



Rochester's Man-Made Wonder: The Erie Canal

Rochester, NY became the country's first "boomtown" as a result of the Erie Canal's venture through the city and it forever changed the development and growth of the region.

In the early 1800's a miller named Jesse Hawley, in the town of Geneva, conceived the idea of a canal stretching from west to east across New York State. Originally derided as a project "little short of madness" by President Thomas Jefferson, the idea was fully supported by New York City Mayor DeWitt Clinton. When Clinton became governor of the state in 1817, he saw to it that the legislature quickly appropriated the funds for its construction. Dubbed "Clinton's Folly," the canal was finally completed in 1825.

Prior to that time, there was no simple way to transport people, raw materials, or manufactured goods from the international highway of the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Lakes, the country's internal thoroughfare. New York State was covered with mile upon mile of wilderness, swamps, mountains, tribes of Native Americans, waterfalls, great inland lakes, and a only a handful of brave settlers.

The Erie Canal changed all that cutting travel time in half, reducing shipping costs by 94%, causing the first great westward movement of American settlers, making New York City the busiest port in the United States, and turning Rochester into the country's first boomtown.

Construction Woes

One of the most amazing facts in the canal's history is that it was constructed by crews of untrained men, without the aid of a single professional engineer. Some of the obstacles they faced seemed insurmountable.

One major problem in the Rochester area was the deep Irondequoit Creek Valley and its glacier-formed hills; by hand-carrying dirt in wheelbarrows, workers created an embankment to carry the canal 70 feet above the valley floor. Now known as Bushnell's Basin, this Great Embankment was the largest ever accomplished by man.

Another involved crossing the roaring Genesee River in downtown Rochester; this was finally solved with the construction of a stone aqueduct spanning over 800 feet and supported by 11 stone arches. When completed, it was the largest structure of its type in

the world, attracting visitors from around the globe to view its great expanse. A second, sturdier version was built in 1842 to replace the original aqueduct. No longer carrying the canal, it is now the Broad Street Bridge in downtown Rochester, and it carries hundreds of vehicles back and forth across the river each day. However, there are currently proponents who are lobbying to again water fill the aqueduct as a tourist attraction.

Statistics

When the canal officially opened on October 26, 1825, at a cost of just over \$7 million, it was acclaimed as the greatest engineering marvel in the world. Stretching 363 miles from the Niagara River on the west to the Hudson River on the east, the canal was 40 feet wide and four feet deep, with 18 aqueducts to carry its waters across rivers and 83 locks to raise and lower boats a total of 568 feet from one end to the other.

The canal was rebuilt between 1835 and 1862 to widen it to 70 feet and deepen it to seven feet; 71 double locks were added, along with minor course changes to increase the speed of traversing it. Between 1905 and 1918, an entirely new third canal system was created to accommodate larger barges. Major course changes were made and most of the original, man-made channel was abandoned as rivers that had originally been avoided became part of the system.

A hundred years from its original construction, the canal took on the structure it is today: an average width of 125 feet, a depth of at least 12 feet, and only 34 locks. Some of the original locks have been preserved as historic sites.

Stops Along the Canal Today

Over the years the canal has become less a transportation corridor for the movement of people and goods and now strictly a recreational corridor. Scores of shops, services, picnic areas, restaurants, and marinas have sprung up along the canal route, with more in the planning stages. Following are some of the historic and recreational areas along the 100-mile stretch of the canal that spans the Rochester region.

Medina - The furthest point west from the city, this historic village boasts an attractive Canal Marine Park in the wide turning basin of the first Erie Canal. Another highlight is the Canal Culvert two miles east of Medina ----- the only tunnel allowing motorists to drive under the canal.

Albion - Canalside Park offers boating facilities and benches for visitors to watch the lift bridge operate. Walking tours of the village center are popular, with 34 19th century buildings, including private homes, churches, and a Greek Revival county courthouse located here.

Holley - Established on the original Erie Canal, the town has preserved its village square, historic sandstone buildings, 1914 fountain, and 1907 railroad depot-now a museum.

Waterfalls Park along the canal is a scenic, forever-wild area ideal for picnics, nature walks, hiking, and fishing.

