

HISTORIC HIGHWAYS OF AMERICA VOLUME 14

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View of Old Erie Canal Basin at Buffalo

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HISTORIC HIGHWAYS OF AMERICA VOLUME 14

The Great American Canals

by Archer Butler Hulbert

With Maps and Illustrations

Volume II The Erie Canal

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PREFACE

This second monograph on the great American canals which played the part of important highways westward, is devoted to an outline of the Erie Canal. In the comparatively short space at our disposal for so great a theme, it has been possible only to sketch some of the leading features of our subject, namely, the early history of the Mohawk Valley route, the origin of the canal idea, its building, the celebration of its completion, a catalogue of its finances and enlargements, and its effect.

Our sources have been the state Reports, Sweet's Documentary History, Hawley's Origin of the Erie Canal, and the various state and local histories which treat of the subject. A monograph, in the form of a thesis, by Julius Winden, has been of great advantage, as will be indicated, in presenting the influence of the Erie Canal upon the population along its course.

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A. B. H.
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CHAPTER I

THE MOHAWK AND ITS IMPROVEMENT

The "great western" route through New York State to the Lakes has come under consideration in our study of highways in three places: as an Indian trail, as a portage path, and as a pioneer road. The old Iroquois Trail, as we have called it, ran up the Mohawk, which it crossed at Nun-da-da-sis, "around the hill," (Utica); thence it made for the Genesee River and the Niagara frontier; an important tributary pathway led down the Genesee to Swa-geh (Oswego) on Lake Ontario. This was the landward route from the Hudson to the Great Lakes. As a thoroughfare in its entirety, it meant much to the Indians, but very little to the white men before the nineteenth century. Though the lower Mohawk Valley was sparsely settled early in the eighteenth century, white men did not build their

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cabins along the Iroquois Trail to the westward until nearly a century later, when the old Genesee Road was opened. Until then the country through which the Iroquois Trail ran had been a terra incognita where only Indian runners knew the way through the Long House of the Iroquois. Yet it was a pleasant country for all the forest shades; from Nun-da-da-sis the trail ran on, leaving the Mohawk River and Ole-hisk, "the place of nettles"—the famed battlefield of Oriskany—to the north, passing Ka-ne-go-dick (Wood Creek) and Ga-no-a-lo-hole (Lake Oneida), the "Lake of the Head on a Pole."^[1] To the southward, the path bore away toward Na-ta-dunk (Syracuse), the place of the "broken pine-tree," and Ga-do-quat (Fort Brewerton). There were the silver lakes strung like white gems on wreaths of heaviest green. The low lands of the Genesee country, soon to see the great advances heralded by the famous purchases of land speculators, intervened; and straight be

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yond, far away across the pine-tree tops, gleamed the Great Lakes and the plunging river between them; the deep growl of Niagara seemed to warn voyageurs away to the forest trails on either side. Those falls were the only interruption in a water highway which in many aspects is, today, the most stupendous in the world.

Had this winding trail been the only means of communication between the rapidly filling Hudson River valley and the chain of lakes to the northwest, it is very probable that a Braddock or a Forbes would have built a military road even through that bloody Long House; but the Mohawk River, and the Oswego, offered a waterway which, though difficult and uncertain, was the white man's route from

the Hudson to the Lakes—the western war route of which the portage at Rome was the key. A clear picture of the old Mohawk would be a precious possession. The records, however, are so few and so general in character that one would be at a loss to supply an artist with his material. It is only in the staid reports of old navigation companies that we get any definite de

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scription of our old-time rivers. We know of the main obstructions to continuous navigation in the Mohawk; first there was the Ga-ha-oose Falls, or Cohoes Falls as we know them today. These were impassable for any craft, and made Schenectady the metropolis of the lower Mohawk Valley because it was the Mohawk terminus of the difficult portage to Albany through the pine barrens. Thus the old-time river traffic began at Schenectady. Proceeding northward by Te-hon-de-lo-ga, the famous lower castle of the Mohawks, and Ga-no-jo-hi-e, the middle castle, the traveler passed the present Fonda, which was Ga-na-wa-da, “over the rapids,” and came to the rocky confines of Ta-la-que-ga, the “place of small bushes”—the present Little Falls. Here the roaring rapids interrupted all navigation, empty boats not even being able to pass over them. The early portage of one mile here in sleds over the swampy ground has been described as it was in 1756, when enterprising Teutons residing here transferred all boats in sleds over marshy ground which would “admit of no wheel carriage.” In all of the military

