

Buffalo, the Queen City: The Rise of an Erie Canal Boomtown, 1825 to (1918)

Pamela Vittorio, M.A., PLCGS
Canalsystemconnections@gmail.com

Three Canals, 100 Years

Canal	I. Original Erie Canal “Clinton’s Ditch”	II. Enlarged Erie Canal “Old Erie Canal”	III. The NYS Barge Canal, aka, The New York State Canal System “1,000 Ton Barge Canal”
Size	40 ft x 28 ft x 4 ft	70 ft x 40 ft x 7 ft	120 ft x 75 ft x 12 ft
Length	363 miles	360 miles	524-mile system
Construction Began	1817	1834	1905
Completion	1825	1862	1918
Terminus: Approximate closing and Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Terminus at Buffalo • After 1840, some sections were closed; 1862-1870s (filled in) • Only small sections still exist. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Terminus at Buffalo • Closed in fall 1917 • Home to “colonies” at end of era • Sections filled in to create NYS Thruway. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Terminus at Tonawanda • Open to navigation

The original **Erie Canal** (1817-1862) was a controversial part of New York State’s transportation industry. Despite its monikers—from “Clinton’s Ditch,” to “the Grand Canal”—it opened up a gateway to the west, provided a new form of passenger transportation for a burgeoning immigrant population, and stimulated the emergence of boomtowns throughout New York State. Enlargement of the Erie Canal began in the mid-1830s (completed in 1862). NYS canal commissioners left behind a vast collection of maps and records of that tell a fascinating story.

In the canal’s western division, Buffalo, or, “Ol Buff” was the victor over Black Rock in the 1822 decision of where the terminus of the canal should be located. Between 1825 and 1918, the population in all canal towns boomed because of this novel way of travel and its convenient “Twenty-four-seven” system of transportation. The Barge Canal bypassed major boomtowns like Syracuse and Buffalo, and populations began to decline.

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Key points: Packet boats traveled in central NY from 1819. Canal completed at Buffalo by 1825; lateral canals also used packet boats for travel; cost was one to three cents per mile, could include meals and sleeping accommodations; boats left in morning & evening and traveled all night; Seasonal: May to December.

Railroads were known as “canal killers” but propelled western migration. Passenger travel on the canals began to dwindle as the packet boats could not compete with the speed of trains. Buffalo became a hub for many railroads – particularly the NY Central RR.

Key points: Passenger travel on the canals begins to dwindle by 1848; connections with canals and a network of stagecoaches facilitated the trip. Trains could travel anytime regardless of factors that affected pedestrian or stagecoach travel (e.g., weather, age, baggage).

The Peopling of NYS via Erie Canal

After construction of the Erie Canal was begun, advertisements highlighting new canal companies appeared in various newspapers. Passengers on the packet boats of the original Erie Canal were typically local businessmen, farmers and their families, or tourists who had heard about this “wondrous waterway” and wanted to experience packet boat travel.

Because of its harbor and primary location on Lake Erie – the goal of the canal commissioners and DeWitt Clinton in 1825 – the canal facilitated making connections westward. There were certain ways a person could travel to and from Buffalo, including stagecoaches and later, steamships across the lake.

Buffalo and Erie Canal Transportation: Gateway to the West

Though many boatmen and their families tied up in the Buffalo harbor, they might not appear in the census unless they also owned a farm. Since U.S. census was usually taken in the spring or summer, and the Hudson River and the NY State canals were open from May to November or December, we can estimate when boatmen might have arrived at a certain place in their migration pattern-- A to B to C to D, such as Ireland to New York City to Albany to Buffalo.

Canal Culture

Boatmen and “canallers” throughout the nineteenth century were often viewed negatively because they worked on Sundays, spent time in taverns and pubs, and often frequented “red light districts.” They had their own hierarchy of who was in charge of whom, or who was viewed as “higher class” – this came from internal perception that an owner or captain ranked above the steersman, and the steersman in turn, above the mule driver (sometimes a child or teen).

