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A New, Historic Canal: The Making of an Erie Canal Heritage Landscape

Camden Burd

Abstract

The Erie Canal was an engineering marvel when it was constructed in the early-nineteenth century. Expanding commercial opportunities to the interior of the continent, the canal quickly became a symbol of economic prosperity for those whose lives were connected to the landscape. Despite its once prominent place in the American mind, technological changes in transportation throughout the twentieth century left the Erie Canal as a symbol of the past rather than an economic reality. Communities that once relied upon the waterway soon felt the negative affects of these technological and economic changes. Fearing that the Erie Canal had lost its prominence in the American mind, local residents as well as state and national politicians began a series of heritage-tourism initiatives to rebuild and rebrand the historic canal landscape. This article examines the history of the formation of the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor as a foundational shift in the cultural landscape. By distributing grants, cultivating tourism, and redefining the space as a heritage landscape, government agencies and regional residents fundamentally transformed the very meaning of the Erie Canal landscape in the minds of Americans. Instead of an industrial and commercial space maintained to facilitate trade, the Erie Canal became an icon of the past, curated to cultivate a new heritage-tourism economy.

Crowds gathered in Waterford, New York, one June morning to witness history. The *Lois McClure* was set to begin its westward journey along the Erie Canal. As the crew of the canal schooner prepared the vessel for the long voyage, crowds jostled to see the sight. The 88-ft. schooner *Lois McClure* was an engineering feat, but her featured tall sails, that made travel on large bodies of water easy, made canal travel difficult. When it needed to enter the canal, the masts had to be lowered and replaced with a simple centerboard. The design was meant to simplify transportation of goods from the Atlantic seaboard to settlements along the Great Lakes and make it faster and cheaper. Any resident of Waterford knew that the Erie Canal served as an economic lifeline to the eastern seaboard and to the heartland. Their community's prosperity was dependent on the canal's importance to New York State and the broader American population. In that sense, the *Lois McClure* carried more than supplies and crew. It carried the hopes and dreams of Waterford's residents who wished to reassure America that their home and their canal mattered.¹

It was, however, June 22, 2007 when the *Lois McClure* departed from Waterford. Although it was historically accurate to an 1862 sailing-canal boat, the 88-ft. schooner had been built in Burlington, Vermont, in 2004, and though she was not a piece of history, she was historic and part of a larger re-invention of the Erie Canalway. At the turn of the twenty-first century the United States government recognized the Erie Canalway and its adjoining communities as part of a National Heritage Corridor (NHC). Those who supported this legislation believed the move to be an important step towards "preserving and interpreting our nation's past."² The launch of the *Lois McClure* reminded residents and onlookers of the canal's history and that the Erie Canal landscape was, and continued to be, a prominent landscape in America.

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Those who crowded the canal side on that June morning did have a lot at stake with the tugboat's departure. As the economic lifeline of several communities, the Erie Canal emblematically birthed numerous towns, villages, and cities; its landscape serving as an iconic landmark for numerous communities' stories of origin. Therefore, when the canal received the heritage-site designation, many residents celebrated the call to preserve their sense of place. One historian noted, "If individuals can experience a sense of place, they can also experience a sense of placelessness—the feeling of belonging in no particular place."³ The fear of placelessness can drive politicians and local communities to protect the landmarks that serve as foundational settings for their own histories. Because the Erie Canal landscape meant so much as a source of community identity, residents contended with the realities of a changing canal landscape throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When it appeared that the Erie Canal was on the brink of being forgotten, politicians, tourism boosters, and local communities rallied to save their sense of place. However, under the name of historical preservation, residents, canal communities, and Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor Commission set out to redefine the Erie Canal landscape. The space did appear to be preserved—but the way people valued and used the Erie Canal landscape had changed.

How does a space change in its meaning? Landscape scholar John Brinckerhoff Jackson argues that new human landscapes emerge by a combination of three forces: "economic necessity, technological evolution, and change in social outlook and in outlook in nature."⁴ Throughout this essay I will argue that the rise of the Erie Canalway NHC developed from the culmination of these three forces. In addition, I propose that this new space can be understood as burgeoning *heritage landscape*. My definition of a heritage landscape is similar to Jackson's definition of a landscape in general: "a composition of man-made or man-modified spaces to serve as an infrastructure or background for our collective existence."⁵ Likewise a definition of heritage landscape includes sentiments shared by David Lowenthal that "heritage . . . attests our identity and affirms our worth."⁶ Therefore the process of creating the Erie Canalway NHC serves as an example of a heritage landscape in which residents, commissions, and collaborators sought and found new meaning as a result of economic, technological, and social changes.⁷