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operations in the Mohawk Valley in the French and Indian and Revolutionary wars this portage played a part. As early as 1768, Governor Sir Henry Moore suggested the improvement of the Mohawk at the Falls of Canajoharie. A route for a canal around Niagara Falls was surveyed in 1784. Travelers to Niagara with heavy baggage invariably went by way of the Mohawk batteaus. We have seen that in 1793 two of the commissioners to the western Indians, traveling light, went overland by horse to the Genesee, while General Lincoln went with the heavy baggage by way of the Mohawk.[2] From Schenectady to the Oneida Portage at Rome, Little Falls offered the only insurmountable obstruction; later on, about 1790, we find that the Germans' sleds were out of use and that boats were transferred on wheeled vehicles appropriately fashioned to carry them without damage to their hulls. No great boats could be transferred by such means; this fact had a tendency to limit the carrying capacity of Mohawk batteaus to about one and a half tons. These boats were

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operated by three men, and a journey from Rome to Schenectady and return—one hundred and twelve miles—required, at the least estimate, nine days. Such was the high rate of freight that, if no return freight was secured, the cost of sending a ton to Schenectady equaled one man's wages for eighteen days, about fourteen dollars.

The improvement of the Mohawk before 1792 was, without doubt, of no real consequence. Ascending boatmen and forwarding companies here and there of necessity made the river passable, otherwise there could have been no traffic at all. As one of our maps shows, as early as 1730 a neck of land, in one instance,

was cut through.[3] The batteaus which carried provisions and ammunition northward to Fort Stanwix or Fort Schuyler probably often broke a new way through the dams of forest driftwood which the flood tides left; and at high tide there was, we know, good downward navigation. Elkanah Watson must be remembered as one of the pioneers in the improvement of the central New York [Pg 21]

waterway. In 1788 he made a western journey by way of the Mohawk, and his journal is full of observations which show him to have been a far-sighted man with correct ideas of the logical advance of commerce and the revolutions it would make.[4] Returning from his journey October, 1791, he prepared all the facts in favor of improving New York's western waterway, in the form of a pamphlet which he presented to General Schuyler, then a member of the state senate. He also contributed an anonymous article to one of the papers in January, 1792, urging publicly the improvement of the Mohawk and Oswego Rivers.[5]

Public interest being awakened, in one way or another, as to the value of the river route westward, and the route up the Hudson and across to Lake George and Lake Champlain, a bill was presented to the New York legislature authorizing the formation of two companies to undertake the work of improving these strategic pas

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sageways between the country east of the state and the country west.

Accordingly, on the thirtieth day of March, 1792, the following act was passed by the legislature: An Act for establishing and opening Lock Navigation within this State.[6] The legal name of the company which was to operate on the Mohawk was the "president, directors, and company of the western inland lock navigation in the state of New-York." The word "northern" was inserted in the legal name of the Hudson-Lake Champlain company, which was otherwise the same. The two companies were chartered by one and the same act, on exactly the same basis; we will consider, however, only the one under discussion.

The Western Inland Lock Navigation Company, to operate between the Hudson, and Lake Seneca and Lake Ontario, was to be capitalized at \$25,000; one thousand shares of twenty-five dollars each, no stockholder being allowed more than ten shares. The subscription books were ordered to be opened at New York and

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Albany on the first Tuesday of May, 1792, and kept open until the last Tuesday. If five hundred shares were taken the organization became effective. Thirteen directors were to control its affairs and they were to be elected annually. Article VII authorized "... each of the said corporations ... [to] enter into, and upon all and singular the land and lands covered with water, where they shall deem it proper to carry the canals and navigation hereinbefore particularly assigned to each...." The stipulations usually made in such cases, as to the company's right to enter land by paying damages, were nominated. The controlling officers were empowered to name the per cent of stock the stockholders were to be required to pay. They were also to decide upon the rates of toll to be charged to boats for the

enjoyment of benefits of navigation; the one restriction was that the charge for one ton of freight from Ontario or Seneca lakes to the Hudson should not exceed twenty-five dollars, and other tolls were to be pro rata. The directors were to be allowed to increase the capital stock at discretion, and

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were ordered to make semiannual reports to the public. After ten years an abstract record was to be published for the inspection of the legislature, and if the profits were found to exceed fifteen per cent, the excess above this amount they were to turn over to the state treasurer. The act of incorporation also stipulated that the company's charter became void if work was not undertaken in five years; if the work was not completed in fifteen years, all rights, so far as the residue was concerned, were to be forfeited. The state of New York promised to give, as a free gift, to both the Western and the Northern companies, \$12,500 as soon as both had invested \$25,000 in the work on which they were starting.

