

# Erie Canal Historical Marker

by Cletus A. Benjamin, SR/WA

*Cletus Benjamin, was president of Chapter 18 in 1992 and promoted the idea of presenting historical markers to canal museums to commemorate the canal right of way and identify IRWA. He is also vice chairman of the International Property Management Committee. Mr. Benjamin is a property negotiations coordinator for the New York Power Authority.*

*Credit for ideas and information in this article goes to the Syracuse Erie Canal Museum and their video, "Transportation and Inspiration."*

"As your tour guide here in New Orleans, I will point out many of our great points of interest such as Bourbon Street, Canal Street, and the Statue of Liberty ..."

But, the Statue of Liberty is in New York City, not New Orleans. The question is, "Why?"

Basically, the Statue of Liberty is where it is because of DeWitt Clinton and his "Big Ditch," the Erie Canal. In the early 1800s, most of the development of this continent was along its fringes. From Alabama to Canada, the Appalachian Mountains created a natural barrier to westward movement. There were only two good routes west-the National Road and the Wilderness Road-but they were difficult and slow for travelers and produce. The other route followed the Hudson and Mohawk River valleys in New York state, but again travel was difficult and slow through the wilderness. During the Revolutionary War and shortly afterward,

George Washington expressed support for a waterway to the West using the Mohawk River and the Great Lakes. Later President Jefferson opposed the idea of spending taxpayer money for a 350-mile route through the wilderness to nowhere. The United States did not have experienced workmen or canal engineers for such a monumental task. But Gov. Clinton prevailed on the New York state legislature to approve the \$6 million project and the 363-mile surveyed route was cleared by hand. Many immigrants came with the promise of jobs, and the "ditch"-40 feet wide and four feet deep with two 10-foot wide tow paths-was dug and built across wilderness and swamps, over rivers and through rock cuts. There were 83 stone locks in all, of which five formed steps at Lockport in western New York to get on top of the plateau up river (east and south) of Niagara Falls. Remember, Lake Erie is 571 feet higher than the Hudson River.

This project was the first major public works project in the new nation, and it had many positive impacts. It created our first school of civil engineers and started the contracting business field. Communities developed along the canal to support the building of the canal and its workers, anticipating the business the canal would foster. It took eight years to build the canal and by October 1825, when it officially opened, Thomas Jefferson had changed his mind, as did thousands of others concerning its need and usefulness. Europeans began to admire the American "can do" attitude and accomplishment. Raw materials moved from the settlements in the West to eastern cities and on to Europe. Other materials and boatloads of immigrants moved West. The first year the canal was open, 40,000 settlers, mostly Europeans seeking new freedom, be-



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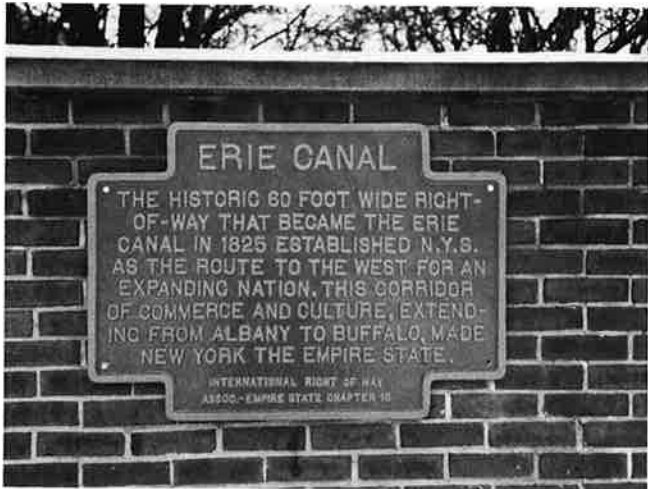
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Empire Chapter 18 donated two of these historical markers to Erie Canal Museums, one at Lockport, and this one mounted in the area of the original canal toe path in downtown Syracuse.

came the most precious cargo on the canal. They paid 4 cents per mile, which included three good meals and a place to sleep. Between 1820 and 1860, 3.5 million people passed through New York City, with the desire to settle this new nation. Many settled in New York state and contributed to its ethnic diversity and to the numerous skills of its workforce.

Industry boomed along the canal, since raw materials were close at hand and could be processed and then shipped cheaply to city markets. As an example, salt mined near Syracuse had cost \$6 per barrel to ship to New York City by road. Once the canal was operating, it cost only 60 cents to ship the same barrel of salt to New York City. The canal is the main reason New York became the Empire State and why the Statue of Liberty is in New York harbor.

If the canal were not built, the development of the Midwest would have had to begin in New Orleans and move up the Mississippi River. New Orleans would have been the point of entry for most of the immigrants. Products would have moved from the Appalachians to the Mississippi down river in a different transportation corridor to New Orleans, which would have become the center of finance, politics and social life.

The Erie Canal proved that the United States was to be a world power. With the success of the Erie, 4,000 more miles of canals were built, now with an experienced workforce and skilled canal engineers.

With this information in our minds, members of Empire Chapter 18 proposed to erect two historic

markers to commemorate the Erie Canal as one of the first major rights of way acquired in the United States. A foundry was hired to cast our markers, and


two canal museums accepted our offer of the donated signs. One marker is now on a wall where the tow path once was in downtown Syracuse. A beautiful statue of a mule and lad stands nearby. Across Erie Blvd., the museum is in the former Erie Canal Weighlock building, where full and empty canal boats were weighed to determine the toll on their cargo.

The other sign is on the outside wall of the museum building in



On the toe path of the original Erie Canal are the statue of a mule and "hoggee," a boy boat driver.

Lockport beside the double set of five locks, built to lower eastbound and raise westbound boats 70 feet.

If you think your job is interesting, imagine what it must have been like to acquire the right of way for the Erie Canal? 

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