



## CHAPTER *Geography in History*

# 10



### Building a Waterway to the West

Build a canal through the Appalachian Mountains? "It is madness to think of it at this day," declared Thomas Jefferson in 1803. By 1817, the unthinkable was underway. Spurred on by Governor De Witt Clinton, New York lawmakers voted \$7 million to build the Erie Canal. On July 4, 1817, work on the project began.

Many Americans mocked "Clinton's Ditch," as they called the 40-foot-wide canal that would stretch 363 miles from Buffalo to the Hudson River. The laughter stopped after the canal opened and tolls started flowing into the state treasury.

In 1826, a year after the canal had opened, more than 7,000 eastbound boats docked at Albany. They brought the products of the Great Lakes region to the port of New York by way of the Hudson River and made New York a busier center of trade than Philadelphia.

#### **LINKING EAST AND WEST**

In 1800, the Appalachians were a serious barrier to westward expansion. People could cross the mountains on foot or on horseback, but farmers in the West could not easily send their crops to markets in the East. Getting manufactured goods to the West was also difficult. Sending goods overland was expensive and took weeks.

Water routes were the cheapest and quickest means of transport. However, west of the Appalachians, most rivers flowed into the Mississippi River. So farmers in the Midwest sent crops south to New Orleans. Goods were then loaded onto large ships for the long trip around Florida and north to Philadelphia.

The Erie Canal reduced costs and speeded up the movement of goods. Before the canal opened, it cost \$100 to move a ton of freight overland from Albany to Buffalo. That cost dropped to \$20 by barge along the canal. Shipping time decreased from 20 days to 8.

#### **CHANGING PATTERNS OF TRADE**

The Erie Canal changed trading patterns. Instead of sending crops south to New Orleans, midwestern farmers sent them north to the Great Lakes and then east to the canal. Midwestern farm products had a market in growing cities such as New York and Boston. Merchants bought vegetables, hogs, beef, and grain from the Midwest to sell to urban workers.

The canal created a boom economy for cities along the waterway. Buffalo and Rochester processed wheat and corn from the Midwest. Farther east, Albany and Troy became centers for lumber, brewing, and flour milling.

The canal also encouraged settlers to move west. It opened a gateway to Michigan, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Illinois, causing populations to soar. The population of Illinois, for example, tripled between 1820 and 1830.

The success of the Erie Canal spurred other states to create their own canal links. The Ohio and Erie Canal allowed farmers to send products north to Lake Erie. The Miami and Erie Canal linked Cincinnati to Lake Erie. As a result, Cincinnati, which had shipped goods south, reversed direction, sending them north to Lake Erie and from there to the East.

States from Maine to Delaware dug canals. But while canal building boomed in the North, it had few backers in the South. Southerners used rivers for transportation but did not build canal links such as those that sparked economic growth in the North.

When the Erie Canal opened on November 4, 1825, Governor Clinton proudly poured a barrel of Lake Erie water into the harbor of New York City. His action symbolized the union of the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean. Newspapers dubbed the event the "wedding of the waters." Until the coming of the railroads, the marriage was a happy one, with East and West benefiting from the link.