The Erie Canal and the Development of New York State

Begun in 1817, the Erie Canal was one of the largest public works projects of the early nineteenth-century and helped transform both New York State and the Country as a whole. State Comptrollers — starting with Archibald McIntyre — were ex-officio commissioners of the Canal Fund and members of the Canal Board up until 1926. The original Canal was 363 miles long, 40 feet wide, four feet deep and connected the Hudson River (Albany) at its eastern end to Lake Erie (Buffalo) at its western terminus, lifting boats by almost 600 feet through many locks (currently 35) along the way. From 1834 through 1862, the Canal was widened and deepened and it became the main route of commerce from the Atlantic coast to the Great Lakes, the developing Midwestern states and Canada, as well as opening connections to the southern states through other canals and navigable rivers.

Thanks to trade brought by the Canal, numerous cities and villages grew and prospered. Most of the major metropolitan centers of upstate New York are arrayed along the route of the Erie Canal, which also later became the route of railroads and highways. These municipalities developed industries that used the Canal to send products and materials to the nation and the world. New York City became a leading port and hub of commerce due, in large part, to its connection with the American interior through the Erie Canal.

In the early twentieth century, the Canal was renovated to become part of the “Barge Canal,” allowing it to be used by larger vessels. It continued to be a major route for shipping until the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959. Since then, the Erie Canal has increasingly become a recreational center for boating and tourism. In recent years, there has been some resurgence in the commercial use of the Canal, which can handle cargoes that are too large or heavy for efficient air, road or rail transportation.

For sources and more information on the Erie Canal see: www.osc.state.ny.us/localgov/pubs/erie-canal-reference.pdf
15 Places on the Erie Canal

- Named for the twin flights of locks located here, Lockport became a town in 1824 and incorporated as a city in 1865.
- Land speculators bought the previously unsettled area after the canal route was determined. It had a population of 2,500 in 1825 and 10,900 by 1860.
- Lockport is the home to the widest bridge in North America and the Lockport Erie Canal Museum.

- "Medina sandstone" was discovered about the same time the Canal was being dug.
- More than 100 local quarries supplied building material for such structures as the Brooklyn Bridge, New York State Capitol and Buckingham Palace.

- The Canal brought a blossoming of commerce. In 1830, there were an estimated 100 businesses in the village and only 133 families.
- Cyrus McCormick manufactured his revolutionary mechanical reapers (grain harvesters) in Brockport.
- Other manufactured items included carriages, rotary pumps, mowers, foundry products, vinegar, and cooling boards for undertakers.
- 45 Victorian-era buildings are recognized as historic places.

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- Population grew from 1,000 in 1825 to 22,300 in 1850.
- Major producer of salt, fine china and typewriters:
- First dental chair produced in Syracuse.
- Canal route was formerly through the city.
- The Erie Canal Museum is in the only surviving weigh station from the original canal.

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