

Where
the past
is present

DETROIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

TEACHER RESOURCE LESSON PLAN

CANAL BOATS TO MICHIGAN, 1820-1850



Boats on the Detroit waterfront, c. 1890

Courtesy of the Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library

INTRODUCTION

This lesson was originally published in *Telling Detroit's Story: Historic Past, Proud People, Shining Future* curriculum unit developed by the Detroit 300 Commission in 2001.

Students in grades six through eight will gain an understanding of the Erie Canal and its importance to Detroit and Michigan through map work, discussion, research and a culminating written assessment. Research topics are suggested.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Locate and analyze transportation routes prior to the building of the Erie Canal.
- Locate the route of the Erie Canal and predict the ways in which it changed transportation routes for cargo and people.
- Examine the links formed between Detroit and the markets of New York City.
- Evaluate the effects the Erie Canal had on Detroit through transportation of goods, migration of people and ideas, and economic connections.

BACKGROUND ESSAY

The era of the Erie Canal was a time of dynamic change and industrial growth in the United States. An increasingly robust and rambunctious nation, the U.S. was embracing new technology in its wish to extend its influence and borders. The Erie Canal heralded much of that change, change that would bring an influx of settlers from New England westward, result in statehood for Michigan, and forge connections to the commercial interests in New York City that would have lasting influence on Detroit.

The Erie Canal represented a major success for Americans as they found a way to change the natural environment instead of simply adapting to it. The wildly successful modification of nature that canals, and especially the Erie Canal, represented, fostered a feeling of optimism and a “can do” attitude in Americans, which is not unlike the exuberance we see in the Internet and its seemingly limitless possibilities. Farmers celebrated the opening up of new markets (Syracuse, Lockport) and the strengthening of established centers of trade (Buffalo, Albany, Detroit.) Inherent in that change was the role of the entrepreneur, the person(s) willing to invest capital in a gamble that the investment would bring financial gain. In the case of the Erie Canal, the state of New York joined with individuals to invest in the project, and all reaped profits. Thus, the Erie Canal can be seen as a symbol of a time when Americans were enthusiastically pushing the old boundaries, both literally and figuratively.

What did the Erie Canal do for Detroit when it opened in 1825? It brought an influx of people and goods to what was once a backwoods area and redirected the natural trade routes that connected Detroit to the outside world. Prior to the opening of the canal, produce from Detroit followed a route that

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ended in Quebec. With the success of the canal, west to east and east to west trade became the focus of economic activity. Both New York City (ultimate East Coast port for the Erie Canal) and Detroit prospered by this connection. Strong economic patterns were developed that exist to this day. Detroit, directing goods from the interior areas to New York City, helped solidify the city's position as a financial center. New York businessmen, in turn, had a reason to invest in Detroit (and Michigan) enterprises.

Restless New Englanders struggling to farm the thin New England soil saw the Erie Canal as a cheap, easy route to the relatively free land being offered in the Old Northwest. Detroit's location made it at once the end point of the long trip east to west and the gateway to their new life. Many settlers went no further than the Detroit area, others moved on to the interior areas. Wherever they went, they brought their New England customs, attitudes and thinking with them.

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Detroit Historical Society,
or to schedule a field trip to the
Detroit Historical Museum or
Dossin Great Lakes Museum,
visit detroithistorical.org**

MATERIALS USED

- Map: U.S.-Mississippi River Eastward
- Map: Erie Canal Area
- Reading: Early Michigan Settlers
- Map: www.canals.state.us/maps/index/html
- Chart: General Population Statistics 1810-1997

LESSON SEQUENCE

Opening the Activity:

1. Pose the following questions:
 - How did the building of the Erie Canal influence the growth of Detroit and the Michigan territory?
 - In what ways did the connection between

Detroit and New York City benefit both places?

