

The Northeast: America's Gateway to the World ***The Great Erie Canal***

a lesson on the movement of people and products

INTRODUCTION:

When the United States won its independence from Great Britain, almost all of our people lived within a few hundred miles of the Atlantic Ocean. The main problem was transportation. With poor roads and rivers with rapids to choose from, it was difficult for farmers and other businesses to get their products to market.

In 1817, New York State set out to change that scenario. Digging began near Rome, NY on the Erie Canal. Eight years later, they had completed an engineering miracle, connecting the Great Lakes (at Buffalo) with the Hudson River (in Albany). In this lesson, you will be looking at the location of the canal, problems with its construction, and its enormous impact on New York and states to the west.

PART ONE: *Jesse Hawley advocates for a canal - a Primary Source*

In 1807, a bankrupt businessman named Jesse Hawley was sitting in a Canandaigua debtors' prison. He had failed because he could not get his goods to market cheaply. While behind bars, he dreamed of a great "Western" canal that would stretch across New York State. He wrote a series of articles under the pen-name "Hercules" about his proposals. They were published over several months in the local newspaper, the *Genesee Messenger*.

You will be reading a selection from this series of articles. In the space below, summarize what "Hercules" had to say why a canal should be built in New York:

Why is this considered a *primary source*? _____

Jesse Hawley promised great prosperity if a canal was built, but many people across the state were opposed to the idea. What do you think were the major reasons for their opposition? _____

PART TWO: Why New York State?

New York was by no means the only state considering a canal. But geography was on the side of the Empire State. Look at the satellite image of eastern and central New York. It was taken at an angle so New York City (NYC) is in the lower left of the photo. Many important features can be seen. With the help on an atlas, try to identify twelve of them:

- | | |
|---------|----------|
| 1 _____ | 7 _____ |
| 2 _____ | 8 _____ |
| 3 _____ | 9 _____ |
| 4 _____ | 10 _____ |
| 5 _____ | 11 _____ |
| 6 _____ | 12 _____ |

What does this photograph show us? Probably most important of all are the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers. They have cut courses through and between mountain ranges. Why do you think this is important to water transportation? _____

The Erie Canal followed the course of the _____ River. The Hudson River is an estuary at sea level all the way up to Albany. No canal was necessary there. (Of course, the canal continues off to the west to Lake Erie, which is not in this photo. The land in this part of the state has low relief also).

Since canals were built mostly by men with shovels with the help of horses and mules, they needed a fairly easy route to be successful. Ports on both the Atlantic Ocean and the Great Lakes were also necessary. New York is the only state that had that combination.

PART THREE: The Canal is Built

Jesse Hawley originated the idea of a canal, but it was left to politicians to get it funded and hundreds of laborers to do the digging. The great champion of the Erie Canal was DeWitt Clinton. Who was he? _____

New York had the geography that made a canal possible, but its construction was anything but easy. It was 363 miles long, four feet deep, and forty feet across. "Clinton's Ditch" used 83 locks to raise the packet boats up to the level of Lake Erie. Several places along the canal route were especially challenging. Read Chapter 3 from *The Erie Canal: the Ditch that Opened a Nation*. The author, Dan Murphy, describes some trouble spots. On the chart on the next page, fill in the information on these places, including what the problem was and how it was overcome.

TROUBLE SPOT	WHAT WAS THE PROBLEM?	WHAT WAS THE SOLUTION?
The Cayuga Marsh		
Irondequoit Valley		
Genesee River		
Lockport		
The Deep Cut (west of Lockport)		

Despite these problems, the canal was completed in 1825. A great celebration was held, including a flotilla of canal boats from Buffalo to New York harbor, led by DeWitt Clinton. America was changed forever.

PART FOUR: *Pennsylvania tries to compete*

We will look at the effects of the canal both positive and negative in the next section. First, you will look at a very interesting program on the ARGUS CD-ROM, about the Erie Canal vs. the Pennsylvania Canal. Your job is to compare the successes of both artificial waterways by answering these questions:

(1) Why do some many towns in Pennsylvania (and Upstate NY) have names ending in “port?”

(2) Compare how much freight a horse can pull in a wagon vs. a boat on a canal: _____

(3) Why were many Erie Canal towns so prosperous in the mid 1800's? _____

(4) What is the origin of the New York Stock Exchange? _____

(5) Compare the populations of New York City and Philadelphia from 1820 to 1840: _____

(6) Pennsylvania decided that it need to compete with New York, and build a rival canal. Look at the satellite image of that state. What big problem did that cause for canal construction? _____

(7) Compare the side profiles of the Erie Canal to the Pennsylvania Canal: _____

(8) What was the Allegheny Portage Railroad? _____

Was it successful? _____ Why or why not? _____

(9) Name three cities that benefitted from the Erie Canal, and three that did not: _____

(10) Can you explain your answer to (9)? _____

PART FIVE: *the Impact of the Erie Canal*

According to the ARGUS program you used viewed, the Erie Canal was the most important engineering program in U. S. history. You will be assigned a short reading about the canal. Note that it had both positive and negative effects. Make a list of them on the chart below:

Positive Effects of the Canal	Negative Effects of the Canal

At the end of this packet are two **Functional Distance** maps. What does that term mean?

In 1780 all the major cities were located on _____.
In 1830, five years after the opening of the Erie Canal, what happened to the functional distance?

How can you explain this huge change? _____

WRAP UP:

The Erie Canal is still very much in existence, although its route is slightly different from the original "Clinton's Ditch." It is used mostly from recreational boating today. What other methods of transportation have replaced the movement of trade goods from the Erie Canal? _____

Today, many Upstate New York cities are not doing well economically. What advantage has this region of the country lost? _____



The famous locks as they appear today in Lockport, NY.