



# THE “NEW” ERIE CANAL

## *Turns 100*

“Pittsford on the Erie Canal”  
by George Harvey, 1837

*The Canal required innovation at every turn, including unprecedented engineering advancements.*

**I**n which year did the Erie Canal open, 1825, 1862 or 1918? Depending on one’s perspective, all three answers are correct. Although the canal was first completed in 1825, it was re-routed and enlarged in a massive 28-year project ending in 1862, which resulted in an essentially new canal. Its present-day course and configuration opened to navigation in 1918, marking 2018 as the 100th anniversary of New York’s storied waterway in its current form. It’s an important milestone and part of the nine-year Erie Canal Bicentennial celebration, from 2017 (200 years after the start of construction on the original Erie Canal) to 2025 (200 years after the opening of the original Erie Canal).

Among history buffs, the canal’s three iterations carry different names: The “Barge Canal” was bestowed upon the current passage when it opened

a century ago. The broadened and re-routed version completed in 1862 is known as the “Improved Erie Canal” or “Enlarged Erie Canal.” The original canal is dubbed the “Old Erie Canal.” Or one can happily hail the waterway at any point in time as the “Erie Canal.”

Although the Erie Canal would eventually be regarded by some as the “Eighth Wonder of the World” and was foundational to New York State’s prosperity in the early 19th century, it was widely considered a colossal waste of funds before and during its construction. “Clinton’s Ditch”— after DeWitt Clinton, a staunch canal-advocate and New York’s Governor at the time – was the snide descriptor attached to the project in 1817 by those who believed the \$7.1 million project was foolish. When it was first proposed, Thomas Jefferson derisively described it as “a little short of madness.”

RIGHT: LOCK 56, LYONS, MARK DECRACKER



Entrance to one of the enlarged (1836-1862) Erie Canal locks.

FAIR RIGHT: TOP TWO: NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES, ALBANY, NY; BOTTOM: SCHOHARIE AQUEDUCT: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

**An Engineering Challenge.** The Canal required innovation at every turn, including unprecedented engineering advancements. As a result, the Erie Canal's Chief Engineer Benjamin Wright is now widely regarded as the Father of American Civil Engineering.

Today, such a project would be undertaken with bulldozers, excavators and an assortment of specialized heavy machinery. The original 40-foot wide by four-foot deep channel was excavated by men using hand tools and primitive, horse-drawn machinery. Water was also used in the canal's construction, its earth-softening and erosive power harnessed for excavation. The stone and soil removed to create the canal was fashioned into the "towpath," the corridor along one side of the wa-

terway upon which teams of horses and mules pulled the barges.

Highly-skilled stone masons were integral to construction of the canal. Locks, aqueducts for spanning rivers, and culverts for crossing small streams were all built from stone, with each piece set by hand.

Although progress was slow at first, more efficient methods of construction rapidly developed to overcome these challenges. When the canal officially opened to great fanfare on October 26, 1825, its completion was well ahead of schedule.

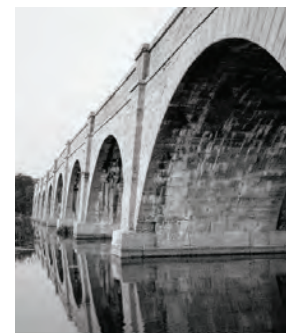
The economic sea of change precipitated by the canal's construction was both immediate and immense. Crops grown in the western portion of New York State and further west could efficiently travel down the canal and the Hudson River to New York



Construction of Lock E-5 on the Barge Canal, Waterford, August 20, 1908.



Enlarged Lockport "Flight of 5" twin staircase locks, April 8, 1907.



Above: Schoharie Aqueduct. Far left: Erie Canal at Little Falls. Middle: Barges on the Erie Canal in Rochester.



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Signs located in the quaint Canal Place district in Little Falls, NY direct visitors to the many attractions along the Erie Canal & Mohawk River.

Below left: A “narrowboat” near Macedon. Below right, top: The Colonial Bell traverses the Great Embankment 70 feet above the countryside. Below right, bottom: Historic watercraft in Rome, 2017.

City, and then to national and international markets. Finished goods flowed back up the Erie Canal system to Albany, Buffalo and beyond. Shipping costs plummeted while the speed at which goods and commodities traveled often doubled. New York Harbor turned into the nation’s busiest port, and the city itself became the economic capital of the world. No longer “Clinton’s Ditch”, the overnight success of the Erie Canal proved the mettle of its supporters, engineers and laborers.

**The Canal Today.** Today’s New York State Canal System remains a viable commercial waterway used for the transportation of specialty cargo. It supplies irrigation water for agriculture. It generates clean, renewable energy at 27 locations. It supports research and development, mining and manufacturing processes near its banks, and it provides drinking water for many communities. That said, perhaps the Canal System’s most prominent role today is recreation and tourism. Kayaks, pleasure craft and tour boats share the waterway. Families can rent a replica “narrowboat” for a week, cruise the Canal on a small cruise



ship or take a day tour on the historic waterway. Cyclists, joggers and casual strollers take advantage of the popular Canalway Trail along its banks. Visitors to the canal and the trail system support local businesses and educational institutions.