On December 22, 1792, the act was amended as the lessons of the season seemed to indicate that there was necessity. The principal amendments were that the locks built on the company's works should have a breadth of not less than ten feet at the base and should have a length of not less than seventy feet between gates. The company was to be

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allowed, in the future, to take up land without first having paid for it—settlement to be made afterward in proper legal form. The land under all locks was vested in the company owning the locks.[7]

It would seem from Elkanah Watson's account that, when these subscription books were opened for signatures of prospective stockholders, there were absolutely no subscribers forthcoming. "They had been opened three days by the committee," he wrote from New York where he happened to be in April (?), "at the old coffee-house, and not a share was subscribed. I considered the cause hopeless—called on my friend (I think it was) James Watson, Esq., and induced him, with much persuasion, to subscribe twenty [?] shares; from that moment the subscriptions went on briskly. On my arrival in Albany, the commissioners had kept the books open several days, at Lewis's old tavern, in State street, and no mortal had yet signed to exceed two shares. I immediately subscribed seven in each company...."

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Watson also wrote to Schuyler of the low state of affairs; the latter ordered him to subscribe to ten shares in Schuyler's name.[8]

A committee appointed by the directors of the Western Company, August 14, 1792, consisting of Philip Schuyler, Goldsbrow Bangar, and Elkanah Watson, to examine the Mohawk from Fort Schuyler (Rome) to Schenectady, reported in the following September. Accompanied by the surveyor Moses De Witt, and Mr. Lightall, a carpenter, and a Mr. Nesbit, the committee left Schenectady August 21 in a batteau, and reached Fort Schuyler on the twenty-ninth. Their itinerary gives us a picture of the old river, and preserves valuable facts for local historians.[9]

The first day's journey was six and one-half miles to John Mabey's, half a mile above Jacobus Swart's. Six rapids were passed, over which the

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water ran, on the average, a foot and a half deep—the river then having the least water running “within the memory of the eldest person.” The night of the twenty-second was spent at John Fonda’s, seventeen and three-fourths miles up the river; in this distance were five sharp rapids and many small rapids with shallow water, as at Sir William Johnson’s “first settlement,” eight and one-half miles above Mabey’s. The night of the twenty-third was spent at Mr. Nellis’s, nineteen and three-fourths miles on; one mile above Fonda’s was “Caughnawaga rift, deep, incommoded with large rocks;” nine miles onward, lay Kettar’s rapid, and two and a half miles on was Colonel John Fry’s. A journey of four miles the next day brought the examiners to Fort Hendrick, four and a half miles below Little Falls. “From the landing at the foot [of Little Falls], to the landing at the head of the Falls, is about three-quarters of a mile, the height thirty-nine feet two inches, the ground stony, rocky and rough.” It will be seen that this was not the old-time portage over which boats were drawn on sleds. Two

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days were spent examining this strategic fall. Proceeding on the twenty-seventh, Fort Schuyler, about fifty miles distant, was reached on the twenty-ninth. The navigation throughout this distance was good with but two rapids, Orendorff’s and Wolf’s.

The recommendations of the committee affirm that the work at Little Falls will be the most important and expensive single work, and would consist of a canal by which river craft can overcome the fall of nearly forty feet; in addition to the canal “a strong work ... to prevent the Canal and Locks from being overflowed, and damaged in high freshes; at this point two guard gates at the distance of seventy feet from each other must be placed; the surface of the ground here is eight feet eight inches above the level of the water in the river above the falls, and, as three feet ought to be given for the depth of the water in the Canal, the depth to be dug at this point will be nearly twelve feet.... Many large stones and rocks, and probably much solid rock will be found in all the distance ... which is 1666 feet; the

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quantity of earth, stone, and rock to be removed in this space, if the Canal has ten feet base, will be about 242,200 cubic feet. [For] 422 feet the Canal must be confined by a double dyke, or embankment, about four feet high; [for] 123 feet the whole depth to be dug is about 4½ feet and contains 5,085 cubic feet; at various places to the water at the bottom of the falls about 100,000 cubic feet of earth must be removed, and about 1,200 feet of a dyke to be made. An estimate of the expense of this work with five Locks ... amounts to £10,500.”

The improvement of the river from Schenectady to the mouth of the Schoharie would call for an expenditure of £20,000 in dykes, dams, and small canals. At Rome a canal 5,352 feet long was proposed as a substitute for the ancient portage path; “apparently the mean depth of the earth to be removed for forming the Canal would be about twelve feet at the greatest depth, hence about 642,240 cubic feet of earth must be removed. The ground though soft is so much interwoven with the roots of trees, and the work will