2. Map work – distribute maps of U.S. Using atlases, have the class locate and label the major ports of trade c. 1800: Boston, NYC, Philadelphia, Baltimore, New Orleans. Locate and label the interior cities: Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Detroit, and Buffalo.
3. Look at the coastal cities first and answer the following questions:
 - What advantages do they have as ports? (Excellent harbors, direct access to goods shipped to and from European ports).
 - Do any have a greater advantage? (NYC).
 - Why? (A deep, protected harbor with miles of wharf area; especially advantageous is the access to the population of interior areas via the Hudson River, and Long Island; access to more people means greater potential markets for goods.)
 - What do the interior cities have in common? (They are all on water routes, lakes or rivers that lead to East Coast ports.)
 - Why do you think they are placed where they are? (Water routes represented the speediest and most cost effective way to move goods.)
4. Transportation of goods was both internal (within a country or area) and external (with foreign countries). In the early 1800s, most U.S. foreign trade was with Great Britain. Both types of trade were essential to the growth and stability of the young U.S. At this point you can ask students what forms of transportation would have been used in the early 1800s – or you can list them: keelboat, flatboat (downriver only), pack animal, wagon and, by 1807, steamboat.
5. Have students suggest ways a farmer in Cincinnati could get his wheat to market, using the transportation routes and means available to him. There were two ways prior to the invention of the steamboat:
 - By keelboat poled upstream on the Ohio River to Pittsburgh – a 3-4 week trip – then wheat was put on wagons and sent overland to Philadelphia, where a ship could transport it to NYC – a total of 52+ days.
 - Flatboat or keelboat down the Mississippi to

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New Orleans, where the wheat was loaded onto a ship which sailed to NYC – a one month trip, or more, depending on weather.

6. How would goods from Great Britain (cloth) get to Cincinnati? (Reverse the above routes, including the trip across the Atlantic Ocean.) If a faster, more efficient way to transport goods from the frontier to markets were found, what would the benefits be? (Economic benefits to the producer in terms of less shipping cost and quicker return of profit and, if a single port city were to benefit over other ports, that city could gain substantial economic power by attracting commerce, jobs, and capital for encouraging more growth.)

Developing the Activity

1. Using a verbal description, or the map accompanying this unit, and atlases, students will draw the route of the Erie Canal on their maps. Teacher choice – use the same map as in opening activity or use a new copy of that map. How does the existence of the Erie Canal change the transportation routes shown on the first map? (It created a faster, more efficient means of transportation along its route.)
2. Return to the questions posed in the Opening Activity. Using those questions, have students, in small groups, predict the answers. Collect their predictions to use at the end of the unit.
3. Assign students (individually or in groups) to do research to test their predictions. Require reading some accounts by people who made the trip to Detroit/Michigan via the Erie Canal: Early Michigan Settlers. (Students can be asked to find these on their own or those supplied in the accompanying lesson may be used.) Some topics they might investigate include:
 - Compare Detroit before and after the opening of the Erie Canal.
 - Population changes in Michigan pre- and post-Erie Canal.
 - Who traveled to Detroit/Michigan and why.
 - Movement of goods, costs, time for transportation and how they affected markets.
 - How NYC and Detroit became linked –

especially financial ties.

- Who financed the building of the canal and who benefited – what role did the U.S. government play?
4. Students should state their topic in the form of a research questions. Research should be gathered in a neat, organized format. Format can be teacher's choice.

Concluding the Activity

1. After assigned time for research is completed, the small groups that made the predictions should reassemble, to share information they have found. Remind them of the original questions and ask the groups to compose and answer, based on their combined research.
2. All members of the group need to agree on the conclusion and all should be able to defend it. Each group should share its conclusion with the class and discussion should follow. Answers can be written on chart paper and displayed in the room or posted on a web page if that technological expertise is available.
3. Predictions made by the groups prior to research should be returned to the groups for evaluation of their guesses.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Research the building of the Welland Canal and its influence on Detroit.
- Research on the Soo Canal, and its effect on trade on the Great Lakes.
- How are Detroit and New York (city and/or state) still connected, culturally, geographically, economically today?
- Why don't we build canals today?

