


NEW YORK
archives Jr!
Teaching Guide



Topic: The Erie Canal Then and Now

Issue: Special Edition Winter 2026

NYS Social Studies Framework:

4.6b In order to connect the Great Lakes with the Atlantic Ocean, the Erie Canal was built. Existing towns expanded and new towns grew along the canal. New York City became the busiest port in the country

7.6c Students will examine the Erie Canal as a gateway to westward expansion that resulted in economic growth for New York State, economic opportunities for Irish immigrants working on its construction, and its use by religious groups, such as the Mormons, to move westward.

NYS Social Studies Practices:

A2, A5, A6, B1, B5, B7, C4, D1, D3

NYS Next Generation ELA Learning Standards:

4R1: Locate and refer to relevant details and evidence when explaining what a text says explicitly/implicitly and make logical inferences.

4R3: In informational texts, explain events, procedures, ideas, or concepts, including what happened and why, based on specific evidence from the text.

Notes about icons:



This icon is paired with observation questions to help students remember that to observe is to just look at what is in the document.



This icon is paired with inference questions to help students remember that to infer is to use what they observed paired with their own background knowledge to draw a conclusion.



This icon is paired with questions that require thinking about the worldview of those involved. This is to remind students to put on their “Worldview Glasses” and see things from the point of view of the people involved.



This icon is paired with questions that ask students to synthesize information from more than one source.

Big Ideas in this Issue: The Erie Canal was important to communities when it was new and it is important to communities now. The uses of the canal have changed over time.

Activities in This Issue:

Page 3 – “Take a Closer Look”

Students will make observations and inferences of two photographs of the same section of the Erie Canal in Pittsford. They will use the text along with their observations and inferences to write about how the community might have changed in 90 years. A Venn diagram is included in the online extras to help with this activity.

- The photographs are visual and allow students to see that the built landscape around the canal in this part of Pittsford has not changed much in almost 120 years. It is clear which buildings are still present.
- First students observe the photos, noting only what they see. You might point out that in both photos there is part of a boat shown in the lower right corner. Look at the buildings present, the trees, the canal, etc.
- Next students infer about how the buildings have changed. With close scrutiny they might notice small changes in the buildings the trees, the boats, etc. Thinking about the article, and the fact that the pictures are in fact very much the same they might infer that the use of the buildings have changed, as the buildings would no longer be needed for their original purposes.
- Extend this lesson to your community. Search online or contact your town historian or historical society to see if they have historic photos of common places. How has your community changed? Were buildings torn down and replaced? Are there historic buildings that have been repurposed?

Page 4 – “Learning Activity”

Students will go online to study two different maps of Pittsford (1902 and the present day) that show the local businesses. They will record the businesses found on each map, then they will write a comparison of the two time periods. The key lists the businesses and how they have changed over time. This can be related to your community, whether on the canal or not.

Take a Closer Look Online Extras:

- Venn diagram to assist with compare/contrast of two photographs in the Take a Closer look activity.

Learning Activity Online Extras:

- Businesses Then & Now student page – enlarged area to record what businesses were present on each on map and lines to summarize the changes.
- Laura Sherwood travel diary through upstate New York, 1823. Students will read an excerpt from Laura’s diary as pertains to travel near Pittsford and the Great Escarpment, then summarize it in their own words.
- Packet Boat Advertisement – students will read an advertisement about a packet boat that travels from Schenectady to Rochester in 46 hours. They will use another document that lists villages along the canal to determine what villages were between the two cities, and do some calculations to determine time and number of mules used in the trip.

A suggested ELA/SS project for this issue is to have students create a time-traveler’s brochure about a town along the canal. Pittsford is used for this issue so the additional documents included are for that area. This activity could be done using any community; contact your local historian or historical society to see if they have documents that might be useful. A note catcher for organizing ideas for time-traveling brochure is included.

Video: *The Erie Canal Then and Now* video created especially for this issue. It features Pittsford and Fairport.



Connections

ELA:

- *The Amazing Impossible Erie Canal* by Cheryl Harness
- *The Erie Canal* by Peter Spier
- *The Erie Canal* by Martha E. Kendall
- *The Story of the Erie Canal Just for Kids* by Sarah Michaels
- *The Erie Canal* by Andrew Santella (from the We the People series)
- *Building the Erie Canal* by Linda Thompson (from the History of America series)
- *Hoggee* by Anna Myers - makes a great read aloud

Websites:

- <https://eriecanalway.org/learn/history-culture> The Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor
- <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/history-of-the-ohio-erie-canal.htm> National Park Service: History of the Ohio and Erie Canal
- The Erie Canal Museum - <https://eriecanalmuseum.org/>

Virtual Field Trips:

- Experience the Erie Canal Corridor in 360* by National Parks - <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/erie-canalway-360.htm>
- The New York State Museum: Traveling the Erie Canal - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8LJtUg3Xq1g>