

Celebrating the Erie Canal

To parody the old song, "fifteen miles (and two hundred years) on the Erie Canal!" Sal is no longer pulling tow ropes but life on the canal continues to this day. Communities along the Erie Canal are hosting events this year to commemorate the bicentennial of the waterway deemed the greatest public works project of the nineteenth century. Most of the events this fall are culminating in the journey of the Seneca Chief, a replica of the packet boat that carried state and local officials on a triumphant voyage from Buffalo to New York City in October of 1825.

The dream of a canal across New York State did not begin with DeWitt Clinton in the early nineteenth century. As early as 1724 a survey looked at a possible water route from Albany to Lake Ontario. In 1783, Christopher Colles completed a more detailed route. In 1806, the New York State Legislature passed the first canal law and appealed to the federal government for funding but President Jefferson considered the plan a physical impossibility and its advocates a hundred years ahead of their time. With the exception of a "government lock" at each end of the canal and some Works Progress Administration maintenance in the 1930s, the canal has remained a State-funded project.

Delayed by the War of 1812, Governor DeWitt Clinton didn't appoint canal commissioners until 1816. Actual construction began on July 4, 1817 at Rome with the roar of artillery and a great crowd of people. Rome was selected for the groundbreaking because the area was flat and would provide relatively easy conditions for digging. Additionally, it was thought that substantial progress made in the first months of construction would make it more difficult for a state bureaucrat to come along and say "stop."

Construction was done one section at a time and unconnected sections were flooded and opened as they were completed. The section through Brighton and Pittsford was in use by 1822. Because horses couldn't pull boats against river currents, the canal did not make use of natural waterways and was entirely hand-dug. It also used Lake Erie instead of Lake Ontario as its water source because the latter was in British control at the time the plans were made.

Jesse Hawley, an early canal planner, said that the men of New York State "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." Forty feet wide and four feet deep, the canal stretched 363 miles across the State with 83 single locks. The cost of construction was \$7,143,789. By 1835, revenues from the canal had paid off the maintenance and construction costs.

The canal was built with little or no technology, with hand and animal power. It trained a whole generation in architectural skills, in reality becoming a civil engineering school. Laborers made \$8 to \$12 a month and were, for the most part, New York State farmers. Some Irish immigrants worked on the canal but, with the majority of Irish coming during the famine period in the mid-1840s, it is more likely that they participated in the enlargement of the canal between 1835 and 1852.

When the construction of the canal began, ninety per cent of the land along its route was undeveloped. Land sales increased dramatically during the building of the canal. Property valued at \$200 in 1810 rose to \$12,000 in 1817. Residents prospered with the demand for labor, teamsters, horses and oxen, animal feed, blacksmithing services and human provisions. The cost of shipping freight to New York City dropped from \$100 to \$12.00 a ton.

Brighton's proximity to the canal provided easy access to markets for its agricultural products. Wheat and other grain products (in milled or distilled form), gypsum (refined into plaster fertilizer), lumber, wool, and bricks were shipped from Brighton farmers and manufacturers.

Its commercial functions usurped by trains, trucks, and planes, the canal now serves as its European counterparts do by providing recreational opportunities for residents and tourists. Although Brighton has lost its connection to the original Erie Canal, its successor still flows through the town, providing a fine place to celebrate Sal the mule and her long-gone tow rope.

Mary Jo Lanphear
Town of Brighton Historian
October 2025