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also be so much retarded by the influx of water into the Canal whilst digging, that it is supposed that one man could not remove above fifty cubic feet per day, hence 12,845 days for one man would be required; which at 4s. per day amounts to £2,569. In very dry times, such as the present, the water in the Mohawk is so little that none can be spared to increase the quantity in Wood Creek. A bulkhead must therefore be placed ... precisely of the height with the level of the water in the Mohawk, a boat then in this low state of the river coming up Wood Creek ... must unlade, and be drawn across the bulkhead into the Canal; there reloaded and proceed through the Canal into the Mohawk River; but when the Mohawk River rises so much as that a quantity of water equal to carry an empty boat is added to the water in the river, the water on the bulkhead will rise to nearly that height, and the empty boat will pass. If the rise be equal to the water drawn by a loaded boat, the boat and its cargo will pass the bulkhead into the Canal. It is evident by this arrangement the navigation of Wood

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Creek will be much mended whenever the water in the Mohawk is higher than at present. The whole expence at this place will probably not exceed £3,000.” Many of the general observations of this committee are important in the history of water transportation across New York.

“Having premised thus much your Committee beg leave to observe, That since (except in such an extraordinary dry season as the present) the river from Schenectady to Schohar Creek is capable of considerable navigation—is still better from thence to the Falls, and will be good to Fort Schuyler, especially if the trees and timber are removed, That therefore, except the removal of the trees and timber West of, and blowing a few rocks on, some of the rapids, East of the Falls, nothing further should be speedily attempted in the parts mentioned; but that the primary exertions should be directed to the Canal and Locks at the Falls; that when this is completed, the water in the river above, will probably be sufficiently low to clear away the timber which incommodes it, and to do the like by Wood-Creek down to the Oneida Lake,

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and to remove the most dangerous rocks below the Falls. This accomplished, the next in degree of eligibility, appears to your Committee, to extend the navigation from Schenectady to the navigable waters of the Hudson—because when with the improvements above suggested, the river shall be rendered navigable in the greater part of its extent from Fort Schuyler to Schenectady, in all seasons not so dry as the present, for boats of considerable burthen; yet the portage from Schenectady to Albany, is not only a very heavy charge on the produce of the upper country, but attended with serious inconveniences to those who enter largely into the interior commerce. To prepare for the accomplishment of this apparently very necessary part of the navigation, your committee recommend, That accurate surveys should be made, as early in the ensuing spring as circumstances will permit, to enable the board to determine the direction in which Canals are to run, to take the necessary preliminary measures for providing the materials; that, if the works at the Falls, &c., should be completed before

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the whole of the next operating season is expired, the residue may be appropriated to this important part of the navigation, and completed in the succeeding year;—Soon after this shall be accomplished, the company will be enabled to judge with precision, what farther is in their power, and if what they have done, should prove beneficial to the community at large, and the resources of the company be then found not competent to such a perfect completion of the whole internal navigation, as is contemplated by the act of incorporation, there can be little doubt but that an enlightened Legislature will extend its aid, to objects promising such extensive benefits to every class of citizens.

“It now remains for your Committee to venture an opinion on the mode of conducting the contemplated improvements. The observations already made will evince the necessity of strict economy in every operation. It will certainly occur to the Directors, that in a work so extensive, as that committed to them, much unnecessary expence, and much waste of time must be incurred, unless the executive part of the

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business be properly conferred; and your committee, to avoid this evil as much as possible, recommend that the executive of the business should be committed to a single directing head, to a man of known and acknowledged abilities, of a mind so comprehensive, as to combine and form all the arrangements, with a minute detail of each part....

“A Person who has had practical experience in making canals and locks, would be a desirable and valuable acquisition, but such a person may not be attainable in this country; if so, it has occurred to your committee, that probably the defect might be supplied, if the person to whom the general direction shall be committed was to select two or three of our most ingenious and best informed carpenters, and repair with them to view the works in Pennsylvania and Virginia, with a critical and close attention. Canals and locks are already formed there, and little doubt can be entertained but that every information which gentlemen are capable of communicating will be afforded with alacrity; and your committee have too good an opinion

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of their countrymen to apprehend, that if your superintendant is a man of genius, and the mechanics who accompany him men of approved reputation in their professions, they would not after such an inspection be able to fulfil the wishes of their employers with satisfaction and credit to both.”

