The Erie Canal: Breaking The Barrier to the West

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Senior Division

Group Exhibit Board

Words: 500
By chance, A.J. read an article about the Erie Canal and realized the historical jackhammer it was. It broke the barrier of the Appalachian mountains. It broke the barrier of westward migration. It broke the barrier of commerce, and it broke barriers of Irish immigrant stereotypes. Brad Utter of the New York State Museum told us, it was “the internet of its day.” Before the Canal, Philadelphia, New Orleans, and even Baltimore all had more trade traffic than New York City. Shipping between the Midwest and New York along the Erie Canal made the Empire City a commercial hub.

Our research began from the general internet but soon expanded to correspondence with various experts and archives. We contacted Brad Utter, curator of the New York State Museum’s Erie Canal Exhibit, and Craig Williams of the Canal Society of New York State. They were crucial to breaking misconceptions about the canal and the vital role the Irish played in it. Primary sources on the Canal are inherently hard to come by—as Mr. Utter and Mr. Williams corroborated—luckily there are digital collections at the Library of Congress and New York State Archive. The nature of working with many sources needs careful scrutiny. Several writings that were attributed to be primary sources, had inconsistencies in author and date. We took a conservative approach and discarded these sources.

An exhibit board was the most practical and symbolic category for an Erie Canal project. It enables us to present the layered, multi-linear story that the canal is and requires us to physically construct something just as the canal itself required construction. Every color on the board has significant meaning in telling the story of the Irish and the canal that changed everything. Coordinating schedules between three people was difficult, so we divided our
resources and did what we could independently. In the end, we all had to agree on a narrative and outline our board despite difficulties.

The engineering feet of the Erie Canal is by itself breaking a huge barrier, demonstrating for the first time in the new country a need for civil engineers. But what’s more impressive is the political barrier that was smashed by the state of New York’s undertaking. Never before had a public agency undertaken such a massive and complicated task. It was even debated whether it was constitutional. The Erie Canal broke the physical barrier between the Midwest and the East Coast. By reducing shipping time and cost, it jump-started a consumer economy in America. Moreover, just as the Canal needed the Irish, the Irish needed the canal. The mass wave of public infrastructure projects spurred by the Erie Canal’s success provided many jobs for future generations of Irish immigrants. These large numbers of immigrants eventually surpassed the stereotypes and gained a hardworking reputation, helping the Irish ethnicity as a whole to gain respect in American society. The impacts are simply so numerous that we can not possibly provide them all in proper detail on one exhibit board.

This fictional story presents an interesting combination of misconceptions and true factors to life on the Canal. That passengers would jump from low bridges on the barges below is still debated to this day.

Allen, Thomas S. “Low Bridge Everybody Down: or Fifteen Years on the Erie Canal.” Haviland, 1913.

Often mistaken for a traditional folk song, this 1913 Tin-pan Alley hit remains the iconic Erie Canal song from New York State. We used this to get a good idea of the time and how it impacted the Americans.

“An act respecting navigable communications between the great western and northern lakes and the Atlantic ocean.” New York State Assembly. Passed April 15, 1817

After years of seeking federal funding for the canal by Presidents Jefferson and Madison and Congress, Governor Clinton eventually submitted the proposal to the State Assembly. This resolution created a Canal Commission to oversee the construction and was given $7 million to see it through.

Annual report of the Canal Commissioners. 1818.

The Commissioners' report illustrates that immigrant involvement was limited to ¼ of laborers in the initial months, but highlights the superior abilities of the immigrant workers. This was how we found the wages of workers and found specificities as to initial hurdles for the Canal’s construction.
“Canal Regulations, Rates of Tolls, and Distances on the New-York State Canals; as Established by the Canal Board and Canal Commissioners, and in Force on Said Canals.” E. Croswell, Printer to the State, 1830.

This is how the canal paid for itself: tolls. The Canal Board established these rates towards the end of construction. Even with the tolls, the cost of transporting goods and people on the canal was significantly cheaper than by road. For the first 5 years, there was simply no competitor and the canal’s profits were incomparably impressive.

