

NEW

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archives Jr!

The Erie Canal

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Erie Canal at Salina Street, Syracuse, NY, ca. 1900

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The Erie Canal

Twenty months in debtors' prison! This was the sentence Jesse Hawley, a flour merchant in Geneva, New York, faced after he went bankrupt. Hawley had many customers, but it was difficult and expensive to ship his flour. Roads were muddy with many ruts, and in the winter, they were almost impossible to travel. Because of this, Hawley could not make enough money to pay his bills, and why he ended up in debt and in prison in 1807.

While serving his sentence, Hawley had plenty of time to think. He had an idea—what if a canal were dug across New York State, connecting Lake Erie to the Hudson River, which would allow farmers in western New York and beyond to ship their produce and goods to New York City and across the Atlantic Ocean to Europe.

Hawley wrote about his ideas, including the canal route and how to build it, in a series of fourteen essays, published in the *Genesee Messenger* magazine. He believed that a canal would make shipping goods faster and cheaper, let New York be settled more quickly, and make New York City the largest port in the nation.

Canals were not a new idea. Europe had many canals, and people had been talking about a canal in New York for several years. But Hawley's essays got many people in the state thinking more seriously about a canal across New York. In 1810, the New York State Senate created a commission to study the best location for a canal. New York also had to find a way to pay for the canal. They hoped the federal government would provide the money.

In 1817, DeWitt Clinton was elected governor of New York State. He was a big believer in building the canal

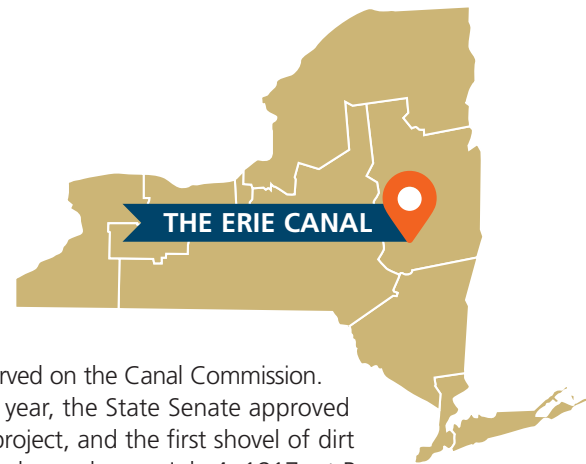
and had served on the Canal Commission.

That same year, the State Senate approved the canal project, and the first shovel of dirt for the canal was dug on July 4, 1817, at Rome.

Many people thought the canal was not needed and was a waste of money. They made fun of the project, calling it "Clinton's Folly" and "Clinton's Ditch."

By 1825, the canal stretched from Buffalo to Albany. It was 363 miles long, 40 feet wide, and 4 feet deep. Sections of the canal were completed and in use during the eight years it took to build the entire canal.

The entire Erie Canal was officially opened October 26, 1825. A fleet of boats, led by the *Seneca Chief* with DeWitt Clinton on board, left Buffalo and headed for Albany. There were celebrations in towns all along the way. In Albany, the boats floated south on the Hudson River to New York City. Clinton brought with him barrels of water from Lake Erie to pour into the Atlantic Ocean to symbolize the connecting of these two bodies of water. Now produce, goods, and people could travel by water across New York State.



Gnaw on This

- Lockport got its name from the original five double locks built there to take boats up and down the change in land elevation.
- The popular song "15 Miles on the Erie Canal" wasn't written until 1905, when boats were more often powered by engines, rather than horses or mules.
- Horses or mules walked on a tow path, pulling the boats along the canal. Most often young children, called hoggees, led them.

Community Connections



- **The Erie Canal Museum**, Syracuse. Visit this museum to see exhibits with interactive displays and original artifacts. eriecanalmuseum.org
- **Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor**. Use this website to plan a trip and learn about events along the path of the Erie Canal. eriecanalway.org
- **Erie Canal Park**, Camillus. In addition to many outdoor activities, visit the steamboat exhibit, shop the old-fashioned canal store, and take a boat ride on the Erie Canal. eriecanalcamilus.org
- **The Erie Canal Discovery Center**, Lockport. Learn about the construction of the canal and the Lock District. locksdistrict.com/erie-canal-discovery-cntr



Take a Closer Look

Student Name _____

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Wedding of the Waters



DeWitt Clinton High School Museum



Directions: Based on the text and this painting, answer the questions below.

