



Essay About the Erie Canal Preserving the Sabbath

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In 1828, a dismayed Elisha Dean informed his business acquaintance Lyman Spalding that a particular boat company along the Erie Canal was operating on Sunday, the Christian Sabbath. It was bad enough for any company to violate the Lord's Day. But it was particularly disturbing to Dean that the Pioneer Line — a company established with the mission of respecting the Sabbath — would also conduct business on Sunday.

Dean and Spalding were Quakers, but many non-Quaker residents of the upstate region shared their concerns about the moral degradation the canal caused. Yet, like Spalding himself, many of these same people also amassed personal fortunes from canal-related businesses.

Many middle-class men and women feared that the Erie Canal posed a threat to civilized society. They thought that the waterway had become a haven for vice and immorality. The towpath attracted workers who drank, swore, gambled, and worse.

Because some middle-class business owners felt responsible for the moral welfare of their workers, they placed some of the blame on themselves. The biggest culprit, they believed, was the poor example they set by conducting business on the Sabbath. From this belief emerged an active "Sabbatarian" movement, which tried to halt business on Sundays.

Some Sabbatarians wanted the state to shut down the locks, so that boats could not progress along the canal. Others believed that this issue was one for men's consciences, not for governmental policy. These people called upon businessmen to respect the Sabbath and to favor boat lines like the Pioneer Line that promised not to operate — not even to shoe horses — on Sunday.

The Sabbatarians met with a great deal of opposition. In fact, the Pioneer Line folded in 1829, the year after Dean wrote to Spalding. But the debate over whether the canal should operate on the Sabbath would continue for at least several more decades.

Proponents hoped that workers would attend church on Sunday if the canal were closed. Opponents argued that the boat workers would simply use the day of rest to pursue additional ungodly activities. Some argued that the state had no business meddling in religious affairs. Others said candidly that they feared the loss of revenue if the canal were shut down for one day out of seven.

Still others argued that the most important issue was not the size of one's purse but rather the extent of one's devotion to God. [See Paul Johnson's *A Shopkeeper's*

Millennium: Society and Revival in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978) for the best treatment of the Sabbatarian movement.]

If Spalding was devoted to God, he was also devoted to profit-making. Yet it would be unfair to dismiss Spalding, and others like him, as mere hypocrites. Middle-class businessmen often supported reform movements that generally denounced them. By supporting reform movements, such men and their wives confirmed their standing as upright citizens.

In a time of boom and bust, economic mobility could be downward as well as upward (as Spalding would find out when he declared bankruptcy in 1841). Members of the commercial middle classes thus were eager to define their own status in cultural as well as economic terms. Although an economic collapse might deprive them of their money, it could not take away their piety or social concern.

Ideally, of course, these businessmen hoped to be both pious and wealthy. In fact, they often saw wealth as an affirmation of divine favor. When they argued for Sabbatarian laws and other reforms, they did not mean to stop commercial expansion. They hoped instead to remove the "vice" from the commercial revolution. Perhaps they could even improve their own profits at the same time, by encouraging their workers to adopt more reliable and temperate habits.

By working toward earthly perfection, they, together with their workers, would hasten the onset of the millennium, the thousand years of peace on earth before Christ's second coming. In God's kingdom, they believed, commercial progress and moral virtue would surely coexist.

http://www.archives.nysed.gov/projects/eriecanal/essays/ec_sheriff3.shtml