

Because the Hudson River was such a natural aid to New York State's economic growth, it's no surprise that people proposed an "artificial river" to expand the Hudson's reach. The idea once seemed impossible, but the Erie Canal proved successful beyond anyone's wildest imagination.

The Mohawk Valley cuts a natural pathway through the Appalachian mountains, but overland travel and river navigation faced major obstacles. Rough terrain, muddy roads, dangerous rapids and streams without bridges made it difficult to transport people or goods between east and west. In the 18th century, advances in canal engineering in Europe promised smooth transportation for boats pulled by animal power. The Mohawk Valley was an ideal location for a canal linking Lake Erie and western New York to the Hudson River. Easier access to large downstate markets would encourage western settlement and boost the statewide economy.

While earlier writers saw the route's potential, Elkinah Watson made the first serious canal proposal in a 1791 series of newspaper articles. His publicity inspired the legislature to create two Inland Lock Navigation Companies, one to link Albany to Utica, another to link the Hudson to Lake Champlain. Their work in the Mohawk Valley cleared the way for future construction, but their first small canals didn't generate enough revenue for a full-scale canal project.

It took one merchant's business failure to convince more people of a canal's usefulness. Jesse Hawley went bankrupt because it cost too much to transport goods over existing roads and streams. Two hundred years ago, bankrupts went to debtors' prison. While there, Hawley wrote newspaper articles as "Hercules" on the need for a full-scale canal. At the same time, prominent men like steamboat inventor Robert Fulton and Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin agreed that a canal would benefit the state.

After Hawley's articles appeared in 1808, the state legislature authorized a land survey for a Hudson-Erie canal and formed a canal commission in 1810. Prominent politician **DeWitt Clinton** emerged as the canal's most powerful supporter. He toured the proposed route in 1810 and lobbied for federal support, but was turned down by Washington. The War of 1812 delayed the project for another four years.

Frustrating and costly struggles to ship wartime supplies over bad roads convinced more New Yorkers of the need for a canal. Postwar public meetings called for fresh legislative action. In 1816 the assembly authorized a project financed by land taxes and bond issues. The senate defeated the bill, and President James Madison vetoed federal support, but public opinion demanded a canal. In 1817, the same year in which DeWitt Clinton was elected governor, construction on the Erie Canal finally began near Rome on July 4.

The canal, which critics called "Clinton's Ditch," would carry light boats towed by animal power through a channel 4' deep and 40' wide. It required the construction of 83 locks to raise and lower water levels, along with 18 aqueducts to carry the smooth stream across rivers and waterfalls. Workmen used innovative machines to pull down trees and uproot trunks while clearing channels for the water with horse-drawn plows.

In 1819 the legislature acquired 100,000 acres of land to be sold to help finance the construction of the canal. In 1820 it passed the "Two Million" bill to raise more money for the project. By then the canal's

middle section was finished, linking Seneca Falls and Utica. Merchants, foreign businessmen and ordinary citizens who saw the benefits of easier transportation eagerly invested in canal bonds. The Erie Canal was truly a public project.

Starting from the middle, the hardest work was at the ends. As the land descended steeply between Little Falls and Albany, multiple locks were built close together to smooth the descent for boats. Giant aqueducts were built over the Cohoes Falls to the east and the Genesee River to the west, while a massive stone culvert crossed the gaping U-shaped chasm of Irondequilt Creek near Rochester – all without modern heavy machinery.

The 363-mile canal was finished in October 1823. In November, ships traveled in procession from Buffalo to New York, where Governor Clinton staged a "Wedding of the Waters," pouring Lake Erie water into the Atlantic Ocean.

The Erie Canal soon repaid its construction costs with profits from transportation tolls. The volume of goods transported grew rapidly while shipping costs for merchants decreased dramatically. For decades,



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Western Expansion & the Erie Canal

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the canal was the state's main trade thoroughfare, encouraging settlement and economic development in western New York and beyond. Today, the original canal's remaining sections are monuments to American ingenuity and innovation. The original canal was rebuilt as the Barge Canal, which opened in 1918 and is still used and enjoyed by many.

Image: Gov. DeWitt Clinton and guests in first boat on Erie Canal, Library of Congress, reproduction number LC-USZ62-80635.



Newspaper Tie-ins to Today:

Jesse Hawley's newspaper articles influenced readers to support the idea of building the Erie Canal. Every day the newspaper includes letters to the editor, editorials and editorial cartoons, many of which were created to influence readers. Look at the local newspaper's editorial section and discover one or two important issues for your community.

Look through the newspaper for articles about a modern public works project that is either being constructed or is being proposed. Are there some people opposed to the project? What impact do you think the project will have on the community if and when it's finished?

For more information on the Hudson-Fulton-Champlain Quadrcentennial go to www.exploreny400.com.