Who is the person holding the barrel? _____

When did this event take place? _____

Where did this event take place? _____

What is happening in this photo? _____

WORDS TO KNOW:

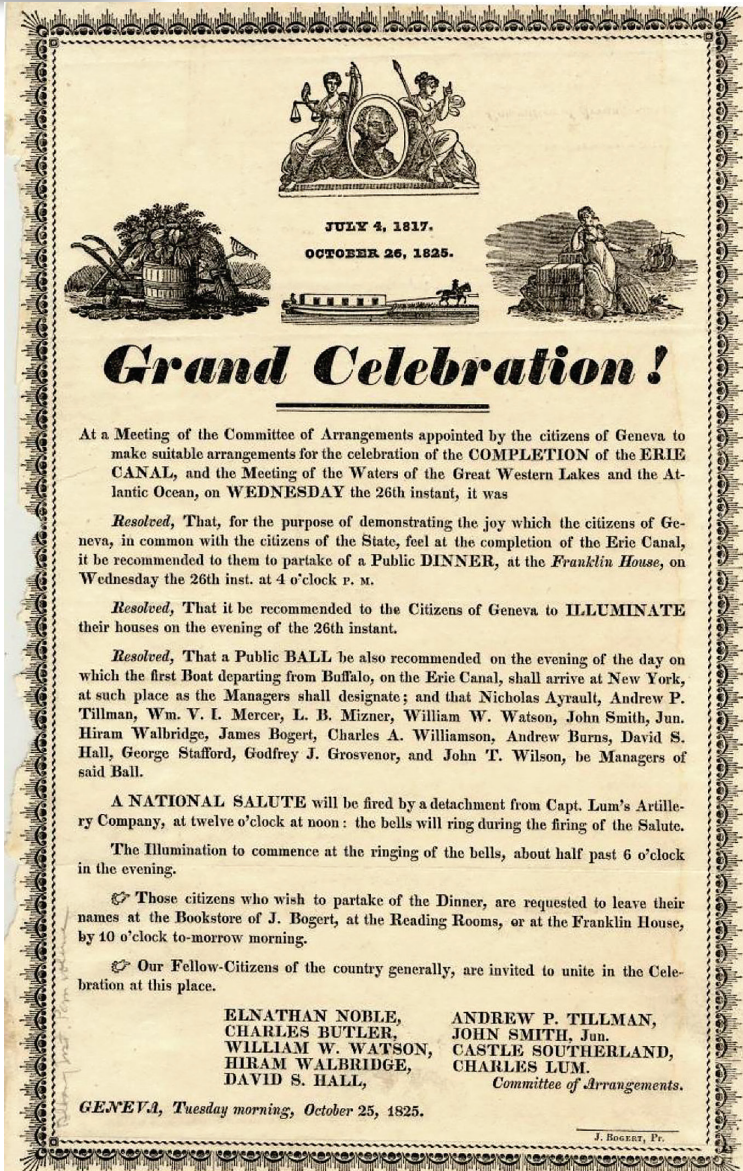
- **Commission** – a group of people given a specific task to do
- **Debtor** – one who owes money to other people or businesses
- **Bankrupt** – to be unable to pay one's debts
- **Folly** – foolishness



Learning Activity

Below is a broadside from the opening of the Erie Canal. A broadside is like a large poster that gives information for the public.

Directions: Read the broadside. Fill in the table. A larger table is available in the online resources.



What What is being planned?	
When	
Where What city?	
Why Why are these events being held?	

Why would people hold a grand celebration for the opening of the Erie Canal?
 What does this tell you about the importance of the opening of the Erie Canal?
 Write your answer on a separate piece of paper using details from the article and documents.

For more activities using this document check out
considerthesourceny.org/new-york-archives-jr/summer-2025.