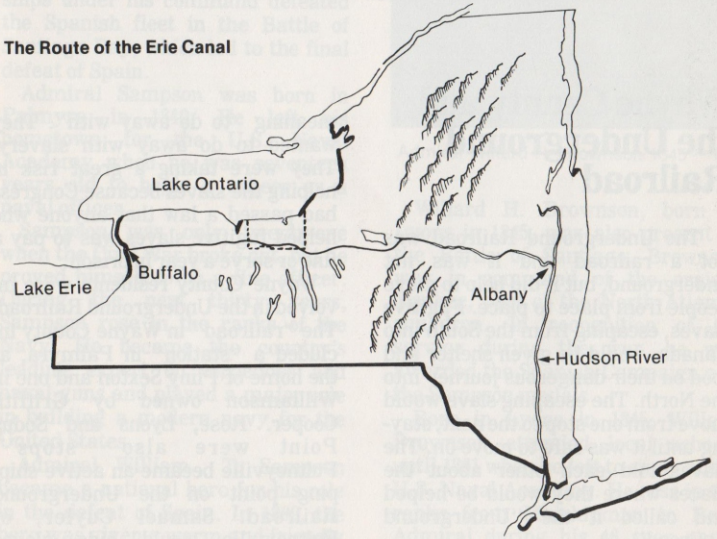
The Erie Canal

"I've got a mule, her name is Sal
Fifteen miles on the Erie Canal
She's a good old worker, and a good old pal,
Fifteen miles on the Erie Canal."

You probably know that song. The whole story of the Erie Canal is a very important part of the history of New York State and Wayne County.

Imagine traveling in the early 1800's. There were few roads. There were no cars, trains or planes. The leaders of the State of New York realized that the people needed a better way to travel and to move goods from place to place. They also realized that New York was rich in waterways. It was decided to build a canal which would reach from the Hudson River to Lake Erie. In 1817 the work on the Erie Canal began. It was completed in October, 1825. It was 363 miles long, going from Albany to Buffalo.

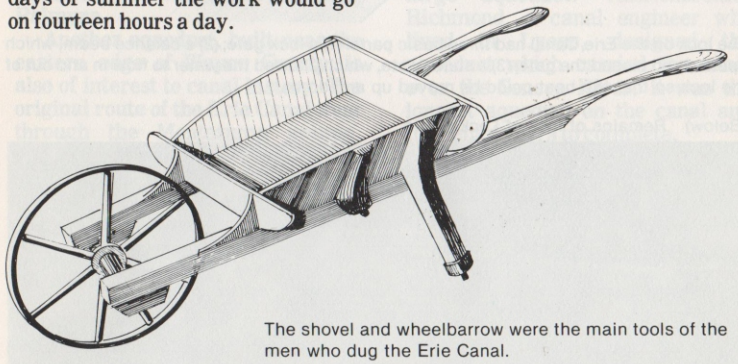
The Route of the Erie Canal



Work On the Canal

First the surveyors staked out a sixty foot wide path to be cleared of trees. Within this they set two rows of stakes, forty feet apart to mark the actual channel of the canal. Men with axes cleared the trees from the sixty foot path. Then men with shovels had to dig through the tangled mass of roots and brush to make the forty foot wide channel. There were no bulldozers in those days.

Men for miles around came to work on the canal. One man would agree to do a certain section of the canal for a set price. Then he hired his workers and made all the arrangements for them. He had to build a shack big enough to sleep twenty-four to forty men, supply them with horses, shovels, and other equipment, feed them and pay them. They were paid $.80 to $1.00 a day. This was very good pay. The men started before daybreak with a hearty breakfast and ended a little before sundown. During the long days of summer the work would go on fourteen hours a day.

