

THE ERIE CANAL

The Erie Canal was the first major man-made waterway built in the United States. It connects New York's capital, Albany, on the Hudson River with Buffalo on Lake Erie.

For many years, explorers, settlers, and early fur traders wanted a water route to connect the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean. On July 4, 1817, digging for the canal began.

Workers completed the project on October 26, 1825. The Erie Canal was the largest public works project up to that time. It cost over seven million dollars to build.

Workers had to cut through high ground. They also had to fill low levels and swamps. All of the work occurred before the invention of power tools.

The original canal was 40 feet wide and four feet deep. It was 363 miles long. The canal had 83 locks to lower and raise the water level. The water level was 565 feet higher at Lake Erie than at Hudson River. The project also included 18 aqueducts to supply water to the locks.

The opening of the Erie Canal provided inexpensive transportation into the region. The cost of moving a ton of material between Buffalo and New York before the canal was over \$100. After the building of the canal, the cost dropped to about \$7 per ton.

Fees to use the canal soon paid off the entire cost of construction. After the canal was debt-free, the state government used profits for repairs and enlargements of the canal. The canal's profits also provided money for other public projects.

Pathways along the canal allowed mules, tied to barges and boats, to provide the power to move both freight and passengers. The legal speed limit during the early years was four miles per hour. It was not until the early 1900s that boats had their own steam or gas power.

A famous folk song from the time includes the words:

"I had a mule and her name was Sal, sixteen years on the Erie Canal."

Traffic on the canal continued to grow. By the Civil War over three million tons of freight traveled on the canal each year.

With the coming of the railroads, traffic on the canal declined. However, the canal always remained a major trade route.

Through the years, projects continued to enlarge and improve the canal. It was seven feet deep by 1862, and 13 feet deep by 1918.

Gradually other rivers and canals joined the Erie Canal. It is now part of the New York State Barge Canal System. Today, over 100,000 boats travel on the Erie Canal each year. About five million tons of cargo are transported on the canal every year.