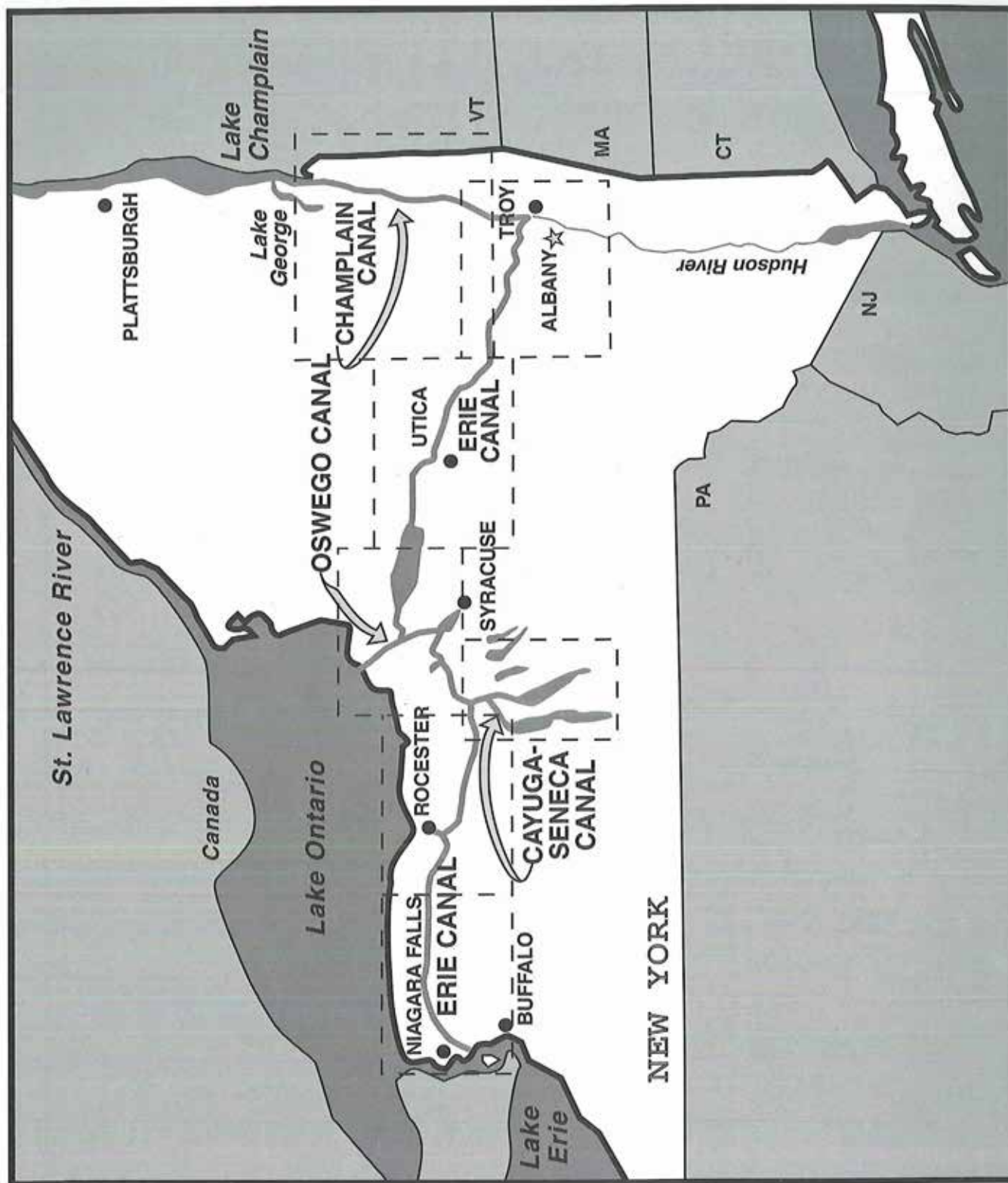
ASSESSING THE LEARNING

1. Assessment is built into the various pieces of the unit. Each student can be assessed on:
 - Map work
 - Depth and extent of research completed
2. Students can be asked to write a response to the questions posed in the opening activity – this could come before all groups share research or after, depending on whether the assessment is for individual work or synthesis of knowledge.

MAP: U.S. - MISSISSIPPI EASTWARD



MAP: ERIE CANAL AREA



EARLY MICHIGAN SETTLERS

JOHN HUNTER

- In 1792, he was born in Cooperstown, New York. In 1812, he moved to Manlius, Schoharie Co., NY.
- In 1816, he moved to Auburn, Cayuga Co., NY. He left Auburn to travel to Detroit, crossed Canada by sleigh and arrived in Detroit in 1818. His wife and children joined him later in 1818. They sailed from Buffalo on the schooner "Neptune." It took them 21 days to reach Detroit.
- His family first went to Mt. Clemens, then to a log cabin built near what is now called Birmingham, which was then named "Piety Hill." By 1819, they had a farm and were growing seed potatoes, corn, and had started an apple orchard.

