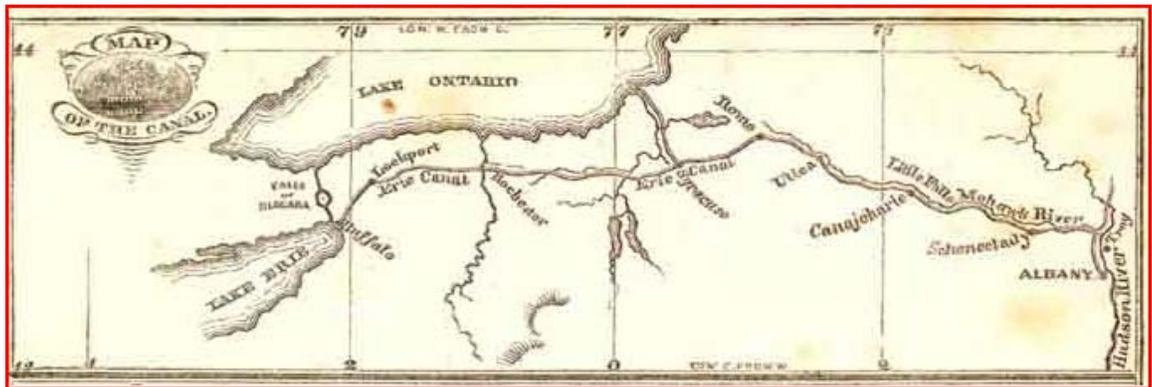


# THE ERIE CANAL AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE OUTBREAK OF THE CIVIL WAR

**A lecture for Santa Clara County Hist. & Genealogical Soc'y.  
By John Shellabear Gleed © on November 19, 2013**

The completion of the Erie Canal in upstate New York was a major influence on the direction of the young United States. It focused immigration, trade and finance on New York City. New settlers helped turn the new Midwestern states away from southern influence. Gradually, the power of Virginia and the slave-holding south was eroded in the national government. And the regional dispute over the institution of slavery led to secession and war.

The Erie Canal, built between 1817 and 1825, was the first major public works project in the United States. It was organized and financed by the state of New York. It quickly became the major route of emigration for those seeking land in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin and new states farther west.



MAP OF THE ORIGINAL ERIE CANAL built between 1817 and 1825

The principal force behind the Erie Canal project was DeWitt Clinton, governor of New York. From an influential family and with decades of political experience, he pushed through the \$7MM funding plan against the opposition of New York City leaders who wanted the money for streets and sewers. Clinton's opponents derided the entire project as "Clinton's Folly" and "Clinton's Ditch".

There were significant barriers in building the Erie Canal at all. First of all, there was no engineering experience on canal construction in the United States. There was no labor pool to build the longest canal ever attempted in the western world, 363 miles long between the Hudson River and Lake Erie. Although the canal plan and route had been discussed for twenty years, the federal government refused to loan money for it. Instead, Congress focused on the building of the National Road to connect Baltimore to St. Louis.

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The Erie Canal was started after work began on the National Road, and the Canal was finished eight years sooner.

Canal construction began near the center of the route at the village of Rome on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1817. As each segment was completed, it was opened for commerce. The first section, finished in only two years, went from Utica to Syracuse. Canal traffic started paying tolls from that time on. The original loan was paid back in eight years.

Canal construction was contracted out to farmers and businesses all along the route. By paying higher wages, the Erie Canal project attracted new immigrants arriving in New York City. Working conditions along the canal were brutal. There was significant loss of life due to malaria and yellow fever. No records of the names of workers is known to exist. Because the 1820 US Census listed only heads of households, the canal workers are likely to remain anonymous. It's possible that contractors' records or diaries may list some of the names.

Learning as they went along, the canal engineers built aqueducts over the rivers. And constructed locks to carry canal boats up and down as elevations changed along the route. Among many innovations, canal engineers invented a horse-drawn tree-stump puller and found an adhesive to solidify the earthen walls of the canal.

All along the route, cities and industries blossomed. From east to west, the main cities were Schenectady (Electrical Equipment), Utica (Copper Wire), Syracuse (Salt), and Rochester (High Tech- the Silicon Valley of its time). At the western end of the Canal, the small village of Buffalo became a boom town. Its population grew from two thousand in 1820 to nine thousand in 1830 and eighteen thousand in 1840. Buffalo had sizeable neighborhoods of German and Irish immigrants. By 1835, Buffalo was the largest inland port in the world. At this entrance to Lake Erie, people and manufactured products were carried west, and wheat and bulk products were transported east.