Colden, Cadwallader D. “Memoir, Prepared at the Request of a Committee of the Common Council of the City of New York, and Presented to the Mayor of the City, at the Celebration of the Completion of the New York Canals.” W.A. Davis, 1825

This work and its Appendix contain period lithographs of the canal construction and highlights of the "Grand Canal Celebration," also known as the Marriage of the Waters, at New York City.

Elkanah Watson diary entry, Sept. 9, 1791.

In this diary entry, writer Elkanah Watson describes the difficulty of traversing Wood Creek by boat, explaining how the unmaintained waters meant on a bad day you couldn’t get more than 2 miles upstream before beaching.


The Library Of Congress gave us multiple pictures but specifically a picture of lock number 18 along with the date and locations and captions. We used this cite several times throughout our project.


This essay, written by the man who conceived the idea of the Canal, advocates the enlargement of the canal to allow larger boats passage. Hawley’s principal argument for the Canal was the economic benefits, and if the canal were widened and deepened, it could take more than just mule-drawn barges, he reasoned.

Hosack conveys George Foreman’s account of meeting with President Jefferson in person. Jefferson acknowledged the value of such a canal, but suggested the federal government turned too slowly, so in practice, it was “little short of madness.”


This excellent source gave tons of pictures and many links for additional information. It also gave the dimensions of multiple locks that were used to get a good idea of how the engineering and design all came together to work as efficiently as possible.


This map of the territory of the United States during the French-Indian Wars illustrates the large territory west to the Appalachians. A great concern of DeWitt Clinton and southerners like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson was which route would be the primary gateway from the east to the midwest. The river system naturally favored a route through southern, slave-holding states.

Letter from Philip Schuyler to unknown recipient, 14 Mar. 1796.

New York’s Senator Philip Schuyler was one of the Canal’s Congressional advocates. In this letter to an unknown “Sir,” he expresses his doubt that Congress will approve any funding for the canal and laments over how the state might fund what he considered to be an immensely useful endeavor.

Letter from Robert Fulton to President George Washington, 5 Feb. 1797.

President Washington received a copy of Fulton's Treatise on Canal Navigation and wrote an acknowledgment to Fulton, who thereupon replied with the following letter suggesting the creation of a canal between Philadelphia and Lake Erie.
Letter from Thomas Jefferson to DeWitt Clinton, 14 Apr. 1817.

Jefferson was the first of two presidents to be asked to fund the Erie Canal project. Jefferson’s response to Clinton’s request and argument came down to practicality. It was, for the revolutionary generation, to be enjoyed in contemplation only, Jefferson responded.

Letter from Thomas Jefferson to DeWitt Clinton, 12 Apr. 1822.

Nearing the canal’s completion, DeWitt Clinton again wrote to former President Jefferson. Humbly, Jefferson acknowledges he was wrong about the canal’s prospects, saying New York “has anticipated by a full century the ordinary progress of improvement.”

Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/

The Library of Congress lacks a robust manuscript collection surrounding the Erie Canal’s inception and construction, but it makes up for it in images. Both paintings of—though not necessarily from—the decades after its creation and later ones from the sixties, nearly half of our board’s images are from their collections.


An advertisement for the land formerly owned by the Holland Land Company along the Erie Canal, now offered for sale by Trumbull Cary, et al. This is evidence of the Erie Canal’s effect on land value. Properties along or near the canal went from relative undesirability to being as valuable per acre as any land in Upstate New York.

Register of Canal Boats, January 1, 1833

Within a few years of opening, the Erie Canal was immensely successful, turning massive profits for the state of New York. The registry of boats for the canal just 7 years after opening spans 34 pages and includes over 1,500 boats.

“The Canal.” Cooperstown Otsego Herald, 31 Jul. 1820

This newspaper article published during the canal’s construction plays an advocate for the plan, building hype by emphasizing the ease and cheap price of canal versus terrestrial travel.
“The Erie Canal, New York State, and the United States.” New York State Library,

The state library provided us with the majority of our primary source manuscripts as well
as images of or relating to the canal, some of which are displayed on the board.
**Secondary Sources**

Websites


The article focuses on the contributions of the Irish and Irish descendants on making the Erie Canal a reality. It discusses how Irishmen were instrumental, such as Governor DeWitt Clinton, canal engineer J.J. McShane, as well as thousands of Irish canal workers.