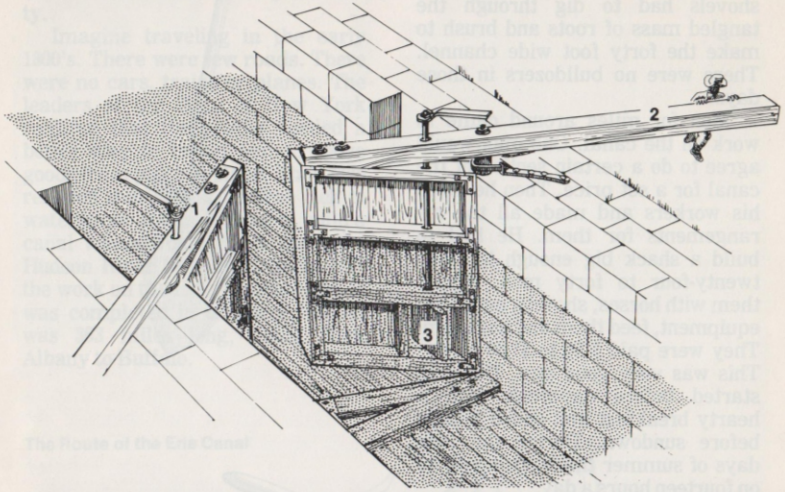


The shovel and wheelbarrow were the main tools of the men who dug the Erie Canal.

Making the Canal Work

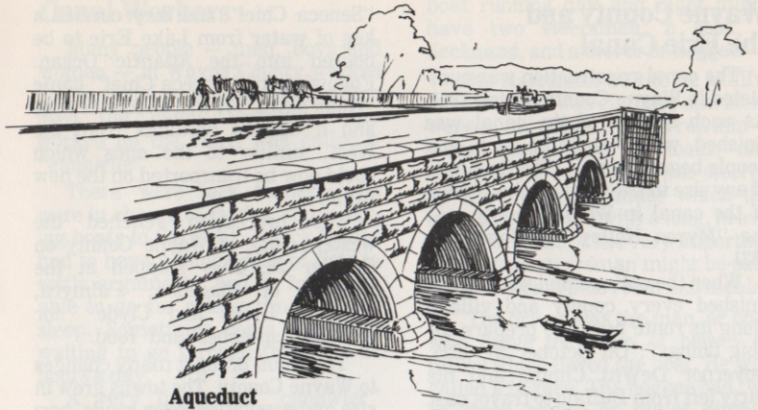
Locks

The route of the canal does not follow a completely level path. How then did the boats get up the hills? That's where they used the locks. When a boat had to be at a higher or lower level a lock was built. It was like a box. To raise the boat, the boat went into the "box", then water was let into it, raising the boat up to the higher level. To lower it, the boat floated in at the higher level, and the water was let out, lowering the boat. Then the end of the lock was opened and the boat was towed out.



The lock on the Erie Canal had three basic parts: (1) a lock gate; (2) a balance beam, which opened and closed the gate; (3) a sluice gate, which allowed the water to flow in and out of the lock so that the boat could be moved up and down.

(Below) Remains of lock at Lock Berlin



Aqueduct

An aqueduct is similar to a highway bridge going over a waterway. It is a waterway bridge going over a waterway. When the canal had to cross a river or a low, swampy area, an aqueduct was built to carry the canal over the river.

There were two aqueducts built in Wayne County, one at Lyons and one at Palmyra. Remains of the Palmyra Aqueduct can be seen from Route 31, just west of the village of Palmyra.

Another aqueduct, built near the eastern edge of Wayne County, is also of interest to canal history. The original route of the Erie Canal went through the Montezuma swamp. Construction of the canal on this section was very difficult and at one point looked as if work would have to be stopped. Thick growth of rushes and oozy black muck made work impossible. In summer the mosquitoes attacked. Many workers got **malaria**, a disease carried by the mosquitoes. After the original canal was completed, this section was still a problem. It was decided to build a large aqueduct. VanRensselaer Richmond, a canal engineer who lived in Lyons, designed the aqueduct which carried the canal over the Seneca River. It was the longest aqueduct on the canal and took eight years to complete.

Richmond Aqeuduct as it looked about 1910.

