Building "Clinton's Big Ditch," the Erie Canal
Using Primary Source Documents from EBSCO’s American Antiquarian Society Historical Periodicals Collection

Introduction

The Erie Canal was first proposed in 1808 as a way to link Lake Erie in the West with the Hudson River in the East. Opened in 1825, it was a state-of-the art engineering feat: at four feet deep and 40 feet wide, it included 18 aqueducts and 83 locks, and could accommodate boats carrying 30 tons of cargo. An enormous undertaking, building the canal required virgin forests to be cleared, trenches to be dug, and supplies to be moved over many miles. Were it not for an influx of immigrants during this time – including some 5,000 from Northern Ireland alone – the canal would never have been completed.

The initial canal spanned over 360 miles across New York State, connecting East Coast ports to the interior, and was responsible for the expansion of trade, travel, and population growth in the early American republic. It was sometimes humorously called "Clinton's Big Ditch," a reference to New York State Governor DeWitt Clinton, who championed the project.

Standards

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.7; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.9; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.7; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.9

Materials

- Computers/laptops/tablets
- Access to American Antiquarian Society Historical Periodicals Collection on EBSCOhost
- Optional: SMART Board/Overhead projector

Primary Source Documents

"DeWitt Clinton, Esq.," Casket, or, Flowers of Literature, Wit & Sentiment, Sept. 2, 1827. As the sixth governor of New York, DeWitt Clinton (1769-1828) was largely responsible for the construction of the Erie Canal. In 1817, he got the legislature to appropriate some $7,000,000 for construction, even though many thought the project was doomed to fail. Clinton proved his critics wrong: from the outset, the Canal moved people and goods efficiently, and through tolls, the state was able to recoup its initial investment. Once harshly criticized, Clinton was championed as a hero when the Canal was opened in 1825.
"Copies of two letters from Thomas Eddy Esq. of New York, to Charles Paleske, Esq. of Philadelphia," *American Register*, June 1810. Merchant, banker, and politician Thomas Eddy was one of the first to conceive of a canal across New York State, believing it to be an easier way of navigation than by way of rivers, and proposed setting up a commission to explore the idea. In this pair of letters, Eddy corresponds with Philadelphian Charles Paleske, president of the Delaware and Schuylkill Navigation Company, outlining his plan. Paleske's response points out the challenges of establishing a company to carry out such a "great undertaking."

Robert Fulton, et.al. *American Weekly Messenger*, April 23-May 28, 1814. This series of articles, published over several issues of the popular magazine the *American Weekly Messenger*, set out the benefits of constructing the Erie Canal, and responses to the myriad criticisms lodged against the project. Among the commissioners of internal navigation was Robert Fulton, inventor of the commercial steamboat.

"The Erie Canal," *Niles Weekly Register*, Nov. 20, 1819. Just two years after ground was broken on the Erie Canal, *Niles' Weekly Register*, one of the leading commercial magazines of the time, described it as a "splendid undertaking." The article continued by noting that because of the Canal, "the most remote points in our great inland seas will be brought near to the Atlantic." The long-term effects of the Canal, the article correctly emphasized, were incalculable.

"Roads and Canals," *Niles' Weekly Register*, Oct. 6, 1827. Even before the Erie Canal was completed on October 22, 1827, people were extolling the ways it was making internal trade and travel more efficient. This article describes how many goods from the South, including cotton, could be shipped to the interior via the Erie Canal. The Canal also helped military troops move easily from one place to another, and enabled emigrants to get to remote places, sparking a boost in land settlement and improvements in connecting roads, railway lines, and waterways.
Civil Engineer & Herald of Internal Improvements, Oct. 11, 1828. A year after the Canal was completed, people were trumpeting its great success. The magazine Civil Engineer & Herald of Internal Improvements, for instance, was reporting that 200 tons of merchandise a week were arriving at the Buffalo wharves, "destined for Michigan Territory and the states of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois." Americans' "canal fever" is illustrated in advertisements like these, which include one for newly-revised Ohio maps that show canal routes "correctly delineated," and another soliciting proposals to construct a similar canal system in Ohio.

"Map, Illustrative of a Communication between the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean," Civil Engineer & Herald of Internal Improvements, Nov. 3, 1828. Maps, more than words, best illustrated the power of the Erie Canal to connect America's hinterlands to a global commercial world. Shown here as a line cutting across New York State from Lake Erie to the Hudson River, the Canal enabled goods and people to travel between the interior and east coast ports – and hence, the world.

"View of the Aqueduct Across the Genesee River, at Rochester," The Gem: A Semi-Monthly Literary Journal, December 3, 1831. Spanning some 360 miles across New York State, the Erie Canal required many feats of engineering, including the construction of an aqueduct across the Genesee River at Rochester. It took two years to build, was 802 feet long, 17 feet wide, and had 11 arches.

"View on the Erie Canal," Peabody's Parlour Journal, Jan. 11, 1834. Cutting through some of the most scenic parts of the state, the Erie Canal afforded new opportunities for picturesque views. This image shows a packet boat, a mode of transportation people preferred in nice weather over traveling by stage coach. Usually pulled by three horses, packet boats could carry up to 30 people and traveled at about 4 miles per hour.
"Enlargement of the Erie Canal," New-York Farmer & American Gardener's Magazine, Nov. 1, 1835. Beginning in 1834, the Canal underwent massive improvements. In addition to increasing its width, engineers added locks and aqueducts, straightened it in some places, and abandoned short segments. The improvements were completed in 1862.

"Morals on Erie Canal," Morning Star, April 6, 1836. Enjoying a degree of mobility and freedom they would not have had on the farm, the boatmen who made their living on the Erie Canal could be an unruly bunch. This article is representative of the popular characterizations of boatmen, who were often considered rude and crude: according to contemporary accounts, they swore, drank too much, used "filthy" language, and engaged in "licentiousness."

"A Day on the Erie Canal," Family Magazine, June 1, 1839. Travelers were afforded new experiences on the Erie Canal – moving at a faster rate than by horse and carriage and experiencing some of the most picturesque landscapes they had ever seen. Like the railroads that would soon follow, canal transportation inspired a new genre of travel literature. This piece, "A Day on the Erie Canal," is one of many such examples.

Activities

1. Mapping: Have students map the Erie Canal across New York State. Each student can research upstate, New York, towns and add plot points describing the town's history, what it was known for, and how the Erie Canal affected the town's development during the 19th century. It could be done in an interactive, on-line medium.

2. Songs and verse: The Erie Canal inspired countless songs and poems. Have students research some of these pieces so that they can write their own songs/verse about the Canal, possibly set to contemporary music.

3. Biographies: People who played key roles in the conception and construction of the Canal were also involved in other activities, from politics to business. They often knew one another and capitalized on their economic and political ties to launch other entrepreneurial endeavors. Students can create biographies for these important people, showing how they were linked together socially, professionally, and economically.