



Essay About the Erie Canal **Art and Nature: Touring on a Packet Boat**

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When Clarissa Burroughs left her New Jersey home in 1835 to travel on the Erie Canal, she brought with her more than a diary in which to record her experiences for her mother. She also brought a host of expectations about what she would see and what her journey should accomplish.

Like so many other middle-class tourists of her time, Burroughs traveled along the Erie Canal to witness the juxtaposition of "art" and the beauties of nature. When such tourists spoke of art, they meant the technological achievements of humankind. There was no greater emblem of human progress than the 363-mile Erie Canal.

When they spoke of nature, they meant "sublimely beautiful nature," associating the splendors of the landscape with the work of God. The Erie Canal allowed tourists like Burroughs to seek a spiritual retreat into nature, in areas that were previously too remote for all but the most rugged adventurers.

Burroughs did not set out with blind optimism. By the time she began her voyage, many tourists had already traveled along the Erie Canal and recorded their thoughts in published journals or in personal correspondence. Burroughs thought she knew what to dread as well as what to anticipate eagerly. Yet her experiences often defied her expectations.

Although she was pleasantly surprised, for example, to find some obliging boat hands and some agreeable fellow passengers, she disagreed vehemently with earlier tourists who had written glowingly about the sleeping accommodations. Burroughs was constantly worried about being tossed from her bed when the boat thumped against the sides of a lock.

She frequently complained about the dirty, cramped, and noisy interior. Yet, she had known enough about the discomforts and tedium of boat travel to plan part of her journey on railroads and horse-drawn stagecoaches.

If the delays and other details of packet boat travel were sometimes annoying, Burroughs nonetheless found plenty to celebrate in the slow-paced canal. The Erie Canal was a wonder of human ingenuity. Its "art" represented nothing less than "the powers of mind, the enterprise & industry of man."

People came from all over the world to admire its locks, aqueducts, and artificial gorges, which were the engineering marvels of their day. Where nature had thrown obstacles in humanity's way, humanity had responded by leveling mountains, lifting an entire waterway into the air, and seemingly making water run uphill.

The Erie Canal stood for progress, the ability of humanity to subdue nature and to craft a civilized society out of wilderness. Because of the canal, dense forests and Indian villages had been replaced by what Burroughs and her fellow tourists saw as signs of progress: gardens, churches, paved streets, literary societies, and a statehouse.

And yet if humanity's progress was worthy of celebration, it was also dwarfed by the majesty of God's creation. If the Erie Canal brought Burroughs past flourishing young towns, it also carried her into the "sublime" or "romantic" landscapes that were God's works, not man's. Burroughs was "riveted" by the scenery and by the intensity of her own feelings. She was reminded that she was in places where "the fancies of man cannot reach. He may admire & while admire adore the Creator & tremble at His power."

The mid-1830s was a time of rapid change in the northern United States. Along with the revolution in transportation had come market expansion, industrial growth, and urban development. When boat workers were surly or haggled with passengers, Burroughs was reminded that "in traveling everyone is for himself" and that in society as a whole people seemed increasingly individualistic, competitive, and harried.

As the nation underwent rapid economic growth, many middle-class people like Burroughs worried that social decay would accompany it. She set out on her trip in hopes of finding reassurance that such need not be the case.

For tourists who saw a trip on the canal as a retreat from the commercial bustle of the urban Atlantic coast, the Erie Canal's mixture of art and nature could also affirm what they wanted to believe: that it was not necessary to choose between material progress and a society in which God and nature held sway. Burroughs, for her part, went home secure in the notion that progress could be consistent with God and nature. Indeed, progress, as represented by the Erie Canal, could be awe-inspiring in and of itself.

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