



## **Essay About the Erie Canal DeWitt Clinton and the Erie Canal**

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It is difficult to name the originator of the idea of a canal between the Hudson River and Lake Erie. The list of early canal advocates includes George Washington, Elkanah Watson, Philip Schuyler, George Clinton, Jesse Hawley, Thomas Eddy, Joshua Forman, Stephen Van Rensselaer, De Witt Clinton, and Governor Morris.

Some historians feel that Morris deserves the honor, since he apparently advanced the prospect of a canal as early as 1777. In any case, many individuals thought it a good idea. Of these, De Witt Clinton alone is preeminently linked with the Erie Canal.

During his long and distinguished career, Clinton served the people of his state in a variety of offices, including U.S. senator, mayor of New York City, and governor. But it is his driving presence on the Canal Commission that so strongly associates his name with successful completion of the Erie Canal.

In 1808, two Federalist members of the New York Assembly, Joshua Forman of Syracuse and Benjamin Wright of Rome, introduced a resolution to survey a canal route between the Hudson River and Lake Erie. The legislature named James Geddes, an engineer, to conduct a survey, and he reported favorably on the possibility of a canal.

Two years later, the legislature, influenced by Clinton, a Democratic-Republican, authorized a second route survey, to be overseen by a seven-member commission. In addition to Clinton, members included Morris, Van Rensselaer, Eddy, Simeon De Witt, William North, and Peter B. Porter. The following year, Robert R. Livingston and Robert Fulton, builders of the first successful steamboat, joined the commission.

In 1811, Geddes and Wright made additional surveys. Although interest in a canal was increasing, the onset of the War of 1812 interrupted the activity. During the war, problems in moving military supplies from New York City to Lake Ontario and Lake Erie further emphasized the need for improved transportation.

In April 1816, more than a year after the war ended, the state legislature passed an act naming a board of five commissioners and authorizing them to build a canal between the Hudson River and Lake Erie. It also authorized a second canal, connecting the Hudson and Lake Champlain.

The following April, the legislature approved construction of the two canals and named Wright chief engineer of the Erie. Geddes was appointed chief engineer for the Champlain Canal.

In 1817, Daniel D. Tompkins was elected vice president of the United States and resigned as governor of New York. Clinton was then elected to serve in his place. As governor, Clinton continued his crusade to complete the Erie Canal.

By the time he left office at the end of 1822, construction of the canal was moving ahead steadily. Clinton's reappointment to the Canal Commission following his two terms as governor ensured that the canal's chief supporter would continue his close association with the project. Re-elected governor in 1824, Clinton was accorded the place of honor at the grand opening of the Erie Canal.

In October 1825, Clinton was aboard the Seneca Chief as it entered the Erie Canal at Buffalo, leading a flotilla in celebration of the canal's completion. Ninety minutes later, the citizens of New York City learned of the event from a relay of cannon fire along the banks of the canal.

As the boats proceeded eastward along the canal, speeches were delivered at towns and cities along the way. In Albany, at tables set up on a long bridge across the canal basin, 600 diners toasted the accomplishment.

On November 4, the fleet of canal boats, towed down the Hudson by steamboats, reached New York City. The boats assembled off Sandy Hook, where Clinton poured a keg of Lake Erie water into the Atlantic Ocean to symbolize the "wedding of the waters."

A magnificent ball was held on November 7 to complete the festivities. The center of attention in the ballroom was a scale model of a packet (passenger) boat made of maple sugar, floating in a large vat of Lake Erie water. Presiding over the gala, Clinton proudly celebrated the culmination of a project for which he had fought long and arduously.

De Witt Clinton was elected to his fourth term as governor in 1826. Less than two years later, in February 1828, he died in office.

[http://www.archives.nysed.gov/projects/eriecanal/essays/ec\\_larkin3.shtml](http://www.archives.nysed.gov/projects/eriecanal/essays/ec_larkin3.shtml)