

*Drowning in*



*From Tonawanda to*



**W**e have it—the “Brand Name Canal”—right here in Buffalo! We need to protect this irreplaceable piece of history. The best way to do this is to learn all about it. We have been “drowning” in the Erie Canal, learning all we can from the old maps.

The Erie Canal changed America. It was the first important link between the Atlantic Ocean and the Great Lakes. Without the Erie Canal, New Orleans and the Mississippi River would have been the port of entry to settling the wilderness in the West, instead of New York City and Buffalo. The Erie Canal put that flood of immigrants into the Northern states, thus changing the outcome of

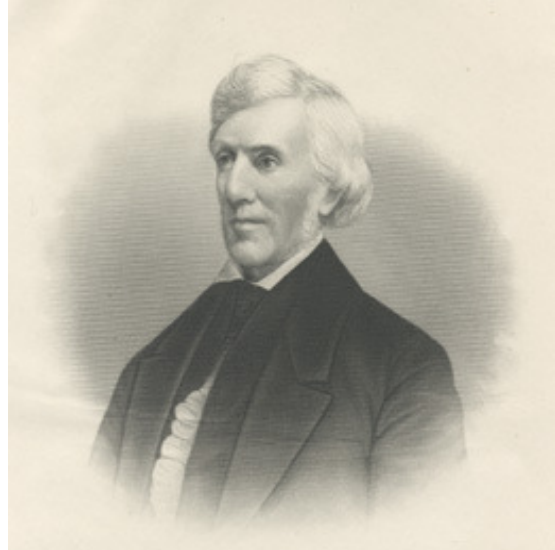
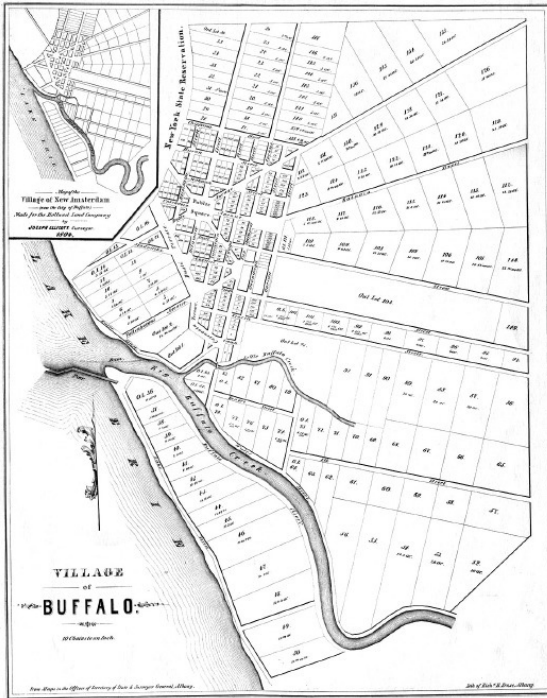
the Civil War.

The Erie Canal began the field of engineering, which put the USA in the lead of the Industrial Revolution.

Whose idea was this project? Europe had lots of canals. The Dutch, who first settled New York, were used to government projects that made life better for everybody, such as dikes to keep out the Sea. Was it their idea?

In 1772, **Ben Franklin** wrote, “Rivers are ungovernable things, especially in hilly countries. Canals are quiet and very manageable.” Maybe Poor Richard” thought of it!

**George Washington** was worried that the Appalachian Mountains were such a barrier that the western part of the continent would be a separate country. He



said in 1784, “Extend the inland navigation of the eastern waters....open also such as extend from the Ohio towards Lake Erie. We shall not only draw the produce of the western settlers, but the peltry and the fur trades of the lakes also, to our ports. Thus [we will be] adding immense increase to our exports, and binding these people to us by a chain which can never be broken.” George even visited New York State to see where a canal could help.

But it was a lowly flour merchant in 1807 who called himself “Hercules” who wrote lots of articles, telling why New

York State needed to build a canal. His real name was Jesse Hawley and he had lots of time on his hands, since he was in prison for 20 months, just for owing money. But he also had great ideas about connecting Lake Erie to the Hudson River.

The War of 1812 gave people the idea that we needed a canal. When England came over the Niagara River from Canada and burned Buffalo to the ground on the New Year of 1813, people said, “We need to get troops and goods out west more easily!”

