

AP United States History
Unit 4- The New Republic
Topic: Market Revolution: Industrialization

The Erie Canal

Overland transportation was extremely expensive at the turn of the nineteenth century. It cost the same amount of money for a merchant to ship a ton of freight across the Atlantic Ocean as it did to send the same goods thirty miles overland by wagon. As a result, early settlement remained concentrated along the coast and beside major waterways. In the first federal census in 1790, the average center of population was twenty-three miles east of Baltimore, Maryland. Forty years later, however, the center of population had shifted into what is now West Virginia. Westward expansion was made possible by a revolution in transportation. Turnpikes, canals, steamboats, and, ultimately, railroads allowed settlers to begin moving west.

By the early nineteenth century, the coast was already densely settled and the demand for internal improvements, infrastructure projects that promised to unite the country through improved transportation, was increasing. In 1817, Representative John C. Calhoun proposed a Bonus Bill in Congress that would have appropriated surplus federal money toward a national system of internal improvements. Calhoun emerged as one of the nation's foremost expansionists and argued that the powers granted to Congress by the Constitution to create post offices and post roads authorized the legislature to fund transportation improvements. Calhoun declared boldly, "Let us, then, bind the republic together with a perfect system of roads and canals. Let us conquer space."

Calhoun's vision foreshadowed Henry Clay's American System, which combined a national system of internal improvements with high tariffs and a strong national bank to promote economic development. Sectional rivalries hampered the passage of Calhoun's bill in Congress, however. Although the Bonus Bill did not identify or recommend any specific roads or canals to be constructed, representatives wanted to ensure that every state benefited equally from any proposed system of infrastructure projects. After expressing concerns about the bill's constitutionality, President James Madison vetoed it. With the direction of federal policy made clear, state legislatures moved quickly to initiate infrastructure projects of their own.

DeWitt Clinton emerged as the leading advocate for a canal in New York (where his uncle, George Clinton, had served as the first governor). As the mayor of New York City, Clinton took a special interest in the canal and defended the proposal when it appeared before the legislature. Though New York was already the most populous city in the country, Clinton worried that rival seaports might overtake it if they established a viable trade route with the west. A westward canal would encourage prosperity, develop a national market, and perhaps even promote sectional harmony. Increasingly, businesses believed that domestic trade would soon overshadow the nation's foreign commerce. A direct connection with the west would guarantee New York's emergence as the center of a new national market.

Clinton faced significant opposition in the state legislature. Canals were expensive undertakings and would require considerable loans and burdensome taxes. The location of the proposed canal was another consideration. Local jealousies divided various interests who supported different locations. Clinton also met resistance from his political rivals, who organized behind Martin Van Buren. Although support for the canal was widespread throughout the state, his opponents feared that a successful project would elevate Clinton's political fortunes. When Clinton managed to win election as governor of New York in 1817, however, Van Buren sensed that the balance of power had shifted, and he quickly flipped his position on the canal. As one of his first acts in office, Clinton broke ground on the canal he had helped secure.

The Erie Canal required incredible feats of engineering to come to completion. Until work on it began, most early canals had reached across short distances to connect existing waterways. The country possessed only three canals more than two miles long, with the longest being only twenty-seven miles. The Erie Canal came to span 363 miles. Upon completion in 1825 after eight years of work, it was the largest canal in the world, including eighty-three canal locks and rising 675 feet in elevation. The locks constructed at Lockport, New York, were higher than any previously attempted and allowed a canal barge to ascend seventy feet over a solid limestone embankment. The canal also required a tremendous amount of human and animal labor for its construction. More than 75 percent of the more than nine thousand canal diggers who worked on the project were from upstate New York; most of the rest were Irish immigrants. The engineering behind the canal is even more impressive when we consider that the builders were amateurs who did not possess any formal training in engineering.

Of all the canal projects in the nineteenth century, the Erie Canal was far and away the most successful, benefitting most importantly from its location. The canal builders could take advantage of natural waterways such as the Hudson River and Lake Erie, to connect the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Lakes. Passing through the Appalachian Mountains, the Erie also profited from more gradual changes in elevation than rival canals. Later canals were more successful at imitation than improvement. And because they relied on funding from state governments, failed internal improvement projects initiated a wave of state debt defaults in the 1840s. These failures encouraged state governments to leave financing to the private sector. Although state governments were the largest financiers of canal projects, railroads obtained their financing primarily from private banks.

The Erie Canal was the first major canal constructed along an existing trade route. An upstate New York merchant, Jesse Hawley, described it as the “longest Canal – in the least time – with the least experience – for the least money – and of the greatest public utility of any other in the world.” Within a few years of its completion, it was already carrying goods worth double the value of all freight shipped down the Mississippi River to New Orleans. Tolls collected along the canal repaid the construction costs in the first nine years of operation.

By linking the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Lakes and West, the Erie Canal transformed the state of New York and cemented New York City’s status as the nation’s most preeminent commercial metropolis. With greatly reduced transportation costs, farmers along the canal could now ship their products to more distant markets. For the first time, inland consumers could purchase fresh oysters and products that had once been prohibitively expensive because of the shipping costs. The canal also revolutionized communities in upstate New York and brought them into contact with a developing national market for goods and ideas. News and newspapers traveled much more quickly than ever before. Religious figures also traveled along the canal and helped initiate a Second Great Awakening. Upstate New York hosted so many fervent religious revivals and traveling preachers delivering fiery sermons that the region became known later as the “burned-over district.”

Free Response Items:

- a. Explain how an improvement in transportation such as the Erie Canal could transform politics, economy, and society.

- b. Explain the impact of the Erie Canal on New York State and the greater region.