Scholars and public historians have a long legacy of examining cultural and heritage landscapes. Cultural

landscapes—a mirror in which the cultural and natural forces of certain populations are reflected—are examined as objects formed from a set of beliefs shared within a community. Cultural landscapes change, Jackson indicates, as the populations, values, and economy change. Richard Francaviglia, however, defines heritage landscapes as "places . . . that contain buildings, sites, and other features associated with history. . . [and] possess historical design integrity; ostensibly, they look much as they did during a particular historical period because there are few or no modern intrusions to mar them."⁸ A heritage landscape is therefore one type of cultural landscape. When the *Lois McClure* made its way through the Erie Canalway NHC in 2007, it entered a changed space: a cultural landscape undergoing transformation where politicians and residents focused on the landscape's prevalence in the past as a means to find meaning in the present. It may have looked old, but the cultural landscape meant something new. A study of the dialogue of the political and cultural forces that shaped the creation of the Erie Canalway NHC allows historians to study public memory as it relates to historic landscapes as well as the way memory is transferred, preserved, and morphed onto a modern landscape. A heritage landscape is thus a type of cultural landscape in which the landscape's appearance is historic and its significance is grounded in the past as a means to adapt to changing social, economic, and cultural concerns.⁹

The Political and Economic Origins of the Erie Canal

At the time of its inception in 1810, the Erie Canal, marked a watershed moment in American politics and government-sponsored construction projects. It was led by a commission made up of Governor DeWitt Clinton, real estate mogul and businessman Stephen Van Rensselaer, land surveyor with economic interests in the Holland Land Company Joseph Ellicott, as well as New York politicians Samuel Young and Myron Holley.¹⁰ The canal's proposal was unique in that it asked for \$7 million in government appropriations to supplement individual investments. This was not only new in magnitude and scope, but it required a reformulation of the way in which government and private bodies worked in concert to take on public projects. With the dismantling of the Federalists after the War of 1812, the Democratic-Republicans continued to debate the nature of government over the question of internal

improvements. Some, who would later be called Whigs, believed that government action ought to support internal improvements such as the Erie Canal. Others, such as the “Bucktails,” believed that government had no business taking on such endeavors. After much debate and compromise, the legislation enabling the Erie Canal combined public funds, private investments, and the insurance that the finished canal would remain a public asset: “In form and function, the canal legislation reflected the growing capabilities of the state and the aspirations of its policy makers,” one historian writes. “It signaled the dawn of a set of assumptions about the proper relationship between the state, its banks and corporations, and the development of its infrastructure and commercial interests.”¹¹ In order to raise initial funds, politicians reformulated the political economy of the state to serve the economic goals of many Americans in the early Republic.

Overcoming political hurdles allowed the Erie Canal Commission to turn its attention to the physical construction of the canal which they split into three parts to break up the workload. Additionally, the Commission proposed a plan that harnessed local labor rather than paying to transport, house, and feed a moving labor force. By employing workers who lived close to the canal, the overseers benefited from the laborers’ local knowledge of the landscape. Construction moved quickly. Within a year, fifty-eight miles of the canal were under construction, and a fifteen-mile stretch was already in use.¹² By 1821, the eastern third of the canal opened for travel, allowing the state to charge tolls for travel on that portion of the canal. This model provided both an economic boost for paying back loans and encouraged further construction on the remaining sections of the project.¹³

When the Erie Canal was completed in 1825, the American population marveled at the largest engineering project to have been completed in American history. Celebratory jubilations such as the “Wedding of the Waters” and the “Grand Celebration” marked the canal’s completion and the beginning of the economic boom that would take place for settlements adjacent to it. Economically speaking, the finished canal was a boon for farmers and merchants hoping to access interior markets. In 1824, just before the canal was completed, nearly 2,000 boats used the accessible parts of the waterway. By 1826, that number had jumped to 7,000. That same year the Commission reported that toll revenues had exceeded \$500,000—an astonishing

number that over the years helped to pay off all debts and loans by 1837.¹⁴ Additionally, villages seemed to spring up overnight while existing smaller settlements ballooned into cities. For example, in 1823 Rochester contained just over 2,000 residents, but after being connected to Erie Canal system its population grew to nearly 10,000 by 1830. New York City also surged in population and economic power as a result of the opening of the canal, cementing its place as the leading city of the country. There was no question that the Erie Canal transformed the economic landscape of western New York and the U.S.¹⁵

The completion of the Erie Canal inspired a wave of canal building throughout the American countryside. Governor Clinton focused on spreading “canal fever” in surrounding states and his engineers, too, were sought out to replicate the canal system elsewhere.¹⁶ Governors from Ohio, Connecticut, and New Jersey called on the governor for advice and guidance to implement canal systems. In 1825, Clinton attended the opening ceremony for the construction of the Ohio and Erie Canal and he assisted in the planning of a canal to connect the Delaware and Passaic Rivers in New Jersey. Before his death in 1828, Clinton actively promoted the Hampshire and Hampden Canal Company’s goal to connect the town of New Haven, Connecticut, to Barnet, Vermont. One historian writes that if America seemed to suffer from “canal fever” in the 1830s and 1840s it was not “as if some invisible agent carried that infection.”¹⁷ Rather DeWitt Clinton helped to stoke and encourage the movement that swept through the American countryside.

