected to eastern markets by a toll road in 1804 and enjoyed a deserved reputation as a promising site for business. The grocery store prospered. Canandaigua was the most important community in the region before the construction of the canal. However, the route of the Erie Canal passed thirteen miles to the north and state officials denied the town's request to build a feeder canal. Business declined and in 1822 Spalding followed his customers to Rochester. While the population of Rochester grew from 1,502 in 1820 to 9,207 in 1830, or 513%, the population of Canandaigua grew from 4,680 to 5,162, or only 10%.

The canal route also bypassed the salt-producing community of Salina. However, a mile-long side cut from the canal south to Onondaga Creek was put in to connect the salt works with the canal. The new town of Syracuse, which had a population of 250 in 1820, grew up at the junction of the canal and the side cut. It eventually expanded to absorb Salina and its salt works.[2]

The town of Lockport is justly named. At this point the water level changes seventy feet through a series of five pairs of locks, accommodating two-way traffic. The town simply did not exist in 1820. In the summer of 1821 there were three families living in this frontier. By 1830 the population had mushroomed to 2,022.

When the canal reached Buffalo in 1825, the time required to transport goods to and from New York City dropped from six weeks to ten days and the cost of transport dropped to one-fifth the former value. If your ancestor was a businessman in the area, he faced numerous interesting opportunities. Some enterprising merchants stocked canal boats and brought groceries, dry goods, and household goods to what had been empty frontier only a few years before. Show boats brought legitimate theater into the local halls of communities that never before had contact with such culture.

III. Opening Celebrations

The opening of each section of the canal was celebrated with various dignitaries making speeches in canal boats along the new route. If your ancestor lived anywhere along the route, it is likely that the whole family would have taken part in at least one of these events. In October 1819 the first fifteen-mile stretch from Rome to Utica was opened. The canal boat *Chief Engineer of Rome* traveled from Rome to Utica and returned the next day. On July 4, 1820, in a more elaborate show, seventy-three new canal boats traveled from Syracuse to Rome to celebrate the completion of the middle section of the canal.

The final celebration was particularly impressive. The stops made along that journey from Buffalo to Albany followed the full original canal route. A flotilla of canal boats assembled in Buffalo, to be joined by others as they proceeded eastward. The first boat, *The Seneca Chief*, carried Governor DeWitt Clinton and other dignitaries (including the Marquis de Lafayette), a barrel of water from Lake Erie (to be poured into the harbor at New York City), and a second barrel containing water from the Amazon, Columbia, Gambia, Ganges, Indus, LaPlata, Mississippi, Nile, Orinoco, Rhine, Seine, and Thames rivers. The second boat, *Noah's Ark*, carried "a rare assortment of birds, fish, and insects, including a pair of eagles, a pair of fawns, a fox, two young bears, and two Seneca Indian boys." [3]

The entire 425-mile route from Buffalo to New York City was lined with war cannons, thirty-two pounders, used by Commodore Perry's fleet against the British on Lake Erie during the War of 1812. The cannon were spaced so that each gunner was within earshot of the next. George Condon describes what occurred at ten o'clock on the morning of Wednesday, October 26, 1825, as the boats prepared to set off. "[The] first gunner lighted the fuse ... fearsome

enough to be heard by the next, unseen, gunner down the line because it seemed as if the echoing boom from the northeast came so quickly as to step on the lingering reverberations of the first roar ... it rolled through the country of the Mohawks, the Senecas, the Onondagas, the Cayugas, the Oneidas, and the Tuscaroras ... moved east, through the Niagara Country, the Genesee Country, the Montezuma swampland, through the Mohawk Valley, past the Catskills, and down the Hudson... It took the cannon telegraph relay only one hour and twenty minutes to reach the island of Manhattan and deposit its historic word before turning about for the return relay to Buffalo.”[4]

At the first stop, Lockport, more boats were to join the procession. The local welcoming delegation, however, convened at the foot of the great array of five locks and ascended to the top of the Niagara escarpment, thus officially opening the locks themselves. They then sailed west to meet the oncoming flotilla, returned with them, descended through the locks, and took everyone off to the Washington House for an elegant banquet. The next day, Thursday, they arrived in Rochester, where the grandly named canal boat, *The Young Lion of the West*, joined the fleet. In Weedsport the celebration was dimmed by tragedy when the explosion of a cannon killed two gunners. Saturday afternoon, October 29th, they reached Syracuse for a banquet at Williston’s Mansion House.

In Rome a group of citizens who resented the decision to position the canal route a mere half-mile to the south formed a solemn procession and protested by pouring a barrel of tar into the canal. Having made their point, they then joined the celebration at Starr’s Hotel that evening. The canal boats stopped in Utica on Sunday morning for church and reached Little Falls Sunday night. They arrived after dark, the canal being illuminated by burning barrels of tar, which had been placed along the edge of the cliffs above the locks. In Fort Plain the next evening, Monday, October 31st, their arrival was also illuminated; this time the burning barrels had been placed on top of high poles on Prospect Hill and appeared to hang in the air. The reception Tuesday afternoon in Schenectady was subdued due to an increased awareness among the town’s businessmen of the negative aspects of the canal on their town. Dinner was polite, but restrained.

In the thirty miles between Schenectady and Albany the land dropped 218 feet, requiring twenty-six locks. The city of Albany provided dinner outdoors for 600 on the Columbia Street Bridge. On November 4th, the tenth day of travel, the boats arrived at Sandy Hook in New York Harbor. The party that followed was stunning. Ceremonies in the harbor lasted all day, followed by more festivities on land the next day including a grand parade with floats, exhibits (remember the animals?), and finally, a grand ball. After the events concluded in Manhattan, the boats returned to Buffalo and closed the circle by pouring a barrel of water from the Atlantic Ocean into Lake Erie.

The canal was more successful than anyone had predicted – and the predictions were very high. The total cost of building the canal was \$7,700,000. Income in 1826, the first year after it was completed, exceeded \$1,000,000. This income was raised with the operation of 160 freight boats and a few packet (passenger) boats. Tolls were reduced in 1833, but traffic grew so fast that profits still increased. By 1836 the remaining debt, \$3,500,000, was paid off and there were 3,000 boats on the canal. If the boats had been spaced evenly, this would be equivalent to about one boat every seventy feet. Not surprisingly, in 1835 and again in 1862, the canal was widened and the route altered – all accomplished while the canal was in use. A system of secondary feeder canals grew up. But, by the time of the Civil War, railroads were offering serious competition and the “Big Ditch” faded from the public consciousness.

IV. Bibliography

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[1] Footnote: When the canal was relocated in mid-century the route was moved closer to the center of Rome and ten

feet lower than the level of the original route. This drained the Great Rome Swamp, creating rich farmland.

[2] Footnote: In its third configuration Syracuse would no longer be on the canal. Today the canal route between Rome and Syracuse is marked by the Old Erie Canal State Park. The Erie Canal Museum, 318 Erie Boulevard, Syracuse, records canal history.

[3] *Stars in the Water, the Story of the Erie Canal* , George. E. Condon, Garden City, N. Y., 1974, p. 6

[4] *Stars in the Water, the Story of the Erie Canal* , George. E. Condon, Garden City, N. Y., 1974, p. 8.