



Essay About the Erie Canal Erie Canal Freight

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The thousands of boats that plied the Erie and other canals in the 19th century fell into two categories: packet boats and freight boats. Packet boats were designed to carry people and had cabins stretching nearly from bow (front section of a vessel) to stern (rear section of a vessel).

Freighters generally had two small shelters at either end of the boat. Often family-owned, the freight boat housed people in the stern cabin and stabled horses or mules in the bow cabin. Nonworking animals rested on the boat between towing shifts. The remainder of the space on a freight boat was for cargo.

New York put the first section of the Erie Canal into service as soon as workers had completed the stretch between Utica and Montezuma. Beginning in 1820, New York collected tolls on the freight moved on the canal to help defray the \$7,500,000 that would be spent on its construction.

Toll collectors used charts listing the toll rates, usually based on weight, for the various kinds of merchandise moved along the waterway. The 1842 listing for the freight boat Equal Rights is illustrative of the variety of goods moved on the canal and the tolls paid.

Usually agricultural products moved east and manufactured goods traveled west. Before the opening of the Erie Canal, Genesee Valley wheat took 20 days to reach Albany by wagon. The cost to move a ton of wheat was \$100. With the completion of the canal, a ton of wheat could make the trip all the way to New York City in just 10 days for only \$5 in transportation charges.

In 1825, roughly 562,000 bushels of wheat, plus 221,000 barrels of flour, 435,000 gallons of whiskey, and 32 million board feet of lumber helped make up the 185,000 tons of eastbound canal cargo. Only 32,000 tons were shipped west, consisting mainly of manufactured goods.

The total amount of freight moved on the Erie Canal increased in volume as the years went by. Although it took until 1845 for annual tonnage to surpass one million, the two-million-ton mark was topped only seven years later. By 1860, freight totals on the canal had increased to 1,896,975 tons eastbound and 379,000 tons westbound.

In 1862, swollen by Civil War shipments, canal freight traffic exceeded three million tons. This high rate of tonnage continued after the end of the war and during much of the next three decades. In fact, in 1880 the Erie Canal experienced its greatest year, with 4,608,651 tons carried.

The huge amount of trade on the canal produced considerable revenue for the state of New York. Tolls collected in 1820 totaled a mere \$28,000; four years later, before the canal was officially opened, canal traffic had surged to 10,000 boats paying \$300,000 in tolls.

Soon thereafter, the state-owned waterway began to experience competition from privately owned railroad lines. Shortly after the Erie Canal opened in October 1825, promoters of the Mohawk and Hudson Railroad, New York's first railroad, began selling stock. They insisted that their line between Schenectady and Albany would complement canal traffic, not compete with it.

This railway, which opened in 1831, in fact did not parallel the Erie Canal's more circuitous route between the two cities. With the completion in 1836 of the Utica and Schenectady Railroad, however, the Erie Canal was clearly challenged. This rail line paralleled the canal for the entire 78 miles between the two cities.

The New York legislature reacted to the threat by enacting a law to protect the canal, forbidding the Utica and Schenectady Railroad to carry freight. As more railroads were built, however, attitudes changed. By the 1850s, the legislature eliminated restrictions on the Utica and Schenectady Railroad.

In 1882, New York ceased collecting tolls on its canals. By then, the total amount of toll money that had entered state coffers from the Erie Canal was nearly \$121 million. During 28 of the 62 years in which tolls were charged, the annual total surpassed two million dollars. In 1862, the peak year for toll collection, more than \$4,500,000 was collected. Unlike many canals built after the Erie, the "Grand Canal" paid off handsomely as an investment.

http://www.archives.nysed.gov/projects/eriecanal/essays/ec_larkin4.shtml