Wayne County and the Erie Canal

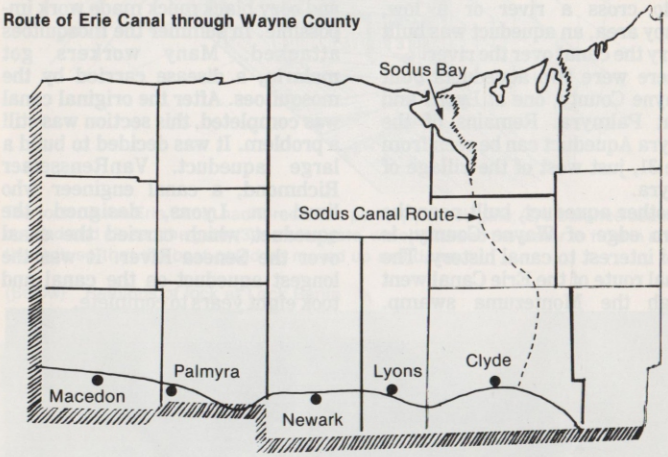
The canal construction was completed in Wayne County during 1821. As each section of the canal was finished, water would be let in and people began using it. The first boat of any size to travel along the section of the canal in Wayne County was the "Myron Holley" in November 1821.

When the entire canal was almost finished every county and village along its route began to prepare for "big doings". On October 26, 1825, Governor DeWitt Clinton and his party left from Buffalo to travel east to Albany on the canal, and then south on the Hudson River to New York City. Their boat was the "Seneca Chief" and they carried a keg of water from Lake Erie to be poured into the Atlantic Ocean. Following the "Seneca Chief" came "Noah's Ark". It was a smaller boat and it carried products from the West, similar to the ones which could now be transported on the new canal.

The procession reached the western edge of Wayne County on October 28. They stopped at the villages of Macedon, Palmyra, Newark, Lyons and Clyde for parades, speeches and food.

The canal brought many changes to Wayne County. The towns grew in size and population. New roads, new buildings and businesses appeared rapidly.

Route of Erie Canal through Wayne County



The Sodus Canal

The success of the Erie Canal and the prosperity it brought caused many people in Wayne County to catch "canal fever". Every possible place for another canal was carefully examined and Wayne County came close to building another one — the Sodus Canal. It was to connect the Erie Canal with Sodus Bay, the best harbor on Lake Ontario. The idea was put before the New York State Legislature several times and was encouraged by many Wayne County businessmen. Work was started, but the Sodus Canal was never completed.

Canal Workers

Many people — men, boys and women — in Wayne County worked on the canal or in businesses which used the canal. Everyone who worked on the canal was called a "canawler"

There were **lock tenders** who were in charge of raising and lowering boats in the locks. A lock tender had to have a handy pair of fists to settle arguments, and he had to be able to go for a long time without sleep. Sometimes boats would be waiting to go through the locks 24 hours a day.

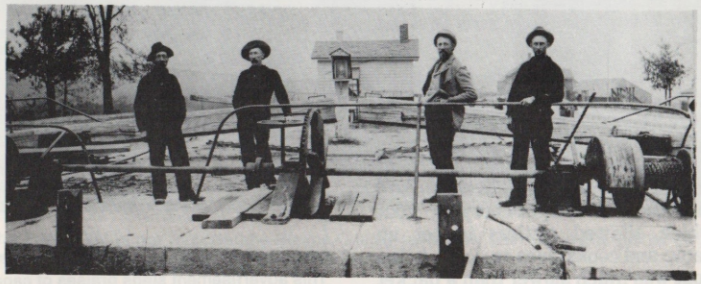
A very important "canawler" was the **towpath walker**. His job was to patrol a ten mile section of the **towpath** — the path beside the canal where the horses or mules walked, pulling the boat along the canal. The towpath walker had to watch for any small cracks or leaks in the canal bank or **berm** as it was called. If he found a leak he stuffed it with a mixture of manure and hay which he always carried in a bag with him. If the leak was a big one he called for help as fast as he could. A small leak could grow so quickly that whole sections of the canal bank would suddenly crumble away. Then the water would drain out of the canal, leaving boats **mudlarked** on the bottom.