The American education system, too, was transformed as a result of the new Erie Canal. New engineering-focused schools grew to both train and propagate canal engineers (that is, civil engineers) elsewhere, and the formal design principles of canal engineering began to be codified (figure 1). Amos Eaton, Clinton’s chief geologist of the Erie Canal construction, was named first senior-professor of the newly created Rensselaer School (now Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute) in Troy, New York—notably the eastern terminus of the canal—where it was founded in 1824, with a course of study in civil engineering added in 1829. After the construction of the Erie Canal, many other universities embraced a course of study that connected engineering and geology. The Military Academy at West Point focused heavily on engineering education and the Erie Canal often served as a learning tool for young cadets.

Americans felt the Erie Canal's impact in all aspects of life as it related to economic change, geographic and social shifts, and educational reform. Those who invested in and promoted canal construction in the early nineteenth century were well aware of the commercial opportunity that cheap and safe transportation could offer to America's growing economy.¹⁸

This was certainly true of many of New York's residents who knew that one's relation to the Erie Canal carried economic implications throughout the nineteenth century. The Erie Canal in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Rochester continued to be a used space where residents and businesses communed with the waterway as part of their daily existence. During Rochester's 1912 Centennial Celebration, for example, *Rochester Herald* photographer Albert Stone captured an image of one float navigating the streets of the city (figure 2). Tarps and wood covered a horse-drawn wagon depicting a triumphant representation of the first canal boat to arrive in Rochester. Nearly 100 years after the creation of the Erie Canal, residents near the canal were conscious of the landscape's prominence in shaping their histories.

Efforts to Save a Diminished Canal

Despite its symbolic representation, the canal was slowly replaced by railroad, truck, and air transportation as more cost-effective modes of commerce. By the second half of the twentieth century, the Erie Canal landscape was a symbol of an economic past rather than of any profitable realities. With the completion of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959, barge traffic along the canal substantially declined. At its peak, the canal carried nearly 5 million tons of traffic through its waterways. At the end of the twentieth century, traffic sank to 10,000 tons annually. The collapse of the barge traffic left an economic void in those communities that had relied on the Erie Canal's traffic. One present-day Erie Canal engineer commented that, "Sixty percent of the people I meet have no idea the Erie Canal is still functioning."¹⁹ The Erie Canal at the dawn of the twenty-first century had apparently fallen out of America's collective memory.

Community activists within New York State understood the diminishing economic and cultural significance of the Erie Canal among the state's communities. In response, several programs and initiatives, orga-

