

# How the Erie Canal Transformed America

Version A

When the Erie Canal was completed in 1825, it spanned New York State from the Hudson River in Albany to Lake Erie in Buffalo. Although the canal did not receive much support in the beginning, it soon proved to be a great benefit to New York and the entire country.

## How the Canal Affected New York City

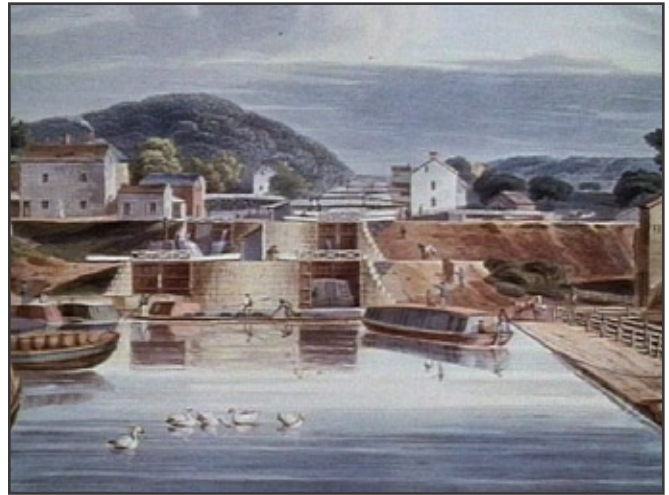
Once the Erie Canal opened, shipping costs from New York to the Midwest dropped from \$100 a ton to less than \$10 a ton, and the time it took to ship the goods was cut down by a third. This greatly increased trade for New York City businesses.

Many settlers used the canal to travel to upstate New York and points farther west. This influx of people opened up new markets for New York City businesses. It also increased the financial and physical growth of cities along the canal route.

The canal also created easy access for European businesses wanting to reach the Midwest. Until the Erie Canal was built, New Orleans was the only port city with an all-water route to the Midwest. However, New York City, which was closer to Europe, quickly became the main international gateway to the resources of the Midwest. It also became the financial capital of the nation.

## How the Canal Affected the United States

In this time of great national expansion and change, the canal created a bond between the people living in the East and West. This helped strengthen the Union.



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The East also began to rely on the West for agricultural products, as well as the profits from exporting them to Europe. So while the South focused more on plantation crops like cotton, the small farms of the Midwest became the nation's food-growing center. The North grew rich from trade. The South, with its slave economy, became the weaker region.

In fact, some historians have suggested that the Civil War may have ended differently without the construction of the Erie Canal. Before the canal, the few settlers in the Midwest were mostly Southerners. But with the opening of the canal, Northerners became the dominant group in the Midwest and began to influence the politics and culture of this region. For example, many Northerners felt that slavery should not be brought into the Western territories. When the Civil War broke out, the Midwest became a battleground over slavery.

## Glossary

**dominant:** having the greatest amount of power or influence

**influx:** the flowing in of a large number of people or things

## Writing Assignment

Using your notes from the lesson and activity, write a one- to two-page paper on one of the following topics:

1. Describe in your own words three key changes (geographic, economic, and political) that the construction of the Erie Canal brought to New York.
2. Describe in your own words three key changes (geographic, economic, and political) that the construction of the Erie Canal brought to the United States.
3. Imagine that you are traveling along the Erie Canal about five years after its construction. Write a journal entry to describe some of the economic effects on the area that you are seeing along the canal and in the Midwest.

If you would like more information to complete your paper, check out the following Web sites:

### Big Apple History: The Erie Canal

<http://pbskids.org/bigapplehistory/building/topic1.html>

### New York State Canals: Canal History

<http://www.nyscanals.gov/cculture/history/>

### The Erie Canal Links

<http://www.eriecanal.org/links.html>