



Essay About the Erie Canal Enlisting National Support

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Many New Yorkers believed that a canal from the Hudson River to Lake Erie would benefit the nation as a whole. They hoped that other states would contribute to its construction or that Congress might finance the project.

In 1807 to 1808, Jesse Hawley, a flour merchant from the Finger Lakes region, published his visionary essays outlining plans for such a canal. Soon thereafter, Joshua Forman, a New York Assembly member from Syracuse, submitted a legislative resolution for a canal.

At the same time, the Western Inland Lock Navigation Company (WILNC) was trying to expand its canal project from the Mohawk Valley to Lake Erie. Thomas Eddy, the company's treasurer, and Jonas Platt, state senator from the Western District, enlisted De Witt Clinton, the former mayor of New York City, to secure a resolution in the New York Assembly. This resolution appointed a board of commissioners to survey possible routes for a canal. An engineer, James Geddes, and Benjamin Wright, a New York Assembly member from Rome, carried out the surveys.

The canal commissioners submitted a favorable report on March 2, 1811. Their report opposed construction by private companies because "too great a national interest is at stake." They especially opposed a shorter canal route to Oswego on Lake Ontario and then to Lake Erie, because cargo "once afloat on Lake Ontario, will, generally, go to Montreal" in Canada.

Some, however, may have feared that the commissioners' proposed canal design was too fantastic. They envisioned a canal on an inclined plane, built over "mounds and aqueducts," rather than a "waving course ascending and descending by locks."

The commissioners' report led to the Canal Act of April 11, 1811. This legislation gave canal commissioners a number of responsibilities: to appoint engineers, continue surveys, receive land grants and loans, buy

out the interests of the WILNC, and seek the aid of other states and Congress.

The commissioners were prominent New York and national figures. Governor Morris was a Federalist who had helped draft the U.S. Constitution. De Witt Clinton had been mayor of New York City and was a leading Democratic-Republican in the state senate. Simeon De Witt was the state surveyor general. William North and Thomas Eddy were Federalist directors of the WILNC.

Robert R. Livingston and Robert Fulton were new additions to the board of commissioners, famous for their steamboat invention, the Clermont, which first ran up the Hudson River from New York City to Albany in 1807. Livingston had been chancellor of New York and had helped the United States negotiate the 1803 Louisiana Purchase. Fulton had written a treatise on canal navigation in 1796.

http://www.archives.nysed.gov/projects/eriecanal/essays/ec_shaw.shtml