Work on the Mohawk River improvements^[10] was begun in April, 1793, by a force of three hundred men; the digging of the canal around the Little Falls was the most important item in the difficult undertaking. Soon the company's funds gave out and work ceased. It was begun again feebly in January, 1794, in hopes that the next legislature would assist by grants, loans, or money, or by subscribing to stock in the company. In this the company was not disappointed, for the state subscribed to two hundred shares of stock in each of the improvement schemes. In May, 1795, work was again resumed, and in November of

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that year boats could go about Little Falls in the canal. It was opened November seventeenth and on that day nine boats passed through gratis. In the next thirty days "eight large boats, and one hundred and two small boats, passed the little falls on the Mohawk, and paid toll in the aggregate of £80.10." [11]

This famous little canal, for in its day it was a very significant piece of work, was 4,752 feet long; it contained five locks, each having a lift of about nine feet; the total rise of boats ascending was forty-four feet and seven inches. The locks were located at the lower end of the canal; "the pits, in which they are placed, have been excavated out of solid rock, of the hardest kind. The area of the chambers was 74x12 feet, admitting boats drawing 3½ feet; the depth of water in the canal above the locks was three feet and would float boats carrying 32 tons; the time of the passage was three quarters of an hour. Nearly one-half of the canal (2550 feet) was cut through solid rock and its total original cost was about \$50,000."

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At the same time, 1793, work was begun at other points, principally on a canal from the Mohawk to the Hudson (to avoid Cohoes Falls), but the work soon ceased because of lack of funds. In that summer the preliminary work on the water route down Wood Creek and the Onondaga to Lake Ontario was done. The little, winding creek was found to be almost incorrigible. It was so crooked that thirteen cuts were made across the points of land contained within its curving banks. The banks were lined with aged trees whose predecessors had fallen into the narrow waterway which they choked with their many huge, straggling branches. It was no less a task to remove the débris from the waterway than it was to remove from the banks the trees which would fall into the water during the next windstorm. Many have written gaily of the swift canoes of the olden days, gliding peacefully on the limpid surface of the old-time rivers; a study of the condition of the old Mohawk, Susquehanna, or Ohio would have corrected suggestions which are inherently misrepresentations. On such smaller

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streams as Little River or Wood Creek, the havoc of the wind was even more noticeable. The company now at work on Wood Creek planned to clear the banks of timber for four rods back on each bank and, by the report of 1796, the contracts were actually proposed to that effect. The company had trouble with settlers along the rivers, for felling trees which grew along the banks into the water, thereby saving themselves the labor of burning them or hauling them away. The company expected to cut a canal from the Mohawk to Wood Creek near Rome, New York, to take the place of the famous portage path. In the report of 1796 it was proposed even to mortgage the works at Little Falls in order to secure funds for this portage canal.

The plan of the complete communication was outlined by the company's engineer, Mr. Weston, December 23, 1795, and was embodied in the report of 1796. It called for a canal from the Hudson, above Lansing's Mill, to the Mohawk above Cohoes Falls; these falls, seventy feet in height, had made necessary the portage path through the pine barrens from Schenectady

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to Albany. The surveyor spoke hopefully of the rapids between Schenectady and Utica (Fort Schuyler) since rapids always indicated pools above and below. The rapids were to be overcome by small, low dams with oblique walls “to collect a greater quantity of water in the channel and pond above.” In the forty odd miles down Wood Creek and Lake Oneida to Fort Brewerton, the “chief impediment is occasioned by an old Indian ell wear [weir]—a wing wall to confine the channel into a narrow compass.”[12] At Oswego Falls (Rochester) a canal was proposed on the south side of the river, sixty-two chains in length, and with a fall of eighteen feet. Thence to Lake Ontario, twelve miles, the rapidity of the river necessitated a series of dams and locks. “Arrived at lake Ontario, it is almost superfluous to remark (what is so obvious to every person the least acquainted with the geography of the state) on the immense expanse of internal navigation, that opens upon our view—the extent of these lakes (with one obstruction only, that doubtless will be surmounted in

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a few years) presents to the mind—a scene unequalled in any other part of the globe; offering to the enterprising and adventurous, sources of trade, rapidly advancing to an incalculable amount, ensuring a certain recompense to the individuals, who promote, and the state, that patronizes their important undertakings.” Thus Mr. Weston concluded his report.

Yet the projectors of this work were men ahead of their days; in a great measure public sympathy was not in favor of the undertaking, especially along the line of operation. Here the strongest objections were raised, some of them of a curious nature. One petition to the legislature read that the operations on the Hudson “will Cause the Fish to wit Shad, Herrin &c. Totally to Abandon the North River, a circumstance which would be felt not only by Your Petitioners but by thousands Residing between Fort Edward and as far Southward as the River Extends.”[13] It was found to be all the company could do to keep things going on the eastern

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division of their works; much less carry on the work in the west. In ten years the company spent \$367,743 and, in the end, sank about \$100,000 more. The greatest expense was in remedying faults and failures. “... hence the expenditures baffled all calculation,” frankly writes Watson; “—besides, we were all novices in this department.... Indeed we were so extremely deficient in a knowledge of the science of constructing locks and canals, that we found it expedient to send a committee of respectable mechanics, to examine the imperfect works then constructing on the Potowmac,[14] for the purpose of gaining information—we had no other resource but from books.”[15] Wooden locks were built at Little Falls, German Flats, and Rome at large expense, and these rotted in six years. It was wooden locks like these that the New Yorkers had found the Virginians building on the Potomac. The locks at German Flats and at Rome were rebuilt with brick, but the

