

A Brief History of the Erie Canal



Built between 1817 and 1825, the original Erie Canal spanned 363 miles from the Hudson River at Albany to Lake Erie at Buffalo. By providing a waterway route that connected the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean at New York City, the Erie Canal brought immediate and lasting impacts to New York State and the nation.

- The Erie Canal was the longest human-made waterway and the greatest public works project in North America at the time. It was celebrated widely as an engineering marvel and technological achievement.
- The canal lowered costs for shipping freight, decreased travel times across New York, and gave rise to industries and cities along its path.
- It transformed New York City into the nation's principal seaport and created a new gateway to the Midwest and Great Lakes.
- The canal powered the rise of New York as the Empire State—the leader in population, industry, and economic strength.
- The canal served as the Internet of its day, spreading news and promoting the expansion of social movements like women's rights and the abolition of slavery.
- The canal was not good for everyone. Canal construction and the influx of people to the state contributed to the dispossession and displacement of Indigenous Peoples from their lands in New York and the Midwest. While building the canal provided jobs, the exploitation of immigrant labor and poor working conditions were documented during initial canal construction and during its later expansion.
- Construction of the Erie Canal led to the emergence of an American national identity, encompassing much of what we now consider to be fundamentally American: charismatic leadership, boldness and risk-taking, territorial expansionism, technological prowess, economic and industrial power, and cultural exchange.

The Changing Erie Canal



Since its opening in 1825, New York State widened and deepened the Erie Canal three times to make way for larger boats and more traffic. Changes were made to the route and to structures like locks and bridges each time.

1825 — The canal that opened in 1825 is often referred to as the “old” or “original” Erie Canal. This canal was four feet deep and 40 feet wide.

1862 – 1918 — From 1835 to 1862, the canal was enlarged to seven feet deep and 70 feet wide. It took many years to build new structures and deepen the canal. The canal from 1862 to early 1900s is referred to as the Enlarged Erie Canal.

1918 – Today — The canal was completely rebuilt from 1905 to 1918 to make way for motorized boats and large commercial shipments. With mules no longer needed to pull boats, engineers moved some sections of the canal into rivers and lakes. The Erie Canal along with the Champlain, Oswego, and Cayuga-Seneca canals was renamed the New York State Barge Canal System. The word “barge” is no longer commonly used since most canal traffic today is recreational.

The Canal Today



The New York State Canal System has been in continuous operation since 1825, longer than any other constructed transportation system on the North American continent. You can still travel by boat from Buffalo to Albany or walk or cycle much of the former towpath, which is now part of the cross-state, multiuse Empire State Trail. Numerous canal sites and museums showcase the canal’s legacy—from its locks and low bridges to its transformation of New York State, to the prominent role it continues to play in shaping communities along its shores. The NYS Canal System was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2016.