

# The Erie Canal Celebrates 200th Anniversary

## From Ditch to Historic Landmark

2017 is the 200th anniversary of the year construction began on New York State's Erie Canal. This "artificial river" was completed in 1825, was 363 miles long and connected the Hudson River in Albany, to Lake Erie in Buffalo. It transformed transportation, opened the Midwest to trade and migration, and made New York City the biggest port in the nation.

In the 18th and early 19th centuries people were seeking a better water route to the land and raw materials of the Midwest. Some thought canals would help. Despite unpredictable rivers and a 600-foot elevation difference between east and west, Upstate New York had the only break in the mountains separating the east coast from the Midwest.



Jesse Hawley was one of the first people to propose a canal from the Hudson to the Great Lakes. He wrote essays explaining its route, costs and benefits. Politicians and businessmen shared Hawley's essays with New York Senator DeWitt Clinton. Clinton became one of the Canal's biggest backers. He and other supporters promoted the project for years, and in 1817 convinced New York's legislature to approve \$7 million for the project.

The ceremonial first digging took place on July 4, 1817 near Rome. At first called "Clinton's Folly" and "Clinton's Big Ditch," the canal was to be four feet deep by 40 feet wide. Construction began almost everywhere along the route concurrently. As soon as a section was completed it opened for use.

The Erie Canal was dug by men and mules using shovels, axes, wheelbarrows and wagons. They faced many difficulties including sickness, accidents, bad working conditions, isolation and poor pay. There were no trained civil engineers on the project. It gave many designers and builders practical experience, and has been called "America's First School of Engineering."

When complete, the original Erie Canal had 83 locks, 18 aqueducts and was considered by many to be a technological marvel. The waterway that had been mocked by many was a huge success. In 2017, the federal government honored the Erie Canal's historic contributions by naming the New York State Canal System a National Historic Landmark.

For more information and resources on the Erie Canal, consider a visit to the Erie Canal Museum in Syracuse or go online to <http://eriecanalmuseum.org/>

Or, go to the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor website at <https://eriecanalway.org/learn/history-culture>

### **Newspaper Activity:**

Search through recent editions of the newspaper (print or online) and other news sources for articles about transportation projects to fix or improve how people and products move from place to place. Compare and contrast this project with construction of the original Erie Canal.

*This feature is just one part of this newspaper's Newspaper in Education (NIE) program. A note of thanks to the Erie Canal Museum for the content of this educational feature.*