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Canal folk (“canallers”) took their culture with them – dialect and jargon, traditions, customs, behavior and style of dress—because they were usually in transit. Children might be born on the boats and often did not go to school until the boats were tied up for winter—either in Buffalo’s Erie Basin or another basin, like in Brooklyn or NYC, but other boom towns as well.

Canal boatmen and laborers, particularly in the eras of the original and enlarged canals, were of all ethnic backgrounds – Dutch or English heritage, German, Irish, and many other groups. Italian and Eastern European arrived during the construction of the Barge Canal in the early twentieth century, and many settled in Buffalo when work was completed.

Buffalo in Travelers’ Sources

Tourists’ journals or diaries espousing opinions of Buffalo varied. A few writers found that Buffalo had sprung up “too fast.” They believed this was due to pressure to keep up with the rapid transportation revolution (canals and railroads) and subsequent influx of people.

Gazetteers and Guides

Horatio Gates Spafford.

A Gazetteer of the State of New York. archive.org/details/gazetteerofstate01spaf

A Pocket Guide for the Tourist and Travellers along the line of the Canals and the Interior Commerce of the State of New York. New York, 1824.

General information: Erie and Other NYS Canals

Canal Corporation of NY State	canals.ny.gov/history/history.html
Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor	eriecanalway.org/explore/plan-your-visit/category/historic-and-cultural-sites-and-museu
Hofstra University	people.hofstra.edu/geotrans/eng/ch2en/conc2en/eriecanal.html
Sadowski, Frank Jr	Erie Canal.org; eriecanal.org/

1. **New York State Archives** (Canal Collection) “The Mighty Chain: A Guide to Canal Records in the New York State Archives.” New York State Archives. Publication #FA05. 1992.

The majority of canal-related records are contained in this vast collection at the New York State Archives. The bulk of the records are for the years 1817–1926, including passenger lists for 1828-1832, laborers’ receipts, weigh masters’ and lock tenders’ oaths, boat registers, and records of the canal commissioners.

Land Surveys (NYS Archives):

NYS Archives has digitized the Holmes Hutchinson Series. This includes names of land owners living within close proximity to the canal.

Buffalo: digitalcollections.archives.nysed.gov/index.php/Detail/objects/42956

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2. **New York State Historical Association** (Cooperstown).
nyscha.org/library/online/eriecanal.htm
 Also **New York Heritage Digital Collections**:
cdm16694.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/srr_ecm
3. **New York Public Library**, Main Branch, New York, NY. Various holdings.
4. **New York Historical Society, Museum & Library**, New York, NY.
 - Artifacts, Broadsides, Drawings, Images, Objects, Paintings, Portraits, Relics, Souvenirs.
 - Archival material relating to Erie Canal Enlargement (special archival collections, papers, and some manuscripts).
5. **Queens College**, Digital Culture of NY State, Waterways of New York
dcmny.org/islandora/object/waterways%3Acollection?page=22&display=grid
6. **NARA**: archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/036.html
7. **Other University Archives**: Cornell, Hofstra, NYU, Syracuse University, University of Virginia.
8. **SUNY Oswego, Penfield Library**. Has many boat registrations and canal documents.
oswego.edu/library/sites/www.oswego.edu.library/files/penfield-library-genealogical-resources.pdf

For information on today’s harbor:

Canalside in Buffalo: Development (21st C): buffalowaterfront.com/canalside

Partial List of Local/Smaller Archives with Canal-Related Materials

Eastern Division	Middle Division	Western Division
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fonda (Montgomery County) • Schenectady County Public Library (Digital History Archive) • Rome (Jervis Library and Rome Historical Society) • Utica (Oneida County History Center) • (Chenango and Erie Canal info at NYS Archives and NY Heritage Digital Collections) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chittenango Landing Canal Boat Museum (maps, journals, diaries, artifacts, photographs, architectural plans, etc.) • Erie Canal Museum, Syracuse (day books, journals, artifacts, maps, objects, etc.) • Fayetteville Public Library • Onondaga Historical Society (boat registers, diaries, letters, log books) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seneca Museum of Waterways and Industry • Tompkins County Public Library • Rochester: Monroe County Library • Buffalo Historical Society

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