So in 1817, people in Albany decided to study the idea. Dewitt Clinton, then the mayor of New York City, was on the committee. His Uncle George had been New York State’s first governor and Dewitt loved politics too. No matter who first thought of the Erie

Canal, it was Dewitt who made it happen! He said to New Yorkers, “We need to do this! We need six million dollars—that is \$5 for each New Yorker—then 1.3 million—to pay to the state.

Soon Clinton was governor of the state, just like his uncle. “Clinton’s Ditch” was begun!

This immediately began an argument about which little town would be the western end of the canal. Whoever won this fight would win great success and an amazing future as a port.

The two competing towns were Black Rock and Buffalo then two small villages separated by three miles of dark forest. Black Rock had a 100 foot black stone sticking out into the Niagara River which could serve as a harbor. But that Niagara River had a 12 mile-per-hour current, racing towards Niagara Falls.

Buffalo Creek’s water was calmer than the strong Niagara River. But Buffalo’s harbor unfortunately had a sandbar that made it hard for even a canoe to enter Buffalo Creek.

Future president Millard Fillmore visited Buffalo as an 18-year-old in May of 1818. He wrote, “Buffalo then presented a straggling appearance. It was

just rising from its ashes, and there were many cellars and chimneys without houses, showing that its destruction by the British [in 1813] had been complete.”

This argument was heated and went on for years! The newspapers were full of reasons and arguments about the placement of the western terminus of the canal.

Black Rock’s leading citizen then was Peter Porter. He’d become rich from controlling the portage route from Lake Ontario up the hills next to Niagara Falls. He was so rich he had built in Black Rock the first steamboat on the upper Great Lakes, called *Walk-on-the-Water*. Porter was sure that with his money and influence, he would get the canal terminus in his town, Black Rock.

But he did not know how hard Samuel Wilkeson of Buffalo was willing to work. He got \$12,000 of state money to help build a long pier along the south side of the entrance to Buffalo Creek [the beginning of which still leads to the 1833 lighthouse.] And when a freak storm and spring floods knocked down the simple pile driver and threatened to ruin the new pier, he gathered almost all the people of Buffalo together to fortify the pier. They even dammed the creek, working day and night,

to make the power of the water dig a new and better entrance from Buffalo Creek to the lake.

With this new pier, boats could anchor 1400 feet from shore and the 800' breakwall could protect boats from that fast-moving river current.

[*Wilkeson's tombstone said "Urbem condidit." He built the city.)*]

1818—Buffalo picked

1820—No, it will be Black Rock No, back to Buffalo again

1821—Black Rock picked

Finally, in July of 1822 at the Eagle Tavern in Buffalo, the canal commissioners debated where the terminus should be — Porter vs. Wilkeson, Black Rock vs. Buffalo. By winter the winner was announced—it would be Buffalo!

Black Rock did get state money though to built the 6500'-long Bird Island Pier into the Niagara River. [*It is still a favorite fishing spot that goes under the Peace Bridge.*]

So finally the digging began in Buffalo in August, 1823. Cannons were set off to celebrate the important day. Villagers came out with their oxen to help. Barrels of whiskey with tin dippers were placed every so often to keep the workers moti-

vated to work. The end of the canal was to be at the end of Pearl Street.

Up at Tonawanda, a dam and a lock were built and a channel was dug to head south parallel to the Niagara River. That way the mules would not have to fight that 12-mile-an-hour current of the river. Much of the soil that was dug up was dumped out on Strawberry Island, increasing its size from 100 acres to 200 acres.

The famous Black Rock, the size of a football field, had to be blown up and removed to build a channel next to the shoreline. Sadly, this had been a favorite ceremonial place for the Native Americans there. Sadly again, in May of 1826, spring floodwaters carried it away.

Buffalo by now had grown, since people with money to invest knew that Buffalo was headed for greatness. Buffalo's population was now 2500 with five churches, six schools, four newspapers, courthouse, a library, a theater, and a Masonic hall.

*Sidebar? How did the Irish get involved in building the Erie Canal?*

When more laborers were needed to get the canal done, Irishman J.J. McShane knew

where to find the right sort. He brought over from Ireland strong Irishmen who were used to earning only 80 cents a week. On the canal, they would earn 80 cents a day, even though that meant working for 14 hours straight!

Some hard workers wanted to be paid by how much dirt they moved. One team of three men worked so hard they made \$1.89 each for a very tough day of work.

