

# 15 THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT THE ERIE CANAL



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**Editor's Note:** As WCNY's production team worked on the upcoming documentary, *Erie: The Canal that Made America*, staff research and journeys uncovered places, artifacts, and information the crew knew little or nothing about.

Visit [wcnycanals.com](http://wcnycanals.com) to preview the documentary, test your knowledge with the 15 Questions on the Erie Canal Quiz, and explore behind-the-scenes photos.



Everyone knows the song about the Erie, Low Bridge Everybody Down (or 15 Miles...or 15 Years on the Erie Canal). You can see a copy of the sheet music written by Tom Allen at the Fayetteville Free Library. It's part of its Vincent Motto Music collection. The song, dating to 1905, was never sung on the original Erie Canal!



In Canastota you'll find the Boxing Hall of Fame, the Canal Town Museum, and the home and final resting place of famed canal engineer Nathan Roberts. His circa 1820 federal style home on Route 5 is occasionally open for tours. A tall, marble spire in the Lenox Rural Cemetery marks his grave. Born in New Jersey, he became one of the most important engineers on the Erie Canal. It was Roberts who designed a five double-lock system to get the canal over a 70-foot rock cliff en route to Lake Erie. You can see the locks in - where else - Lockport!



Culvert Road, near Medina, is the only place on the canal system where you can drive on a road under the canal! Rebuilt during the Barge Canal construction era, a sign at the spot says the original culvert was built in 1823 - and that the phenomenon is recorded in "Ripley's Believe It or Not."



The Erie Canal not only transported cargo and people, but also ideas including abolitionism, women's rights, and new forms of spirituality and religion. As a young man, Brigham Young worked as a laborer, digging wells, painting houses and building some of the locks and boats on the Erie Canal. Young went on to become the second president of the Church of the Latter Day Saints. A pay stub for Brigham Young can be found in the New York State Archives in Albany, part of a large collection of documents from the earliest days of the Erie to the opening of the Barge Canal. While in Albany, visit the New York State Museum's new exhibit, *Enterprising Waters: New York's Erie Canal*, scheduled to open Sept. 16.



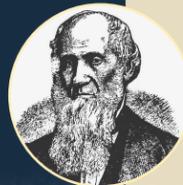
The songs and the stories, the artifacts and the attention around the Erie Canal tend to focus on men, mules, and money. Part of the folklore of the canal is that the most popular name for a canal boat cook, Sal, was the name of choice for those naming their mules. In the collections of the Chittenango Landing Canal Boat Museum are records that prove that women were also captains of canal boats. The museum features the restoration of a three bay dry-dock where 90-foot-long canal cargo boats were built and repaired on the Erie Canal from 1855 to 1920. Of the 30 dry-docks that once served canal boats, this is the only remaining one.



There is a lot that goes on at Lock 17 near Little Falls. It is one of the highest lift locks in the world at 40.5 feet tall, which makes locking through in a boat quite an experience! Bordering the lock is Moss Island, which features some great cliffs popular with rock climbers.



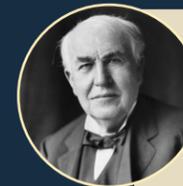
The choice of Buffalo as the western terminus of the Erie Canal was not a sure thing. Buffalo and Black Rock were two villages along Lake Erie that both wanted the Erie Canal and made sure politicians knew that. Buffalo, with its deeper harbor, was ultimately chosen and the village of Black Rock is now a neighborhood in the largest Upstate New York city.



Inventors and entrepreneurs are inherent to the story of the Erie Canal and the name Squire Whipple is part of the tale. In 1841, he designed and built a weighlock scale with a capacity of 300 tons to weigh canal boats; it was the largest scale in the country at the time. He went on to greater fame as a designer of bridges, especially "iron truss bridges," filing and earning patents for his work as someone who "practically created the modern art of bridge construction." One of his bridges was relocated to Union College in Schenectady. Another, the Aldrich Towing-Path Change Bridge, is the oldest iron bridge in New York State. Originally used in Rochester, the bridge now stands in Palmyra's Aqueduct Park, located adjacent to Lock 29 on today's Erie Canal.



The world has had a fascination with aqueducts, and at the Camillus Erie Canal Park visitors can explore the 1844 Nine Mile Creek Aqueduct, the only restored navigable aqueduct in New York State. It dates to the first enlargement of the Erie Canal. The Park also offers boat cruises as well as interpretive information in its museum, a recreation of a 19th century canal-side store.



Thomas Edison thought the Erie Canal would help his company, the Edison Machine Works, with its shipping needs. So in 1886, he relocated the company to Schenectady, a move that eventually resulted in the formation of the General Electric Company in 1892.



The Erie's groundbreaking occurred in Rome on July 4, 1817. Eight years later, New York Gov. DeWitt Clinton joined Ohio Governor Jeremiah Morrow to turn the first shovel of earth for the construction of another canal, the Ohio & Erie Canal, on July 4, 1825.



Syracuse's Erie Canal Museum is housed in the only remaining canal weighlock building. It was on the building's second floor that much of the design work for the 20th century's Barge Canal was done by canal engineers. And another little-known fact - the weighlock building was once the subject of a question on "Jeopardy!"



When the Barge Canal opened in 1918, the Rochester Aqueduct over the Genesee River was no longer needed. It was repurposed though, as a place to house Rochester's Subway from 1929 to 1956. Today, the beautiful stonework of the aqueduct remains and on occasion there are tours offered of the historic aqueduct and abandoned subway tunnel, now used as a canvas for graffiti artists.



The Erie Canal has never been open year-round. Water levels were typically lowered to partially drain the canal in the winter, with boats either heading for home ports or for New York City, where 500-600 boats would tie up for the winter forming a floating village.



Nearly 80 percent of the population of Upstate New York lives within 25 miles of the Erie Canal!