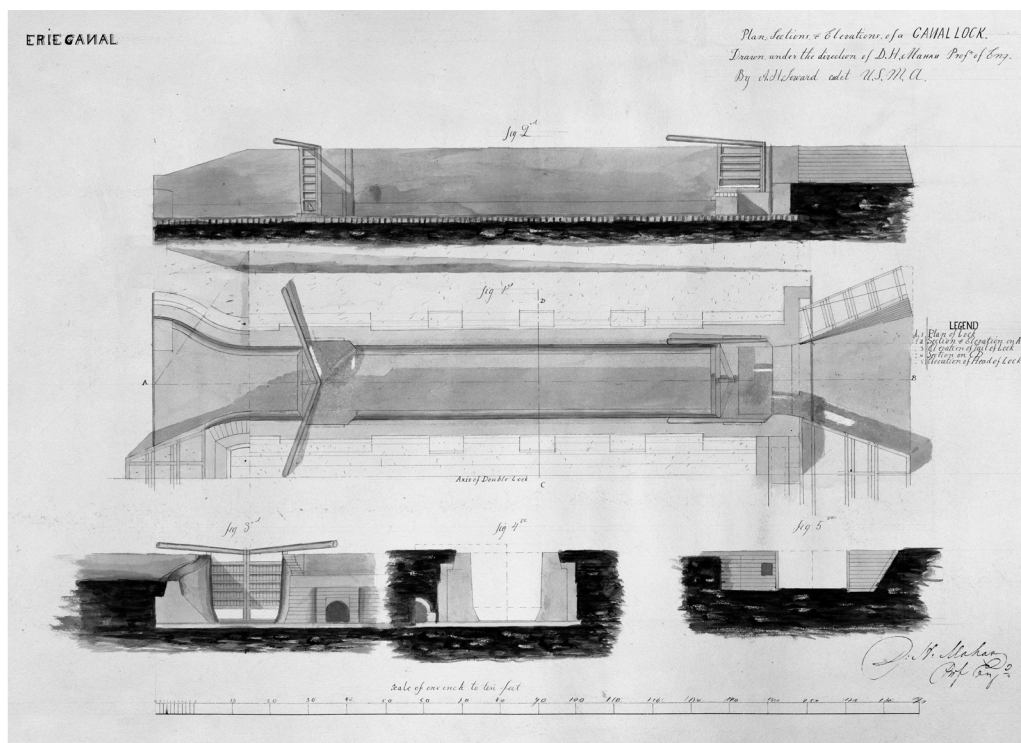


Figure 1. Augustus H. Seward, "Engineering Drawing of a Canal Lock," c. 1845–1847, William Henry Seward Papers, University of Rochester Rare Books and Special Collections, Rochester, NY.

nized in the closing decades of the twentieth century, focused on addressing the shifting economic landscape of New York State. For example, the Canal Corridor Initiative, led by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development provided funds to encourage “economic growth and community revitalization.”²⁰ The Northern Frontier Project, based in historic Tryon County north of Albany, hoped to expand and improve “travel and tourism opportunities.”²¹ Other organizations such as the Mohawk Valley Heritage Corridor, the Hudson River Valley NHC, and the Champlain Valley Heritage Corridor all shared a similar commitment to economic revitalization through grants, publications, and public programming based on heritage tourism. Recognizing that the era of large-scale barge traffic had passed, these local organizations believed government funding and community engagement could offset the gradual decline of the Erie Canal in the twenty-first-century economy.

The collective concern among many of New York State’s residents prompted bipartisan political action in 1995. Congressman James T. Walsh (R-Syracuse) and Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-New York) tasked the National Park System to consider plans to designate the New York State Canal System as a NHC. In an exhaustive resource study, the National Park Service published several plans to designate and promote the entire canal system as a heritage corridor ensuring

the economic support of the federal government and the technical support of the National Park Service. The report outlined the apparent need for federal intervention. While the industrial use of the canal slipped away, canal promoters believed tourism could fill the economic void. The National Park Service report claimed, “the present canal system offers expansive and diverse recreational opportunities, both on its own waterways and through its links to other bodies of water such as Lakes Erie, Ontario, and Champlain, the Finger Lakes, and the Hudson River.” In addition to boating opportunities, potential tourists might enjoy “watching locks operate.”²² For local and national organizations, the main problem that afflicted communities surrounding the Erie Canal was the canal’s diminished commercial influence in the local and state economies. Keeping the canal and its surrounding communities relevant required a concerted effort to promote the canal’s once historic significance.

Fears of this reality awakened politicians in New York State and across the country who felt compelled to remind Americans of the Erie Canal’s history and America’s relation to it. As a result, new economic proposals and ideas made their way to larger political debates. Some wanted to improve the canal’s structure to allow larger barges access to the canal. Other New Yorkers (further removed from the canal landscape) opposed such large-scale funding for what appeared to be an outdated



Figure 2. Albert Stone, “Erie Canal Float,” c. 1912. Courtesy of Monroe County Library System, Rochester, NY.

and antiquated form of transportation. Debates continued regarding ways in which to improve the economic void felt by a dwindling Erie Canal system. However, with the passage of Public Law 106-554, Title VIII, the U.S. government officially recognized the Erie Canalway as an NHC (figure 3). The bill's passage also marked the 175th anniversary of the canal's completion.²³

The rhetoric surrounding the passage of the legislation indicates a group of politicians and business associates interested in preserving the history of the Erie Canal out of a concern that the American population was losing touch with the iconic landscape.²⁴ The law informed onlookers that “the construction of the Erie Canalway was considered a supreme engineering feat, and most American canals were modeled after New York State’s canal.” In it, politicians reminded residents

of New York City (sometimes the biggest naysayers to Erie Canal funding projects) that, “the Erie Canalway played a key role in turning New York City into a major port and New York State into the preminent center for commerce, industry, and finance in North America.” Legislators made their case for local significance and connected the Erie Canal to some of the largest political, social, and cultural movements of American history by arguing through the legislation that the Erie Canal “facilitated the movement of ideas and people ensuring that social reforms like the abolition of slavery and the women’s rights movement” could occur. As heritage scholar Lowenthal points out, “We value our heritage most when it seems at risk.” As reflected in the language of the heritage legislation, a prevailing notion of lost heritage drove advocates to protect and promote the history of the Erie Canal landscape.