The article describes an exhibit that shows the breadth of the contributions of the Irish and Irish descendants on constructing the Erie Canal. It focuses on the significance of the connections of the Irish to the canal.


This source had pictures that we used for Irish Immigrants. We learned about the Impacts that it lists, both good and bad, in that time in the form of a list. This site also gave a pre-Erie Canal idea of what the land looked like before construction.


This source gave us pictures and context of what the Irish did during the famines. We did use one quote explaining the hard times for the Irish.

This website talks about the Appalachian Mountain Barrier that posed problems for travel. After that, it talks about the Politics of the Erie Canal and whether or not it was even constitutional. We used multiple quotes about the engineering and construction challenges along with the effects of the canal.


This article gives a brief history of quotes and pictures. Towards the bottom of the picture, it gives links and stories about the canal. We used all of the pictures offered along with some quotes that were in the additional links.


This site gave statistics on the Erie canal along with a map that helped us get a good picture of how Albany New York looked like and how the Erie Canal looked like. We used a quote from this site along with an image.


This pdf is a transcript of an interview between Bob Doughty and Mario Ritter talking about the positive effects that the Erie Canal had on New York and how the communities thrived on that. We used the information for context and quotes.


The article describes an exhibit about the “historical contributions of the Irish to the planning, designing, engineering, funding and construction” of the canal. It focuses on the impact it had on New York City growing into an economic center.
“Erie Canal.” American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE), www.asce.org/project/erie-canal/.

The American Society of Civil engineers writes the barriers that they broke in the field of engineering and how the famous Erie Canal was the world's longest canal and America's greatest engineering feat. We used pictures and the links provided for additional information.


This site talks about how the Irish Immigrants influenced the culture around the Erie Canal and all of the songs they created while building the canal. We used this source to find the cultural barrier that they broke with the American people.


This site talks about how the Irish Immigrants influenced the culture around the Erie Canal and all of the songs they created while building the canal. They also talk about some of the work conditions. We used quotes like “Canal workers were paid 80 cents a day and in addition received “found,” which included room and board plus a daily ration of whiskey.” Mr. Flannery, an avid Irish-American historian, created the site with the goal of “Creating ‘browseable’ versions of important historical documents.”


This talks about Jesse Hawley and gave a couple of pictures and multiple quotes that we used for the exhibit board. They state how politician Dewitt Clinton, Governor of New York, gave Jesse Hawley the credit for making him a believer in the "artificial river."


This site gives In-depth on the impact of the economy, trade, engineering, and settlement. The historical context of pre canal economy, trade, etc. to paint a better picture of the significance of the impacts. We used several quotes from here for our board.
“History and Demographics of the Irish Coming to America.” Macaulay Honors College, The City University of New York, Apr. 2009, macaulay.cuny.edu/seminars/gardner-irish/articles/h/i/s/History_and_Demographics_of_the_Irish_Coming_to_America_248e.html.

This source gives context and the reasons for the Irish Immigrants going to the US. Macaulay College writes that the Irish had two waves, in one that they came and were very poor and oppressed but then the second wave had where the Irish were given jobs. We used quotes and one picture from this site for our board.


This source talks about how the Irish Immigrants were the backbone of the workforce in the making of the Erie Canal. We used this source for quotes and extra knowledge. It talks about how in 1818 Irishmen arrived to work on the canal and soon became the majority element in the workforce. They remained so for the next seven years of construction until the longest canal in the world (363 miles) was completed in the fall of 1825.


This source gave a great overview of the Erie canal with several additional resources and pictures. The site gave names and context with the clash and controversy that happened during the beginning of the canal. Lastly, it shows how difficult it was to build the canal.


This article discusses the positive impact of the economy and trade on local towns.


This site offers an in-depth description of the working conditions of the Irish canal workers, including a moving letter from a canal worker to his sister in Ireland describing the numerous deaths occurring during the work.