Use of the scenic Erie Canalway Trail is poised to increase exponentially with the completion of the 750-mile Empire State Trail in 2020. This continuous 750-mile route, the longest multi-use state trail in the nation, includes the Canalway Trail. It will span the state from New York City to the Canadian border and from Albany to Buffalo.

Today’s Erie Canal and New York State Canal System offer fun, historic, charming and scenic destinations and activities for both residents and visitors. After 200 years, New York’s iconic canals are just getting warmed up.

*For more information on its heritage, ways to enjoy the Erie Canal and Canalway Trail, and destinations along the canal and trail, go to [canals.ny.gov](http://canals.ny.gov) and [eriecanalway.org](http://eriecanalway.org).*



## GLASSBARGE TRAVELS NEW YORK'S WATERWAYS

*Glassblowing demonstrations commemorate the state's canal system.*

The Corning Museum of Glass (CMoG)'s GlassBarge offers free public glassmaking demonstrations at scheduled stops during its four-month tour. Launching on May 17th from Brooklyn Bridge Park, it will travel north up the Hudson River, then westward along the Erie Canal en route to the Finger Lakes. A ceremonial last leg of the trip will take place by land, concluding in Corning with a community-wide celebration on September 22nd.

GlassBarge commemorates the 150th anniversary of the Brooklyn Flint Glass Company's (now known as Corning Incorporated) relocation to Corning by barge using the New York Waterways canal system. In celebration of this pivotal journey, CMoG is recreating the voyage with GlassBarge, a 30-foot by 80-foot canal barge equipped with CMoG's patented all-electric glassmaking equipment. In addition to sharing the story of glassmaking in Corning, the GlassBarge tour emphasizes the continued role of New York's waterways in shaping the state's industry, culture, and community. GlassBarge is the signature event for the state-wide celebration of the Erie Canal Bicentennial.

"Glassmaking innovations in Corning have shaped the modern world, from the first electric lightbulbs for Thomas Edison and the invention of optical fiber for telecommunications, to the glass



### COME ABOARD GLASSBARGE!

The 30-minute glass-blowing demonstrations will occur at each location from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Reservations are strongly encouraged ([www.cmog.org/GlassBarge](http://www.cmog.org/GlassBarge)). Tickets are available four to six weeks prior to each stop. The demonstration can also be viewed from shore without a reservation.

used in modern flat screen displays," says Rob Cassetti, senior director of creative strategy and audience engagement for The Corning Museum of Glass. "That story all began with a voyage on New York State's waterways. We're excited to commemorate the 150th anniversary of glassmaking in Corning by sharing our story, and by shining a spotlight on waterfront communities with their own stories enabled by these historic waterways."



### CYCLE THE ERIE

From July 8th to July 15th, over 650 cyclists will pedal 400 miles, from Buffalo to Albany, along the historic Erie Canalway Trail. The journey celebrates the Erie Canal Centennial and the Parks & Trails New York's 20th annual Cycle the Erie Canal bike tour. Along the way, cyclists will enjoy some of the finest scenery and interesting history.

It's among the most unique, unparalleled rides in the United States. Participants will travel 40 to 60 miles per day along the Erie Canalway Trail, which is now 80 percent complete and will be completed by 2020 as part of the statewide 750-mile Empire State Trail.

[www.ptny.org/cycle-the-erie-canal/annual-bike-tour](http://www.ptny.org/cycle-the-erie-canal/annual-bike-tour)

Can't make those dates? Create your own cycling itinerary as a day-trip or multi-day excursion. Amtrak stations in Buffalo and Albany offer easy access to the Erie Canalway Trail for cycling and other activities. [www.ptny.org/cycle-the-erie-canal](http://www.ptny.org/cycle-the-erie-canal) ●

*For more information on transporting your bike on the train, see page 20.*

[www.amtrak.com/bring-your-bicycle-onboard](http://www.amtrak.com/bring-your-bicycle-onboard)

## GLASSBARGE SCHEDULE

**May 17-28**  
Brooklyn Bridge Park

**June 1-3**  
Yonkers\*

**June 8-10**  
Poughkeepsie\*

**June 15-17**  
Kingston

**June 21-24**  
Albany/Troy/Waterford\*

**June 30-July 1**  
Little Falls

**July 7-8**  
Sylvan Beach

**July 13-15**  
Baldwinsville

**July 20-22**  
Fairport

**July 28-29**  
Lockport

**August 3-5**  
Buffalo\*

**August 11-12**  
Medina

**August 17-19**  
Brockport

**August 24-26**  
Pittsford

**September 1-3**  
Seneca Falls

**September 14-16**  
Watkins Glen

**September 22**  
Corning

*\*Denotes locations with Amtrak stations.*