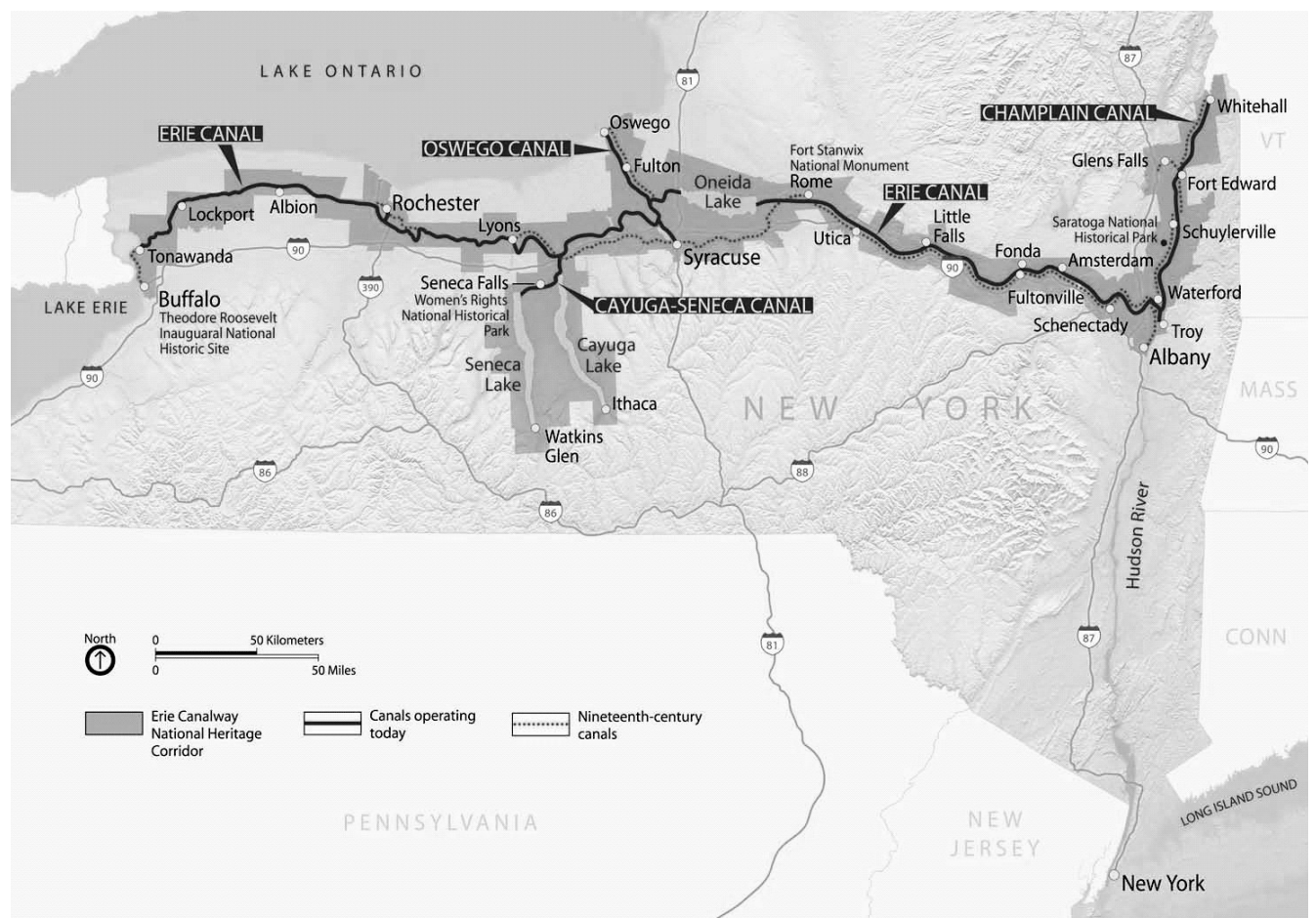


Figure 3. “Erie Canalway Map,” National Park System Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor, <https://www.nps.gov/erie/planyourvisit/maps.htm>.

Those who proposed the creation of the Erie Canalway NHC did so for two main reasons. First, they recognized a decline in the economic significance of the canal system for regional economies. Secondly, the proponents for the Corridor held deep convictions that the Erie Canal landscape held immeasurable importance in American history. The legislation argued, “the Erie Canalway proved the depth and force of American ingenuity, solidified a national identity, and found an enduring place in American legend.” Through these deep convictions regarding the landscape’s historical significance, the newly created Erie Canalway NHC Commission began to construct a new heritage landscape through the fusion of tourism, historical interpretation, and community engagement.