This site discusses how the Irish moved from the horrible conditions of the cities ghettos in New York, Boston, and Baltimore to work on the Erie canal. We used quotes and pictures from this site.


This site gave an Infrastructure impact while explaining the significance of Irish to the Erie Canal. This source gave multiple facts like the percentage of Irish workers. It talked about social obstacles that the Irish had, such as prejudice and the Irish being outcasted. Lastly, this site explained the number of Irish in the records and how they were not all documented.


Explained how the Erie Canal opened the West to settlement and turned NYC into the commercial capital. This talked about how the Erie Canal launched the consumer economy. Lastly, talked about the boom in canal construction.


This site gave us knowledge of the Irish Immigration. It talks about how in 1810 to around 1860 the Irish were the largest group of immigrants to come over to the United States. They helped shape America into what it is today. Without the Irish, we would not be as far along as we are today. We used quotes and used this knowledge for context while using pictures from the bottom of the website.

This source talks about how during the years 1788-1868, 2,249 political prisoners were transported from Ireland to exile in Australia. It writes the Irish journeyed to Australia, England, and the US. We used a few quotes along with a picture of the Irish during the famine.


This source told us how the canal was made at certain points while giving tons of pictures. We used some information for our impact of engineering and used the dimensions and locations. Trouble in the swamps in detail as well as how they solved it was explained as well.


This source gave us a picture and knowledge about the Irish Immigration. It talks about how at the beginning of the 19th century the dominant industry of Ireland was agriculture. Large areas of this land were under the control of landowners living in England.


We took great enjoyment in listening to Low Bridge on repeat. Over time, we noticed some differences between Thomas Allen’s original *Low Bridge* and Springsteen's rendition, *Erie Canal*. For instance, while Allen talks of *Fifteen Years on the Erie Canal* working, Springsteen changes it to *Fifteen Miles on the Erie Canal*, after finding out that 15 miles were roughly the distance a mule could tow a barge before resting.


This site talks about the engineering difficulties and the processes that the government had to go through dealing with these difficulties. We used a quote about Thomas Jefferson and how he looked for the space to build the canal.
We collected tons of pictures and this source showed how the Erie Canal made some western states like Michigan accessible for the first time therefore not only sparking a bunch of settlers to move there but making it possible for a bunch of settlers to move there. Towards the end of the website, it gave an overview of the Erie Canal along with some background information.

This site provides information on the history of the Erie Canal in general, however, it focuses to some extent on the middle and western portions of the canal. It provides facts, locations, dates, and dimensions of the Erie canal itself and how it was used. It also provides lots of images and a clickable map of a journey down the Erie.

The American Heritage foundation wrote that When the Erie Canal was built in the 1820s, it was the engineering marvel of its time. And, considering the tools and technology of the period, it still appears a rather respectable undertaking. We used quotes and used this knowledge as context or background knowledge.

Wild Geese narrated the In-depth situation of the Irish, specifically about the economic collapse and famine that Ireland went through. This site gave us a few quotes that we used for context. Lastly, we used a few pictures to put on our board.
Books


Condon’s book approaches the societal perspective of the Canal as a beacon of hope. There are many different angels to this, he argues. For one, it opened the passage to the frontier. Cities like Detroit and Cleveland could not have been settled so early without the Erie Canal. Not only that, but it created jobs—especially for many fresh-arrived immigrants. Condon concludes that the Erie Canal is what made America a country of opportunity to so many immigrants in the mid and late 19th century.


The Dohertys make the case for Erie Canal being of comparable national value to the Gateway Arch and the Washington monument. They pay particular attention to engineering—unlike most Canal books which focus on the politics of the canal. The Erie Canal, they argue, is perhaps the best example of an American monument that integrated the latest in design and technology and required the skills of thousands of workers.


This book is about the history of the Irish in the United States and provided useful information about the experiences and contributions of the Irish on the Erie Canal, as well as work on other canals.


In this fiction book set in the late 1800s, young Timmy O'Dowd and his "city boy" cousin must forget their differences and pool their energies when the Erie Canal is damaged by storms. But Hilts did his research. Over the smallest of details—like how a mule had to rest after 15 miles pulling a barge—he covers historical sources to support it. The appendix was a great gateway to primary sources and oral histories that were passed down.


