



Essay About the Erie Canal The Canallers

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They were known as canallers. They were the people who were part of the Erie Canal, made their living from the canal, and more often than not lived on the canal. Some of them crewed on the packet boats. Others drove the teams as they plodded along the towpaths.

Many owned or operated freight boats. If the freight boats were family owned, the family lived in quarters in the stern, behind the cargo hold. Since horses or mules pulled canal boats, boatbuilders located stables in the bow of freight boats. The stables provided shelter for the team at rest while another team pulled the canal boat. Packet boat companies kept replacement teams at various points along canal routes, so packet boats did not need stables on board.

Businesses sprang up along the banks to serve canallers. Establishments that catered to canal traffic included general stores, blacksmiths, saloons, hotels, and boatyards. At least one such general store survives, along the old Erie Canal route a short distance east of Fort Hunter.

When several businesses located near the canal, they created a canal town. The short-lived Canal Village near Rome illustrates this pattern. The village of Rome existed long before the coming of the Erie Canal. It had been the location of the Western Inland Lock Navigation Company (WILNC) canal built in the 1790s.

The Erie Canal was not built through Rome because of the privately owned WILNC canal. The half-mile distance between the Erie Canal and Rome caused new businesses to cluster along the canal banks and not in Rome, since transferring goods from the canal to the village would have added to the total cost of the merchandise.

As early as 1820, at the spot where the Rome Turnpike (now South James Street) crossed the Erie Canal, an entrepreneur opened the first business, a tavern. Later that year, a toll collector's house was built near the tavern. Prior to the opening of the entire canal in 1825, a bakery and a coffeehouse followed.

The completion of the Erie Canal stimulated construction during the following five years of a grocery store, a blacksmith shop, a boot and shoe store, a butcher shop, a storehouse, and as many as 12 houses. By then the little community was known as Canal Village.

The buildings of Canal Village had a less permanent look than those of Rome. Many of the Canal Village structures were raised on piles or stilts because of the area's marshy soil. Also, few people from Rome went to live in Canal Village.

Nevertheless, the citizens of Rome were rightly concerned that their location a half-mile north of the canal would be detrimental to the prosperity of their village, so they petitioned the state legislature to make a change. When the Erie Canal's first enlargement began in 1836, the legislature rerouted the Erie Canal through Rome. As a result, Canal Village stagnated and Rome grew.

Life in the canal towns could be boisterous, particularly on Saturday nights, when the canallers sought relaxation after a long work week. It was not unusual to read in local newspapers of weekend fights and drownings. It was fairly common for someone to stagger out of a saloon, fall off a bridge, and drown in the canal on the way home. (Keep in mind that most canal bridges were relatively low and that the original Erie Canal was only four feet deep.

It would have been difficult for most adults to drown in the early canals unless they had lost all control of their faculties.) It is not surprising that other residents in canal communities sometimes looked down on the canallers and their rough and transient lives.

Because many of the canallers moved along the canals as part of their jobs, it was difficult to formally educate their children. While working on the canal, many parents could teach their younger children the basics of reading, writing, and ciphering, as mathematics was called at the time. However, it was important for parents to decide before the annual canal closing whether to send the children to school.

Then the family could move its canal boat for the winter to a community in which schools were located. Often, the port of New York City was the winter destination of canallers. Steamboats towed the canal boats several at a time down the Hudson River from the Erie Canal Basin at Albany. Once the canallers arrived in New York, the children would have access to schools and their parents could find work for the winter season.

http://www.archives.nysed.gov/projects/eriecanal/essays/ec_larkin5.shtml