Although advocates of the heritage designation sought to preserve the landscape’s place in American history, they did so by transforming how the Erie Canal was to be used. Rather than restore the booming shipping industry that had defined the canal for well over a century, the Erie Canalway NHC Commission appealed to a new type of canal traveler. They preferred travelers like William Neuman who, with his wife and three children, rented a boat in Macedon, New York, and headed west along the canal. Stopping in towns like Spencerport, Greece, and Brockport, the Neuman family enjoyed the simplicity offered by canal travel. Historical landmarks and scenic stretches of travel helped to cultivate a sense of appreciation for this historic landscape. “By now we felt like experienced ‘canawlers,’ as the boatmen in mule-power days called themselves,” Neuman commented at the completion of the family vacation. “We had gotten used to the canal’s easygoing rhythms, and we were reluctant to say goodbye.”²⁵ Expressions like the ones articulated by Neuman represent the emotions the Commission looked to cultivate. Because “heritage *is* entrepreneurial,” the Commission’s goal to transform the Erie Canal from a landscape built to solicit barge traffic into a new landscape meant to attract tourists was not problematic.²⁶ In the eyes of the Commission, a tourist economy was just as effective (if not better) in restoring the economic and historical significance of the Erie Canal landscape.

Cultivating Heritage Tourism

The entrepreneurial spirit of heritage can be a problematic phenomenon. Lowenthal argued that the infusion of capitalistic marketing into the creation and

remembering of heritage landmarks has the potential to dilute historical accuracy: “Marketing corrupts its purveyors along with the heritage.”²⁷ Heritage has the ability to twist historical accuracy to serve modern purposes. Simply put, “history is the past that actually happened, heritage a partisan perversion, the past manipulated for some present aim.”²⁸ Heritage always lives in the present although it stakes its claim in some version of the past. And while heritage sites *can* be historically accurate, historians and cultural observers should always understand the intended goal of modern heritage-makers to grasp historical perversions. Because the Erie Canalway NHC was developed to encourage economic growth among deflated economies of the Erie Canal towns, the heritage became adapted for profit-making. By calling on history, the Canalway Commission broadly defined what projects and goals would be available for government dollars. Museums? Absolutely. Public signage? Yes. Bike trails? Art walks? Those initiatives would have access to grants as well. But their ties to any historical past are vague or even non-existent. This is only problematic to anxious historians confused by the pseudo-historical grounding and justification for these types of initiatives. However, one must remember that heritage is always a phenomenon created in the present. Heritage gives people a sense of self and a sense of place. And for those who supported the Erie Canalway NHC designation, the need to preserve the economic and cultural significance of these towns in twenty-first-century America made possible a wide range of entrepreneurial heritage.

The Erie Canalway NHC Commission turned to tourism as a way to tap into the growing market of a heritage-based economy. Many scholars have noted the rise of heritage tourism in the late-twentieth century. Heritage sites and museums have increased dramatically since 1970. Scholar Rodney Harrison proposes that the rise of heritage tourism comes from “deindustrialization, reconfigurations of the tourist ‘gaze,’ and the emergence of heritage as an element of a new ‘experience’ economy.”²⁹ Similar to Jackson’s factors that redefine a landscape (change in economy, social concerns, or technology), Harrison believes heritage tourism grew from social and economic factors. Through the preservation of heritage sites, visitors can still connect to landscapes that had been foundational to their concept of identity. The rise of tourism along the Erie Canal allowed for tourists to feel attached to a location considered important to American history while inter-

acting with the landscape in new and dynamic ways that had very little do with the historic practices associated with the canal.³⁰

The construction of the heritage landscape meant a rebranding and a shift in the ways in which communities interacted with the canal landscape. The Commission offered grants to communities in order to cleanup, construct, or preserve historical space that could be packaged as heritage landmarks. In 2007, the Commission released its first round of grant recipients. The Commission declared that the goal of the grants (roughly \$200,000 split amongst thirteen recipients) was to “preserve and promote the Erie Canal.” More specifically, the Commission announced that, “From Albany to Buffalo, the grants are funding projects and programs that protect and celebrate the corridor’s distinct sense of place, while boosting heritage tourism and recreational opportunities.” Because of the open-ended goals of the grants, communities along the Erie Canal were encouraged to either focus on creating historical signage, interactive exhibits, and museums to celebrate the past or forge a new community identity for the future. With the grants, the Commission hoped to satisfy an overarching goal to “assure that this national treasure will serve once again as a key destination and source of renewal to more than 200 canal communities.”³¹ Preserving the significance of the historic landscape meant reviving the communities that most felt the effects of a poor Erie Canal economy.