In her book, Ms. Minetor takes a focus on the broader impact of the Irish on America and American on the Irish. Of key point to our narrative, she corroborates what we had already believed: the success of the Erie Canal was a key factor in future infrastructure projects—and therefore immigrant jobs—and began a long process of overcoming derogatory Irish stereotypes in favor of a hardworking reputation.

The Artificial River reveals the human dimension of the story of the Erie Canal. Carol Sheriff’s extensive, innovative archival research shows the varied responses of ordinary people—farmers, businessmen, government officials, tourists, workers—to this major environmental, social, and cultural transformation in the early life of the Republic. It highlights the idea of the Erie Canal as the story of America’s industrial and economic progress between the War of 1812 and the Civil War.


This book published by the National Park Service is unique in its specific approach to the Irish involvement with the Erie Canal’s construction. In it, Mr. Svejda defends much of the oral histories. Of key importance to us deciding an immigrant focus on the board, he asserts that though the only surviving record—from the first few months of construction—says only ¼ of laborers were immigrants, oral histories are clear that the ratio grew dramatically as construction continued. Moreover, Irish immigrants were the only ones willing to do some of the more dangerous work, like in the Montezuma swamps and setting off gunpowder to clear rock near Lockport. He furthers in discussing how in New York State, the Irish contribution led to some immediate favors courtesy of Governor Clinton. “Just as the Erie needed the Irish,” he concludes, “so the Irish needed the Erie.”
O’Connell, Daniel. “Famine and Disease in Ireland.” Delivered at the UK Parliament, 17 Feb 1846

Daniel O’Connell talks about how in 1817, crops of the preceding year failed to ripen. He explains how this led to the flight of many Irish from the British Isles to North America. O’Connell is attempting (unsuccessfully) to persuade the British Parliament to take greater steps in ameliorating the Great Potato Famine that was ongoing.
Title and Thesis:

The Erie Canal: Breaking the Barrier to the West

Built by immigrants, the Erie Canal opened a passage to the west, breaking many barriers in western expansion, transportation, and industrialization while generating an age of economic prosperity. The backbone of this perilous project were the Irish, who have gone down in history, lore, and song as the prevailing element that made the canal possible.

Left Panel:

Heading: Historical Context

Quote: “A state government built, owned and operated canal or even road had never been done before in America. It was even debated as to whether or not it was constitutional.” -Brad Utter, New York State Museum


Quote: “The idea had been discussed as far back as the 1700's by the founding fathers, but never took shape until the early 1800's when politician Dewitt Clinton, Governor of New York, gave Jesse Hawley the credit for making him a believer in the ‘artificial river.’” - Pam Hawley Marlin, Descendant of Jesse Hawley


Original text: Jesse Hawley, a merchant from Buffalo, was driven to debtors' prison in 1806 due to high transportation costs for his goods. It was there that he conceived the idea for the Erie Canal as a means to enable a consumer economy in the new nation.

Image citation: New York State. Laws of 1817, Chapter 262, Passed April 15, 1817

Quote: “After President Thomas Jefferson declined to support use of federal funds for a canal in New York and his successor James Madison vetoed a bill that would have provided federal money for canal and road projects, Clinton worked tirelessly to garner support for the canal from a deeply divided New York State legislature. His efforts paid off, and in 1817 the first canal
authorization bill passed by a narrow margin.” - National Parks Service

Quote: “In 1817, crops of the preceding year very deficient, did not arrive at maturity; corn was uncut in November, much of it lost; corn saved was green in the husk or matted; potatoes scanty, wet, unripe; no straw even for the beds of the poor; turf also deficient. This combined deficiency of food, fuel, and bedding, felt most severely in winter and spring of 1816–17, when fever appeared, which became very prevalent in summer of 1817.” - Daniel O’Connell, MP, 1846

Image citation: “The Irish Famine: Scene at the Gate of a Workhouse.” Unknown Artist, 1846.