Brockport - With two lift bridges just 900 feet apart, the single lift operator is kept busy dashing between them. Exhibits in the Brockport Museum recall its days of boat-building and agricultural glory; reminders of a former brickyard are still seen in the prominent homes that led to Brockport's "Red Village" nickname.

Spencerport - Begun as Ogden Center in 1802, the town became Spencerport in 1825 after the Erie Canal cut through Daniel Spencer's land. Its charming Main Street of shops and services is a present-day reminder of the canal's flourishing past.

Greece - Although only a small portion of the Erie Canal passes through this largest town in Monroe County, boaters find tiny Henpeck Park a welcome rest stop. With public docks, a quiet picnic area, and public restrooms, this small haven offers the additional convenience of a marina with overnight docking and fuel.

Rochester - The Erie Canal turned Rochesterville into an American "boomtown." The final reconstruction of the canal bisected the Genesee River in what is now known as Genesee Valley Park. Canal boaters can now reach the heart of the city via the river, and dock at the Corn Hill Marina. Within walking distance is the historic Corn Hill neighborhood and the Campbell-Whittlesey House, built by a wealthy Erie Canal merchant.

Pittsford - It was the canal that first brought prosperity to this town as tons of heavy gravel from nearby hills found an inexpensive mode of transport. A family restaurant inhabits the old coal tower, one of only two locations on the entire stretch of the canal where boats could refuel. The Pittsford village section of the canal also boasts a year-round population of ducks and geese who live near the grain mills, while specialty shops and restaurants and a bike rental shop line the popular canal towpath. A replica canal packet boat, the "Sam Patch," gives tours from this area.

Bushnell's Basin - Although there is no lock or docking area here, the area's scenery draws a steady parade of walkers, bike riders, and joggers along the old towpath. "Picture postcard" homes with beautiful lawns and gardens line the canal banks, and clustered in the nearby town are several restored buildings including a country inn, large restaurant, and rustic tavern.

Fairport - Fairport came to exist only after canal construction dried up the area swamps leaving fertile ground and a "fair port" for travelers to spend a night. The town features the only sloped lift bridge along the canal; a variety of shops and services are all easily accessible from both land and water. The Colonial Belle (largest tour boat on the canal) offer tours of the canal during cruising season (late spring, summer, and early fall).

Macedon - The center of a peacefully rural, agricultural community, the town boasts one of the few sections of the original Erie Canal that is still being used today. Macedon Canal Park provides picnic areas, hiking trails, boating facilities, and an observation deck. A new trail also enables visitors to hike from the main Canal Trail to the site of historic old Lock #60, built in the 1850's as part of the enlargement of the Erie Canal.

Palmyra - Internationally famous as the birthplace of the Mormon religion, Palmyra hosts thousands of visitors at its Hill Cumorah pageant each July, the largest outdoor religious pageant in the world. Historic Mormon sites and a visitor center are open all year. Aqueduct Park, west of the village, is located where its stone-arched namesake carried the original Erie Canal over Ganargua Creek.

Newark - Famous in its early days for having the world's largest field of roses and nurseries that sold shrubs and trees up and down the canal, the town currently provides more diverse entertainments ----- one of which is the Hoffman Clock Museum, one of only four clock museums in the United States.

Lyons - An international exporter of peppermint and essential oils during its flourishing canal days, the town has plans to preserve and interpret the site's history by restoring and possibly refilling the old E-56 double lock to the west. The Wayne County Historical Society Museum, in an 1854 former sheriff's residence and attached stone jail, provides visitors with a glimpse of earlier days, prehistoric and Native American life, plus military history of the area.

Clyde - The Montezuma Wildlife Refuge provides the town with some of the canal's most beautiful scenery. The town also offers visitors a window to the past in its Galen Historical Museum. Another major attraction today is one of the world's largest private collections of lilacs, open to the public for free viewing in May and June.

New York State Erie Canal Heritage Trail

This trail that more or less follows the original towpath along the canal was developed for walking, jogging, and bicycle use. Its surface varies from paved stretches to areas of hard-packed earth and stone. Access points have been constructed along the route from the water and from land, as it winds its way along the canal from Medina in Orleans County through Rochester in Monroe County, to Palmyra in Wayne County.

###