Numerous communities vied for the grants and the opportunities they afforded. The grants opened the possibilities for old landscapes to take on new meanings in the midst of shifting societal values—heritage tourism was to replace barge traffic as the key significance of the Erie Canal landscape. Obvious recipients of the grants consisted of historical organizations strongly tied to the history of the Erie Canal. It seemed natural for the Erie Canal Discovery Center (with the Lockport Visitor Center) in Lockport, New York, to receive funds to promote the history of the lock system that made the city famous (figure 4). The American Locomotive Company Heritage Museum in Schenectady received funds to demonstrate the interrelatedness between canals and railroads in nineteenth-century America. Other organizations with a vague connection to the history of the canal also encouraged wider awareness of the history and significance of the communities attached to the Erie Canal. The National Heritage Corridor sponsored public events focused on kayaking and cycling, hoping to bring people and awareness to the canal landscape.³²

Underlying the economic transformation of the space was a deeper cultural transformation. The Erie Canal became a landscape to reflect cultural values to tourists seeking certain experiences. So in 2008 when interested members from many Erie Canal communities proposed establishing the Erie Canal as a continuous outdoor art gallery, they placed their modern cultural

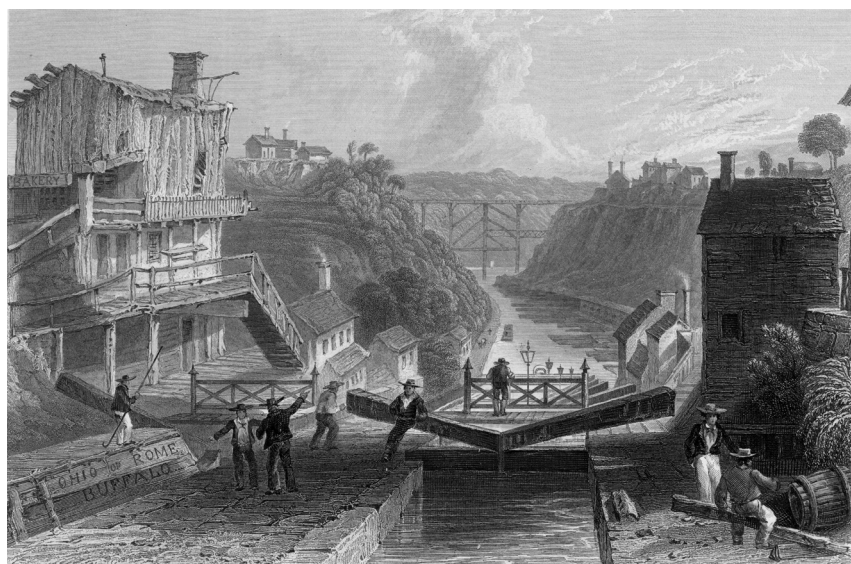


Figure 4. W.H. Barlett, “Lockport, Erie Canal,” in *L’Amérique Pictoresque* (London: George Virtue, 1840), 100. Courtesy of University of Rochester Rare Books and Special Collections, Rochester, NY.

values onto the historic landscape. “The unique combination of arts, heritage, and landscape within the Erie Canalway NHC presents an exceptional opportunity,” began one Commissioner, “for canal communities to come together to foster community pride, attract new visitors, and stimulate the creative economy through the arts.”³³ The goal of creating a 524-mi. art corridor never came to be, due either to a lack of art or of money. Regardless, the Commission did identify sixty art venues on the canal where tourists could enjoy “art museums and galleries, place-based artistic traditions, historic theaters” or scenic vistas that could inspire artistic “inspirations.”³⁴

The celebratory language of historic preservation became entwined with the rhetoric of economic prosperity. For residents along the Erie Canal, grants offered a way to create jobs, encourage a tourism-based economy, and affirm their sense of place. The New York State Canal Corporation argued in favor of future heritage-preservation policies as it both addressed current infrastructural demands of the canal-system and raised awareness of the canal’s and the Canalway Trail’s presence in the local economy as economic engines that will “continue growing their impact on New York’s economy.”³⁵ The versatility of the canal speaks to the transformative powers of a heritage landscape. Canals are canals. But when a canal becomes a heritage landscape, it becomes something else. The canal becomes a tourist destination, an art gallery, and an environment for those seeking a sense of place to find new meaning.