Quote: “[T]he conception is bold and great, and the accomplishment will be equally useful. the works of Europe in that line shrink into insignificance in comparison with these. . . . but no probable degree of expense can transcend that of its utility. the prospect of the future face of America is magnificent indeed: but for the revolutionary generation it is to be enjoyed in contemplation only.” - Thomas Jefferson, 1817

Heading: Timeline

Image citation: Oil on canvas painting of Thomas Jefferson. Mather Brown, 1786.
Portrait of DeWitt Clinton. Rembrandt Peale, 1812

Original Text (for Timeline):

- February 4, 1808 Idea for canal
- War of 1812 Postpones canal
- April 17, 1816 Approval for canal
- May 17, 1816 Canal divided into three sections: east, middle, west—each with its own engineer, surveyor and workers
- 1817 and 1822 Irish Famines
- July 4, 1817 Broke ground on Erie Canal
- October 26, 1825 Erie Canal completed

Image citation: “A food riot in Dungarvan, Co. Waterford, Ireland, during the famine.” The Pictorial Times, 10 Oct 1846.


Center Panel:

Circle Side 1:

**Heading: ...and it could not have happened without the Irish...**

*Quote:* “Three Irishmen . . . finished . . . three rods of the canal . . . in the space of five and a half days. . . . which at twelve and a half cents per cubic yard, would produce to each workman the very liberal wages of one dollar and eighty eight cents per day.” - Report of the Commissioners of the State of New York


*Quote:* “Immigrant labor has always been the most significant contributor to the Erie's success. Even in the very first months of construction at least a quarter of the labor force were recent immigrants. The percentage grew dramatically as construction reached the more difficult sections such as the Deep Cut above Lockport.” - Craig Williams, Canal Society of New York

Circle Side 2:

**Heading: Constructing the Erie Canal**


*Image citation:* A lock on the original canal in operation. Ca. 1825-1840.

*Original text:* The Irish laborers worked closely with canal engineers, and in doing so, encountered many “first-time” obstacles together, figuring out how to overcome those obstacles and learning how to do things faster and more efficiently.

Lower Center Panel:

**Heading: Economic Impact**

Original Text: The Erie canal sparked widespread trade and became the financial center which helped New York flourish along with the rest of the country, creating great relations that helped America grow.

Image citation: The Erie Canal at Little Falls. Jackson, William Henry, 1 Jan 1880.

Original text: The Erie Canal revolutionized the US economy, trade and industry making New York its financial center. The increasing opportunities attracted great numbers of immigrants, especially the Irish who worked on the growing canal systems.


Quote: “It gave New York City access to this huge area of the Midwest, and that was an enormous factor in establishing New York City as a premier port in the country.” - Jack Kelly, Author, *Heaven’s Ditch*

Image citation: Erie Canal sketch. Unknown artist, unknown publication, 1825.

Quote: “Between 1830 and 1847 well over half of all American imports flowed through New York’s harbor. This enormous volume resulted from the simple fact that the Erie Canal cut the cost of sending goods from Buffalo to New York to less than $8 a ton from the precanal cost of $100 a ton, a twelve-fold reduction even before factoring in the savings in time. In fact, the Erie Canal so reduced waterborne shipping costs that by 1827 residence Savannah, Georgia, could buy wheat from Central New York for less than they paid for wheat grown in the interior of their own state.” - Encyclopedia of the New American Nation

**Heading: Engineering Impact**


Original text: In its day, the Erie Canal was America's greatest engineering feat where the invention of revolutionary tools and machines forever changed engineering and construction.


Image citation: “Emigrants Landing in New York.”
William John Hennessy, 26 Jun 1858.
Quote: “When the Erie Canal workers reached the Montezuma Marsh in 1820 towards the northern part of the canal, engineers from the American Society of Civil Engineers report that ‘malaria and pneumonia thinned their ranks and difficult geotechnical conditions slowed their progress’. [Near Buffalo,] laborers had to use the dangerous technique of heavy blasting to break through a slab of sturdy rock.” - University of Richmond

**Heading: Travel Impact**

Original text: The difficulty of traveling through the Appalachian Mountains kept many people from going west. The mountains prevented people in the west from sending their wood and farm products east. The Erie Canal overcame the natural barrier of those mountains and helped open the American West. The canal made the United States a richer and stronger young nation.