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mortar was poor and they fell to pieces. Finally, at all points, the locks were built of stone. This experimenting was extremely expensive work and explains why,

for a long time, no dividends could be paid. Up to December, 1804, the company had received \$232,000, which was paid on 2,630 shares of capital stock. It had received \$25,494 on forfeited shares. The tolls at Little Falls since 1796, when the works there were completed, amounted to \$58,346; at Rome, \$15,037 had been taken in as tolls. The sum of \$12,500 had been received as a gift from the state. Of the total stock the state held \$92,000, and the private stockholders, \$140,000. In 1798 a dividend of 3 per cent had been declared; in 1813, a dividend of 3½; in 1814, a dividend of 3; 4½ per cent dividend was paid in 1815, 8 per cent in 1816, 3 per cent in 1817, and 5½ per cent in 1818. All receipts from 1798 to 1813 had been absorbed in improvements and repairs.[16]

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CHAPTER II

EARLY PROMOTERS AND THEIR DREAMS

The honor of originating the plan of a canal from the Great Lakes to the Hudson will forever lie with the brilliant, visionary Gouverneur Morris. The idea must have suggested itself to other minds even if it occurred to Morris originally; this cannot be disproved; but Morris's shoulders were broad enough for an honor too great for many, and his persistent labors in behalf of the project are altogether consistent with this verdict of a century. In 1777 Morris was known to have hinted of what we know as the Erie Canal. In that year he was sent to General Schuyler's army at Fort Edward, then slowly retiring before Burgoyne's advancing regiments. Morgan Lewis, then quartermaster, later governor of New York, leaves this testimony, in a letter dated May 26, 1828: "One evening in particular,

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while describing in the most animated and glowing terms the rapid march of the useful arts through our country, when once freed from a foreign yoke; the spirit with which agriculture and commerce both external and internal would advance; the facilities which would be afforded them by the numerous water courses, intersecting the country, and the ease by which they might be made to communicate; he announced, in language highly poetic, and to which I cannot do justice, that at no very distant day the waters of the great western inland seas would, by the aid of man, break through their barriers and mingle with those of the Hudson. I recollect asking him how they were to break through these barriers. To which he replied, that numerous streams passed them through natural channels, and that artificial ones might be conducted by the same routes." [17] In his diary for October, 1795, Morris describes his feeling on viewing the Caledonian Canal in Scotland; "when I see this," he writes, "my mind opens to a view

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of wealth for the interior of America, which hitherto I had rather conjectured than seen." [18] In a letter to Mr. Parish in January, 1801, he observes, after seeing a number of ships riding at anchor in Lake Erie, "Hundreds of large ships will, at no distant period, bound on the billows of these inland seas. At this point begins a navigation of more than a thousand miles [to the extremity of Lake Superior].

Shall I lead your astonishment up to the verge of incredulity? I will. Know then that one-tenth of the expense, borne by Britain in the last campaign, would enable ships to sail from London through Hudson's River into Lake Erie." [19] "The merit of first starting the idea of a direct communication by water, between lake Erie and Hudson's river," wrote Simeon De Witt to William Darby, February 25, 1822, "unquestionably belongs to Mr. Gouverneur Morris. The first suggestion I had of it was from him. In 1803, I accidentally met with him at Schenectady. We put up for the night at the same inn

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and passed the evening together. Among the numerous topics of conversation, to which his prolific mind, and excursive imagination, gave birth, was that of improving the means of intercourse with the interior of our state. He then mentioned the project of tapping Lake Erie, as he expressed it himself, and leading its waters, in an artificial river, directly across the country to Hudson's river. To this I very naturally opposed the intervening hills and valleys as insuperable obstacles. His answer was in substance, labor improbus omnia vincit, and that the object would justify the labour and expense, whatever that might be. Considering this a romantic thing, and characteristic of the man, I related it on several occasions." [20] J. Geddes wrote William Darby, February 22, 1822, as follows: "In the year of 1804, I learnt for the first time, from the surveyor-general [Simeon De Witt] that Mr Gouverneur Morris, in a conversation between them in the preceding autumn, mentioned the scheme of a canal from lake Erie across the coun

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try to the Hudson river. The idea of saving so much lockage by not descending to lake Ontario made a very lively impression on my mind." [21]

With canal building going on in other portions of the country, it was inevitable that the suggestion made by Morris could not down. The opportunity offered here in central New York was so favorable, that a people with only half the ambition and ability of New Yorkers would have profited sooner or later by it. Having studied the tremendous tasks undertaken by the Marylanders and Pennsylvanians, it can be understood why the Erie Canal was under consideration at a comparatively early date; the Mohawk offered a gateway through the northern foothills of the Alleghenies, and beyond lay lakes and rivers in the direct route to Lake Erie. There could be no question of water supply at the summit level; the waterways to be crossed, however, might cause the engineers no little trouble.

