



Essay About the Erie Canal The Railroads and New Yorks Canals



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At about the same time that New York's canals were being built, American railroads were in their experimental stage. Initially railroads were seen as a lateral system connecting to canals. For example, the southern end of the Delaware and Hudson Canal was located in the Pennsylvania village of Honesdale.

But 16 miles of the Moosic Mountains separated Honesdale from the coal mines at Carbondale. Transporting coal was the whole point of the canal, but it was beyond the resources of the Delaware and Hudson Company to cross the mountain barrier by canal.

As a result, chief engineer Benjamin Wright, together with his principal assistant, John B. Jervis, put forth a daring plan to transport the coal from the mines to the canal by railroad. Even more novel was their proposal to use steam-powered locomotives. Such a venture was without precedent in America. It turned out that the Delaware and Hudson's railroad track could not support the weight of the locomotive engine Sturbridge Lion when the machine was tested in 1829.

Jervis used the steam locomotive again, however, when he built New York's first railroad, the Mohawk and Hudson. This time it was successful, and when the railroad opened in 1831, the locomotive De Witt Clinton chugged from Albany to Schenectady. The promoters of the Mohawk and Hudson made a point of informing prospective shareholders that the railroad was constructed to supplement Erie Canal travel, not compete with it.

Investors were afraid of challenging the Erie. Instead, the railroad company advertised that passengers could ride the cars in a direct 16-mile journey between Albany and Schenectady and then board canal packet boats for the trip west. This would save 10 miles, since the canal route between the two cities was 26 miles.

When New York's second railroad opened in 1832, its route between Schenectady and Saratoga Springs did not parallel the Erie Canal. The same could not be said of the state's third line, the Utica and Schenectady. Completed in 1836, it ran just across the Mohawk River from the Erie Canal for nearly 78 miles as they both squeezed through the Mohawk Valley.

In an effort to protect its canal, the New York legislature forbade the railroad to carry freight. Then, in 1844, state lawmakers permitted freight on the railroad, but only during the winter months, when the canal was closed. Although the Utica and Schenectady was required to pay canal tolls on the freight it shipped in the winter, that did not halt the shipments, nor did it stop railroad construction.

In 1839, the Syracuse and Utica line went into operation and continued the westward expansion of the railroad. This line also paralleled the Erie Canal for most of its route, but legislators did not hinder Syracuse and Utica freight shipments. In the 1850s, legislators removed the restrictions placed on the Utica and Schenectady.

The Syracuse and Auburn, Auburn and Rochester, Tonawanda, and (in 1843) the Buffalo and Attica railroads finally spanned the remaining distance between Syracuse and Buffalo. None of the routes of these railroads closely followed that of the Erie Canal, but the railroad challenge had become clear.

On May 14, 1851, a ceremonial train puffed its way westward over the recently completed New York and Erie Railroad. It carried President Millard Fillmore, Secretary of State Daniel Webster, and other dignitaries, who joined in celebrating the first single railroad link between the lower Hudson Valley and the Great Lakes.

Two years later, the New York Central Railroad united several rail lines between Albany and Buffalo into one company. Both of the new through lines competed directly with the mighty Erie Canal for the western trade. Yet in 1880, nearly 30 years after completion of the New York and Erie, New York's legendary artificial waterway had its biggest tonnage year of all. Particularly in bulk freight trade, the Erie Canal was still competitive with the railroads. Of course, the same could not be said for passenger trade. Railroads reigned supreme in carrying people.

There were 29 railroads in New York already built or under construction by 1850. This sealed the fate of most of the lateral canals. Very few of these canals had been enlarged after 1836 to the Erie's new dimensions. This prevented larger Erie boats from using the smaller laterals.

Railroads could be constructed relatively inexpensively through almost any terrain to canal communities and to towns and cities not served by canals. Only four of the state-owned laterals survived into the 20th century. Neither of the two private canals in New York was in use by 1910. To add to the railroads' triumph and the humiliation of the laterals, some of the railroads laid track in the old canal beds or along former towpaths.

http://www.archives.nysed.gov/projects/eriecanal/essays/ec_larkin6.shtml