Image citation: Road and Bridge over the Mohawk. Jacques Milbert, 1828.

Original text: Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, the lack of an efficient, safe transportation network kept populations and trade largely confined to coastal areas. The Northwest Territories that would later become Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and Ohio were rich in timber, minerals, and fertile land for farming but were nearly isolated from the rest of the continent, taking weeks to reach these precious resources. Turnpike roads baked to hardness in the summer sun and in the winter, the roads dissolved in a sea of mud. The Erie Canal would become the answer to this conundrum.

Image citation: Erie Canal (Enlarged), Lock Number 18. 1968

Quote: “Lock 18 of the Enlarged Erie Canal was part of a scheme to reduce the number of locks between Albany and Schenectady, thus making transportation easier and speedier on what was one of the most difficult stretches of the canal.” - Library of Congress

Original text: As the first major travel infrastructure in America, the Erie Canal revolutionized America by facilitating western travel and settlement and sparking a flood of immigrants.

Quote: “The barrier to large scale western trade and settlement with the east was overcome by the canal. Not only did people and goods travel the canal, but so did news, ideas and social values. It was truly the internet of its day and its impact was similar.” - Brad Utter, New York State Museum

**Right Panel**

**Heading: The Irish Influence**

Quote: “The Irish were involved from start to finish, from originally proposing the concept a hundred years before a shovel was even put into the ground, to the routing, to its design, to securing support from elected officials, to the elected officials themselves, to its construction and...”
finally to its navigation and transportation services once it opened.” - Ed Collins, Irish American Heritage Museum

Image citation: Laborers on the Delaware & Hudson Canal. Ca. 1858-1898


Original text: Irish immigration to America swelled at the onset of the 19th century due to religious oppression, social upheaval, and poverty. Hundreds of Irish men were looking for any opportunity to start a new life in America, and the canal offered entry-level opportunities into society. Indeed, some were likely contracted directly from Ireland to work on the Erie. While the Erie brought prosperity that provided additional employment in New York, these low wage, physically demanding jobs in canal construction did place immigrants in the midst of difficult and often dangerous work environments.

Quote: “I don't know, dear Sister, if any of us will survive, but God willing, we will live to see a better day. . . . Six of me tentmates died this very day and were stacked like cordwood until they could be taken away. Otherwise, I am fine.” - Timothy Geohagan, Irish Canal Laborer, 1819


Quote: “Malaria and mud were the two principal obstacles in the construction of the Canal at the Montezuma Marshes, where several contractors gave up in this malarial swampland, but these hazards were overcome through the endeavors of the hearty Irish immigrants who, despite heavy mortality due to malaria, stuck to the job and finished it.” - George J. Svejda, Author, Irish Immigrant Participation in the Construction of the Erie Canal

Quote: “The New York Census of 1845 shows the Irish comprising 10% to 15% of the population along the Erie Canal.” - George J. Svejda, Department of the Interior


Image citation: “An act respecting navigable communications between the great western and northern lakes and the Atlantic ocean.” Passed April 15, 1817.

Original text: The impact of the Erie Canal was far-reaching as it facilitated faster, easier travel west. It revolutionized the US economy, trade and industry making New York its financial center. The increasing opportunities attracted great numbers of immigrants, especially the Irish to work on the growing canal systems.

Quote: “The Erie Canal was most of all a political . . . accomplishment. The advocates for the Erie Canal wanted to secure the commercial networks of New York's western frontier and the Midwest to New York City as opposed to New Orleans or Montreal to make sure that political allegiances would follow.” - Craig Williams, Canal Society of New York
The Erie Canal
Breaking the Barrier to the West

Campbell Koella, A.J. Camacho, and Hannah Rasmussen

Senior Group Exhibit
Entry Dimensions in inches: 39.5 x 13 x 72
Full Exhibit Board

Center Circle
Pictures Side 1

Center Circle
Pictures Side 2
Left Panel
Center Panel