Each canal boat had a crew of two to six men plus the captain. A boat running day and night might have two **steersmen**, a cook, a **deckhand**, and a driver or **hoggee**.

The steersman had to be skillful for his vessel was clumsy; and there were many things it could run into — other boats, sides of locks, and bridges. The canal boat was steered by a very large **rudder** which the steersman moved with a long, heavy **tiller**. Because of the very important job, a good steersman might be paid $20.00 a month plus room and meals.

The driver was the man, or boy, who drove the team of horses or mules which towed the boat. He was called a hoggee. The hoggee had two or three horses or mules hitched together. He usually walked alongside the team. The team would be changed every fifteen to twenty miles. Most hoggees worked twelve hours a day on the towpath regardless of weather. Many hoggees were boys 12 to 15 years old.

Besides all these people who worked on the boats on the canal, there were hundreds of people who ran grocery stores and other shops along the canal, selling food and providing services to the boatmen and their passengers. And finally, there was a whole group of gamblers, thieves, exhibitors of dancing bears, fortune-tellers and the like who were there because the canal brought them so many customers.



Locktenders at locks in Macedon.

The New York Central Railroad is clearing snow from the tracks in 1877. Notice all the steam engines.

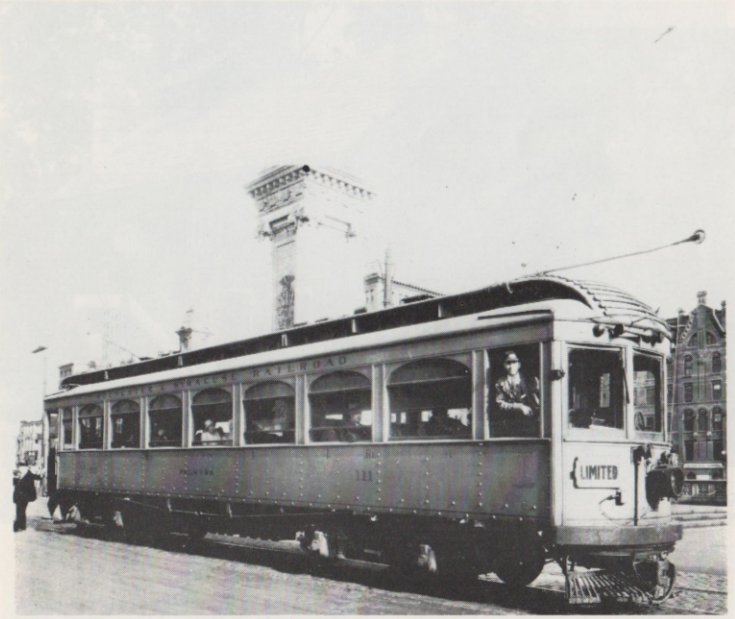
The New York Central Train Station in Clyde about 1905. The hotel wagon waits for arriving guests.

Transportation In Wayne County

In addition to the Erie Canal, there were other transportation systems which helped to build Wayne County. Stagecoach lines operated from Rochester to Oswego through Wayne County, along the State Road, as early as 1820. In those days a **ferry** carried travelers across Sodus Bay from Port Glasgow (now called Resort). By the 1870's the railroads had put the stagecoach out of business.

In 1853, the New York Central was the first railroad to be built in Wayne County. Its route went through the southern towns. The Sodus Point and Southern Railroad went from Sodus Bay to Newark and was completed in 1873. It carried coal from the Pennsylvania coal fields to Sodus Point. There the coal was loaded on big boats to be shipped to Canada, or to the West on Lake Ontario. In the 1880's a second railroad through the southern towns was completed, called the West Shore Railroad.

In 1900 the electric railroad or **trolley**, became important in Wayne County. One trolley line ran from Rochester to Sodus Point. Another went from Rochester to Syracuse through the southern part of the county. In recent years, cars and trucks have been carrying most of the people and freight of Wayne County.



This trolley car was named "Palmyra" and made regular trips between Rochester and Syracuse through Wayne County.