The Erie Canal became the preferred route for immigrants to the open lands of the new Midwestern states. Cities grew from hamlets along the shores of the Great Lakes which many regarded as North America's "Mediterranean Sea". Cleveland and Toledo along the south shore of Lake Erie; Detroit and Windsor (Ontario) at the western end of Lake Erie; Bay City (Michigan) on Lake Huron; Green Bay, Milwaukee and Chicago on Lake Michigan; Thunder Bay (Ontario) and Duluth MN/Superior WI on Lake Superior.

New York City quickly became the commercial and financial capital of the United States. Prior to the Canal, bulk products had been shipped down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to New Orleans. After the canal building started, New York City took over immigrant passenger arrivals reaching more than 85% of the total. Immigrants took steam boats up the Hudson River to the Canal entry point just north of the state capitol at Albany. Completion of the New York railroad system along the canal route

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by 1845 reduced passenger traffic on the canal, but it remained the quickest and least expensive transportation choice for bulk products.

No formal attempt was made to keep track of the names of passengers travelling on the Erie Canal. However, there are two possible sources for this information. The New York State Archives has a Record Group A1057 which is a collection of names from canal boat operators for the years 1827-1829. Another possibility is newspapers in the principal cities along the Canal route. The arrival of passenger-carrying boats on the Canal was 'news', and the names of passengers might have been reported. All the main towns along the route had newspapers which began publishing before 1820.

Virginia was the cradle of our presidents for the first forty years of the United States. And the Virginians- Washington, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe, got themselves re-elected, and each served for eight years. The Massachusetts' president, John Adams, was not elected to a second term. Virginia politics manifested itself in Ohio where the early governors were from the Old Dominion. Governors, senators and congressmen from Indiana and Illinois had been born in Virginia or had strong family ties to that state. King Cotton and Tobacco and Slaves ruled the economy of the south.

Initially settled from Kentucky by travelers crossing the Ohio River, Northwest states were strongly influenced by the politics of the slave-holding states. Elected men in the Northwest usually supported slave-state initiatives including the Missouri Compromise of 1820. Missouri entered the Union as a slave state. Before the influence of new arrivals through the Erie Canal, the Senate had a majority of men who supported the slave states. Senators from the new northwest states were often crucial tie-breakers on issues such as whether other new states should enter the Union as 'slave' or 'free'.

The northern counties of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois filled in with new arrivals from New York, New England, and Europe. Slowly as populations grew in these states, the elected representatives moved towards the abolition of slavery. The political majority in the northwest shifted definitively against the South and its institution of slavery.

The Compromise of 1850 & the Kansas-Nebraska Act impelled Midwestern lawmakers to vote against the dominant Democratic Party, and it disintegrated completely at its nominating convention in Charleston, South Carolina in 1860. The party leaders couldn't settle on one candidate, and three different branches of the Democrats emerged behind three men. They divided up their votes. Meanwhile in Chicago, a new party calling itself the Republicans nominated an Illinois lawyer named Abraham Lincoln. He won a majority in the Electoral College against the three Democrats. Southern secession became inevitable, and the catastrophe of the Civil War followed.

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The Erie Canal turned the commerce of the Northwest states away from the Ohio and Mississippi river system and moved that traffic to New York City. Votes of the Northwest politicians and the beliefs of its people gradually turned against slavery. The Southern states realized that they were to be deprived of a slave system on which their economy was based. Bloodshed followed.

On a cold October morning of 1825 in New York Harbor, a huge flotilla of ships jammed with people watched as a man opened a small keg and poured Lake Erie water into the ocean. He was the triumphant DeWitt Clinton who'd carried the keg on a canal boat all the way from Buffalo. The ceremony was called "The Marriage of the Waters".

Another keg of water from the Atlantic Ocean made the reverse trip to Buffalo where it was 'married' to Lake Erie. DeWitt Clinton lived another three years, long enough to know that his 'Ditch' was an unqualified success with investors standing in line to support its enlargement. You have to wonder if he realized that the fulfillment of his dream would be the precursor to the bloodiest conflict in the nation's history.

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