"I have not been able to trace," Mr. Watson leaves record, "any measure, pub

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lic or private, tending towards this great enterprize, till the 27th October, 1807, when an anonymous publication, under the signature of Hercules, appeared in the Genesee Messenger of Canandaigua, which is attributed to Jesse Hawley, Esq. now [1820] collector of the port of Rochester." [22] It is affirmed that these communications were not inspired by the prophetic words of Morris; [23] they were fourteen in number,

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and were contributed weekly from October, 1807, to March, 1808. Hawley had

thought out his problem with great seriousness and detail, and had splendidly planned a canal from Buffalo to Utica, where improved navigation on the Mohawk was to be depended upon. The cost he estimated at five millions. It is not at all unlikely that Hawley's attention was the more quickly attracted to this subject because of the celebrated message of President Jefferson to Congress in this fall of 1807, just when Hercules was writing his articles.

It was probably the general discussion of this great theme, more than the result of any one influence, which led to the crystallization of the movement, when on February 4, 1808, Joshua Forman, a member of the New York legislature, from Onondaga County, offered the following bill:

"Whereas the President of the United States by his message to Congress, delivered at their meeting in October last, did recommend that the surplus money in the treasury, over and above such sums as could be applied to the extinguishment of the national debt, be appropriated to the

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great national objects of opening canals and making turnpike roads. And whereas the state of New York, holding the first commercial rank in the United States, possesses within herself the best route of communication between the Atlantic and western waters, by means of a canal, between the tide waters of the Hudson river and Lake Erie,—through which the wealth and trade of that large portion of the United States, bordering on the upper lakes, would for ever flow to our great commercial emporium. And whereas the legislatures of several of our sister states, have made great exertions to secure to their own states the trade of that wide extended country, west of the Alleghanies, under natural advantages vastly inferior to those of this state. And whereas it is highly important that these advantages should as speedily as possible be improved, both to preserve and increase the commerce and national importance of this state:—Resolved, (if the honourable the senate concur herein) that a joint committee be appointed to take into consideration the propriety of exploring, and causing an

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accurate survey to be made of the most eligible and direct route for a canal to open a communication between the tide waters of the Hudson river and Lake Erie; to the end that congress may be enabled to appropriate such sums as may be necessary to the accomplishment of that great national object." In the general appropriation bill now passed the sum of \$600 was allotted to a survey of this proposed canal and the work was done by James Geddes, whose report, at a later day, became important.[24]

Mr. Forman's motion passed, but amounted to nothing. In 1810 Thomas Eddy, the treasurer of the old Western Inland Lock Navigation Company, called on General Platt, a member of the New York senate, and the two conversed seriously about the great plan which was slowly coming more and more to the front. Platt affirmed that he would offer a resolution in the legislature looking toward increasing public interest in the great dream of the farthest-seeing men of New York. Perhaps the two drafted this resolution; at least, the very next day Platt handed De

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Witt Clinton a draft of a resolution. Clinton liked it. Its author thereupon offered it in the senate and Clinton supported it and it passed, March 13, 1810. It began: "Whereas, the agricultural and commercial interests of the state, require that the inland navigation from the Hudson river to lake Ontario and lake Erie, be improved and completed on a scale commensurate to the great advantages derived from the accomplishment of that important object: And whereas, it is doubtful whether the resources of the Western Inland Lock Navigation Company are adequate to such improvements:

"Therefore resolved, that if the honourable the assembly consent herein, that Gouverneur Morris, Stephen Van Rensselaer, De Witt Clinton, Simeon De Witt, William North, Thomas Eddy and Peter B. Porter, be and they are hereby appointed commissioners for exploring the whole route, examining the present condition of the said navigation, and considering what further improvements ought to be made therein; and that they be authorized to direct and procure such surveys as to them shall appear necessary and proper in rela

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tion to these objects; and that they report thereon to the legislature, at their next session, presenting a full view of the subjects referred to them, with their estimates and opinion thereon." [25] On April 5 following \$3,000 was appropriated for the expenses of the surveys called for in the above resolution. [26]

