

The Erie Canal Story

In the early 1800's, Upstate New York was a wilderness. Swamps and dense forests covered the land. Dewitt Clinton saw the need for a faster, cheaper way to carry goods and people. He urged the building of a canal. After much debate, the legislature approved the building of the canal. On July 4, 1817, laborers began to dig the Erie Canal in Rome, New York. It was started in the middle of the state because the terrain was level and there was no need to build locks from Rome to Syracuse. The canal was completed in October 1825. It was 363 miles long from Albany to Buffalo. The rise from the Hudson River to Buffalo was 568 feet. There were 83 locks which were used to raise or lower the canal boats to the water level on either side of the locks. Eighteen aqueducts were built to carry the canal across rivers and creeks. In the beginning, the canal was 40 feet wide and 4 feet deep.

The cost of the canal was \$ 7,143,789 dollars. To pay for it, tolls were levied on traffic and there was also a tax on salt. Seven Weighlock Buildings were constructed to collect tolls. The only remaining Weighlock Building is located on Erie Boulevard in Syracuse, New York and is the site of the Erie Canal Museum.

The Erie Canal was the first fast and cheap route through the Appalachian Mountains. Before the canal was built it took 15 to 45 days to travel from Albany to Buffalo by wagon and cargo cost about \$125 a ton. After the canal was built, it took about 9 days at a cost of \$6 a ton. Going by canal boat saved about \$119 a ton and 6 to 36 days travel time.

In 1835, the expansion of the canal was begun. It was 70 feet wide and 7 feet deep and had double locks for speed. The towpath was 10 feet wide. In 1882, tolls, which totaled \$42 million dollars since the canal had opened, were abolished. In 1917, one hundred years after "Clinton's Ditch" was begun, it ceased operations. In 1905, construction of the New York Barge Canal was begun. It opened for use in 1918. The Erie Canal stopped operating because of the competition from railroads and because the new Barge Canal was being built. It was wider and deeper and could accommodate bigger vessels that used engines.

There were many types of boats in use on the canal. PACKET BOATS

carried only passengers and hand luggage and traveled the legal speed on the canal which was 4 miles an hour. Many of these boats were pulled by horses. They traveled about 80 miles in 24 hours. LINE BOATS hauled freight and usually traveled about 2 miles per hour. Mules were used to pull these boats because they did not scare easily and would not drink contaminated water. They traveled about 50 to 60 miles a day. They carried immigrants, supplies, manufactured goods such as guns and tools westward; then they returned eastward with potatoes, flour, apples, lumber and furs. LAKERS were freight boats with water tight holds for carrying grain and could be used to go from the canal to lakes where they could be towed by steam boats.. SCOWS were flat bottomed canal boats used for hauling lumber. HURRY-UP BOATS were a type of SCOW used to repair breaks in the canal wall and were allowed to travel up to 11 miles an hour.

Most captains and their families lived on board. Children tended the animals and helped run the boat as soon as they were old enough. They went to school when the canal was closed by ice from December through March. The rest of the time they were home schooled. The canal families attended church in towns along the canal or on church boats which traveled up and down the canal., Canal boat families shopped in general stores which were located along the canal usually near locks or on 'wide-waters' where boats were kept during the winter or where they could turn around. These stores also provided a place for people in the community to pick up mail, to shop for necessities, and to interact with others and get the latest news.

Canal boats cost from \$1500 to \$5000. Monthly wages varied. In 1823, a captain earned \$30; a steersman \$15; a steward \$12; a horstler or mule driver \$10; and a cabin boy \$4.80. Travel prices varied also. Packet rates in 1835 for through passengers were 5 cents per mile with meals and lodgings included. Way passengers paid 3 cents per mile, 37 ½ cents for dinner, 25 cents for supper and breakfast and 12 ½ cents for lodging .

On the line boats the animals were kept in a stable on the forward part of the boat. Mules went on and off the boat steered by the tail over the horse bridge which was stored on the roof. The man or boy driving the team was called a mule driver or hoggee and walked behind them on the towpath. Three (3) horses pulled one (1) packet boat .Two (2) mules towed one (1) line boat but three (3) mules pulled two (2) boats butted together called a hoodledasher. The first boat hoisted it's rudder out of the

way and the second boat steered. The boats could pass each other without tangling lines. One boat would move to the far side of the canal as its mules halted on the outside of the towpath. The towline which was 100 to 150 feet long would sink to the bottom of the canal and the overtaking or oncoming boat could pass it freely.

There were over 300 bridges on the Erie Canal. Canal builders had to construct bridges as the canal divided farms and cut through roads. A low bridge took less lumber than a high one and was much cheaper to build. Bridges through towns and villages were larger and sturdier.

Today some sections of original canal have been filled in. Others sections have been saved and are being used as recreational areas. In Camillus, the enlargement of the canal can be seen at the Erie Canal Park where the aqueduct is restored. You can see the bed of the original Clinton's Ditch 1817 canal behind Sim's Store Museum and take a walk back in time on four (4) trails that border the canal.