### **The Opening of the Grand Western Canal**

On October 15th, 1825, now Governor DeWitt Clinton and his group left Albany, riding the *Seneca Chief* on the brand new 363 mile-long Grand Erie Canal. October 25th was the biggest day so far in Buffalo history when Clinton arrived. The next day Clinton paraded down Main Street, led by a band. All 2500 Buffalonians were out for the event. A speaker that day announced, "America can never forget to acknowledge, that they have built the longest canal in the world in the least time, with the least experience, for the least money, and to the greatest public benefit."

At 10 a.m., the governor officially opened the Erie Canal and left Buffalo, again on the *Seneca Chief*, with Samuel Wilkeson invited along too. This fanciest of all canal boats was pulled by four grey horses with plumes, ribbons, silver-plated harnesses. Behind the *Seneca Chief* was a boat called *Noah's Ark*, with two eagles, two fawns, two live bears and two Seneca Indian boys, all native to New York.

An experiment was launched that day in high speed communication. Cannons left from Perry's victory on Lake Erie had been placed all along the route of the canal and down the Hudson to New York City. The first was shot in Buffalo; when the next cannon tender heard that shot, he lit his own and so on all along New York State, celebrating the new era of commerce and transportation. It was a great success, taking only an hour and twenty minutes to reach New York City. Then it traveled north and back west—100 miles in three hours and twenty minutes, setting the record for the fastest news in the world!

It took the boats a bit longer—ten days— to reach New York City, but an over-land trip would have been two or three weeks, and not nearly so much fun. Two red, white and blue kegs of “the pure waters of Lake Erie” had traveled along and were now ceremoniously dumped in the Atlantic Ocean for “The Wedding of the Waters.” Samuel Wilkeson brought back to Buffalo a cask of ocean water which he then poured into Lake Erie for Buffalo’s own “Wedding of the Waters.”

#### Sidebar

Said eyewitness Thaddeus Joy, “I carried the first barrel of flour and the first bushel of wheat that ever went from the State of Ohio..[on]...this boat called the *Seneca Chief*, and left here on the 26th of October, 1825, amid the roar of cannon and the shouts of a vast multitude from the town and surrounding country who had assembled to witness the event, as well as to make public expression of their heart felt joy and gratitude, at the completion of so important a work. That noble Patriot, that great Statesman, that master spirit, Governor Clinton, was on board ; and in

this expedition, he fulfilled a prophetic expression which he once made on the floor of the Senate of this State, while advocating the construction of this canal. and before a spade full of earth had been raised upon it, he said, "I have no doubt, if I am not prematurely cut short in this life, that I shall yet ride in a canal boat from Lake Erie to tide water." And this he did do, to my certain knowledge, for I carried him in the *Seneca Chief* every inch of the way....

“...This boat with its distinguished guest and the various committees on board, passed through the canal amid the roar of cannon, the sound of music, the wavering of flags and banners, the shouts of the inhabitants, as well as bonfires and illuminations, by night and by day, until by the aid of steam on the Hudson River, she was towed out on the broad Atlantic, where the waters of Lake Erie, which had been carried in casks, were mingled with the briny deep, by the hand of that illustrious benefactor whose energies had the accomplishment of this great work.

“The water of the Atlantic was then dipped up, put into casks, and the boat returned to Buffalo and mingled the water of the Atlantic with that of Lake

Erie, which closed the ceremony, and the navigation closed the same night.

### **1825-1840—Boom Town**

Opening the Erie Canal opened the floodgates of immigrants, leaving the East coast to settle the Midwest. The farms they quickly developed produced in the fertile soils of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Wisconsin soon began an eastward flow of agricultural products to feed the East coast. All came through Buffalo.

Farmers of Western New York were now able to sell their products for a lot less! Before the canal, it had cost \$100 a ton to take flour to New York City by wagon. Now it was only \$10 a ton, soon to be \$3.

The Erie Canal brought wealth to the farmers and merchants of Western New York. The log cabins were expanded and replaced with the newest fashion of house architecture—white, columned Greek Revival houses.

If you didn't want to farm, perhaps you could be a captain on a canal boat for about \$30 a month. A young hoggee, the mule handler,

could earn \$7 to \$10 a month.

### **1850-1885—Major Port**

### **1885-1930—Age of Railroad**