OLIVER TORREY

- In 1820, he left Ontario County, New York and took passage on a steamboat named "Walk-in-the-Water" to Detroit. The steamboat was stranded near Buffalo, so Torrey walked through Canada to reach the Detroit area.
- He eventually settled in Bloomfield Township, Michigan.

ROSWELL T. MERRILL

- In 1804, he was born in Rutland, Vermont. He then moved to Gaines, New York. In 1825, he moved to the Pontiac area.

HARRIET L. NOBLE

- She left Geneva, New York in September of 1824 with a three year old and a "babe." She then traveled to Buffalo in a wagon and had to wait there four days for passage to Detroit. She took the schooner "Pru-dence" to Detroit, which took seven days on Lake Erie, with everyone on board seasick.
- When she arrived in Detroit, she described it as one of the "most filthy, irregular places I had ever seen."
- She then started by wagon for Ann Arbor, traveling only 10 miles (to Dearborn) the first day. The road was muddy and the wagon became continually mired. Harriet spent three more days traveling to Ann Arbor. Her sister-in-law and her six young children accompanied her on the entire trip.

MARION LOUISE HINSBILL WITHEY

- In 1833, she left Hinesburg, Vermont and traveled with her family on the Erie Canal to Buffalo, New York.
- She then took "a boat" to Detroit, then on to Richland. She was only six years old.

MRS. M.W. CLAPP

- In 1837, she left Farmington, Ontario County, New York with her husband to travel by canal boat to Buffalo, then by wagon, (their own wagon and team having been transported with them), to Adrian, Michigan.

POLLY DYE

- In May 1837, she lived in Herkimer, New York. She left with her two children and various family members to follow her husband to Michigan. She found the canal trip uncomfortable and tedious. She was confident she "could walk more rapidly" herself. The canal boat was stranded at Buffalo by ice, forcing the travelers to wait at Buffalo. They were fearful of crossing Lake Erie due to the ice jams and a storm. They needed to stop at Dunkirk to repair the steamboat before continuing to Detroit.
- They then traveled by wagon to settle in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

CHARITY STEVENS

- In 1808, she was born in Cayuga County, New York. She lived with her sister and her family in Holland Purchase, east of Buffalo. At the age of eighteen she went to Lawrenceville, Pennsylvania to attend high school, (her brother lived next door to the school.)
- Twenty-one years later, she was living in Cattaragus County, teaching school and living with another brother. By 1845, she was living in Oxford, Michigan.

TABLE: GENERAL POPULATION STATISTICS, 1810-1997

YEAR	Michigan Territory or State			Detroit
	GENERAL POPULATION	URBAN POPULATION	RURAL POPULATION	GENERAL POPULATION
1810	4,762	--	4,762	--
1820	8,896	--	8,896	1,422
1830	31,639	--	31,639	2,222
1840	212,267	9,102	203,165	9,102
1850	397,654	29,025	368,629	21,019
1860	749,113	99,701	649,412	45,619
1870	1,184,059	237,985	946,074	79,577
1880	1,636,937	405,412	1,231,525	116,340
1890	2,093,890	730,294	1,363,596	205,876
1900	2,420,982	952,323	1,468,659	285,704
1910	2,810,173	1,327,044	1,483,129	465,766
1920	3,668,412	2,241,560	1,426,852	993,678
1930	4,842,325	3,302,075	1,540,250	1,568,662
1940	5,256,106	3,454,867	1,801,239	1,623,452
1950	6,371,766	4,166,165a 4,503,084b	2,205,601a 1,868,682b	1,849,568
1960	7,823,194	5,085,882a 5,739,132b	2,737,312a 2,084,062b	1,670,144
1970	8,875,083	6,553,773	2,321,310	1,511,482
1980	9,262,078	6,551,551	2,710,527	1,203,368
1990	9,295,297	--	--	1,027,974
1996				1,000,272
1997	9,773,892	--		

a. Previous urban definition (pre-1950)

b. Current urban definition (1950 and after)