Accordingly the commissioners named explored the country between the Hudson and Lake Erie through which the prospective waterway would run, in the summer of 1810 with Jesse Hawley's contributions of 1807-08 in their hands. At the next meeting of the legislature they presented an elaborate report. It would seem that the committee had passed over the route of the Western Inland Lock Navigation Company from Schenectady to Lake Ontario; James Geddes, the experienced engineer who had given some little study to the region under survey, made a map and a few rough estimates. The report

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opens with the declaration that the idea of making small rivers navigable had long ago been exploded in Europe; this was a polite way of saying that the days of the Lock Navigation Company were fairly numbered. The report affirms that a canal parallel with the rivers improved by the Navigation Company (Mohawk, Wood Creek, and Oswego) is practicable as far as Oswego Falls (Rochester). The twelve remaining miles to Lake Ontario might well be covered by a railway. However, the committee had another plan, that of building the canal straight west from the Oswego to Lake Erie, avoiding Lake Ontario's winds and waves entirely. Certain interesting commercial questions were here involved. Even with the advantages offered by the Western Inland Lock Navigation Company, New York and Albany could not hold their own in competition with Montreal. Freight rates down the St. Lawrence were marvelously cheap; fifty cents a hundredweight, only, was charged by descending boatmen from Kingston to Montreal—one-half the early rate from Buffalo to New York on the Erie

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Canal when it was at last built. The rate of freight up the St. Lawrence was only one dollar per hundredweight. If any point east of Niagara Falls was made the

terminus of New York's canal, it was feared that Montreal would profit by it more, perhaps, than the cities it was intended to build up and benefit.

Mr. Geddes favored the direct route to Lake Erie by way of the "Tanawanta" River. He advanced the following rough estimate of distances in the direct route:

Miles

Descent

(feet)

Mouth of Tanawanta

10

5

Genesee River (about)

68

34

Seneca Lake

46

23

Cayuga Lake

6

3

Rome (summit)

66

33

Little Falls

38

19

Schoharie

38

19

Summit between Schenectady and Albany (about)

24

12

Hudson River

14

7

—
—

Totals

310

155

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The actual descent would be 525 feet. Mr. Geddes's plan included aqueducts across the Genesee River twenty-six feet high and one hundred and fifty yards long, across the mouth of Seneca Lake eighty-three feet high, and across the

mouth of Cayuga one hundred and thirty feet high. As a detailed survey had not been made, it was impossible to estimate accurately the expense.

Agitation of the great question was the only tangible result of this investigation. In 1811 Robert Livingston and Robert Fulton were added to the committee, and a report was made to the legislature, March, 1812. This report showed that the friends of the great waterway had resolved to exhaust all resources before relinquishing the work. They applied to Congress through Morris and De Witt Clinton for "Co-operation and aid in making a canal navigation between the great lakes and Hudson's river, which, in the opinion of the Legislature of New-York, will encourage agriculture, promote commerce and manufacture, facilitate [sic] a free and general intercourse between different parts

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of the United States, tend to the aggrandizement and prosperity of the country, and consolidate and strengthen the Union." The legislatures of the various states were likewise asked to lend sympathy and aid—to co-operate and aid New York in opening the communication between the Great Lakes and the Hudson. "... The general advantage to the whole nation," it was urged, "is of such preponderating influence, as to render the present object of principal, if not exclusive, concern to the national legislature." The ways of help suggested were pecuniary assistance in the form of loans or gifts, and a friendly voice in favor of the project in Congress. A letter to President Madison expressed the hope that in his annual message to Congress he would in every consistent way urge the plan of national assistance. Accordingly in Madison's message, dated December 23, 1812, he enclosed the act of the New York legislature and said: "The particular undertaking contemplated by the state of New-York ... will recall the attention of Congress to the signal advantages to be derived to the United States,

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from a general system of internal communication and conveyance.... As some of those advantages have an intimate connexion with arrangements and exertions for the general security, it is a period calling for these that the merits of such a system will be seen in the strongest lights." Thomas Eddy wrote Simeon De Witt January 9, 1812 "... accounts from Washington this days post say that the expectations of our committee respecting aid from Congress are very flattering—the project of a Canal from Erie to the Hudson has many friends West of the Allegany—We are full of the news that De Witt Clinton will be president and Munro Vice p———this is the united wish of all parties in this City except Madisonians."

A great, comprehensive plan of national aid to local improvements was proposed, by means of giving grants of land in Michigan to a large number of improvement schemes in various states. Article seven read: "And be it further enacted, That four million acres of land, part of the tracts above mentioned, shall vest in and belong to the said state of New-York, so soon as a

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canal shall be opened from lake Erie to Hudson's river, not less than sixty-three feet wide on the top, forty-five feet wide at the bottom, and five feet deep (and, if practicable, along an inclined plane, descending not more than six feet in a mile,)

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