This transformation can best be exemplified through the annual photography contest hosted by the Commission. The competition is open to amateur photographers who submit their work in one of four categories: “For the Fun of It,” “Canal Culture,” “Historic Architecture and Engineering Marvels,” and “The Nature of the Canal.” These categories ask participating photographers and onlookers to actively reconstruct the landscape based on a new set of social views provided by the newly created heritage landscape. For example, in “For the Fun of It” the Commission described a new canal landscape less focused on barge traffic and more interested in cultivating tourism. “The Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor offers fun for all ages, including cycling, boating, walking, festivals, fishing, and more. Capture people in action enjoying the Canalway Corridor.”³⁶ The description operates on two levels. First, it reads as a sort of tourist

advertisement—the Commission’s language reminds onlookers that the new heritage landscape is a great space for recreational activity. Secondly, the Commission asks photographers to participate in reconstructing the meaning of the landscape. The language and call for participation from tourists represent the cooperative task of heritage-making. The winning submission for the competition featured a gentleman battling the rapids near Lock 32 in Pittsford, New York. The connection of the whitewater rafting to the Erie Canal is loosely outlined. Because the image is focused on the kayaker’s face and body, onlookers may seem to think that the Erie Canal can be just as hazardous as other whitewater rapids. Of course, the Erie Canal was constructed for exactly opposite reasons: as a means to safely and smoothly transport barges. The scene nevertheless contributes to the larger project of redefining the Erie Canal as a recreational area.

In addition to the category of “For the Fun of It,” the Commission offered an award for the best photograph of “Nature on the Canal.” This category appealed to tourists who may have valued clean, pristine, or idyllic environments, indicative of a Commission interested in reconstructing the meaning of the landscape and those visitors who value the reconstruction. The Erie Canal in nineteenth-century America was a dirty, busy, industrialized space. Because access to the canal was valued for its potential economic gains, nineteenth-century businesses clamored for space. As a result, the canal was cluttered and packed. A scene of the nineteenth-century canal would hardly please the twenty-first-century environmentalist. Regardless, because of the declining traffic-based economy throughout the late-twentieth century, large swaths of the canal fell to the wayside and as a result, flora and fauna returned to the shores of the man-made canal. The de-industrialized landscape coincided with the rising environmental movement of the twentieth century. The winning submission titled “Spring on the Canal” depicts a sole waterfall crashing into the canal surrounded by fall foliage. The scenery is meant to inspire a sense of wildness that in turn, departs from its historical reality as a manufactured landscape. Similarly, both runners-up in the category focused on landscape photographs that fail to depict any human actors.³⁷ The Commission’s attempt to create a legacy of environmental beauty required the Commission’s concerted efforts combined with the desires of those seeking “natural” experiences.

Conclusions

Although it may appear to be so, it is not contradictory to have a canal come to represent both an icon of an engineering marvel and a site for pristine natural environments. “Heritage lumps together all the past,” Lowenthal argues, “commingling epochs without regard to continuity or context.”³⁸ Therefore the values of environmentalists concerned with the natural beauties of the canal landscape coexist with the celebration of a busy, productive, and industrial past. The creation of the Erie Canal Heritage Landscape marked the end of an era when the canal was dedicated to trafficked goods. The photography competition exemplified the Erie Canal landscape’s transition to a heritage landscape in which historical moments blended with modern cultural concerns.

While the Erie Canalway NHC is relatively young, there are signs that it is nearing the completion of its transformation into a heritage landscape. Through careful advertising campaigns, the canal is entering the wider American mind as a potential site for heritage tourism. Bicycling around the Erie Canal is now seen as eventful or as recreational as kayaking, hiking, and camping.³⁹ In the 2014 Annual Report, the Commission boasted that it had fulfilled its role: “From large festivals to more intimate events and specialty programs, we’re helping to ensure that there are plenty of reasons for people to head to the waterfront again and again.”⁴⁰ In celebratory style, the Commission declared that

through grants, heritage tourism, and reinventing the Erie Canal they had created a \$380 million economic impact along the canalway. In the Commission’s eyes, their efforts to sponsor historical education, museums, public artwork, and recreational activities helped to keep the Erie Canal landscape a fixture in the American mind.

This economic growth appears to be a success to those most interested in keeping the Erie Canal landscape economically and culturally relevant in the twenty-first century. However, the Erie Canal landscape of 2015 is very different from the Erie Canal of 1999 or of 1825. One only needs to see Albert Stone’s 1920 “Tenements” to understand how the use of this landscape has shifted through time (figure 5).⁴¹ The landscape today hardly looks, feels, or means the same as it did throughout history. The Commission created a new heritage landscape out of an older industrial landscape, and in doing so, they constructed a new space that is advertised as touristic and preserved. There are no more mules and only a few cargo-carrying boats. In contrast, there are several elementary school field trips and even more tourists. In the name of historical preservation, the Erie Canalway NHC Commission created a landscape that is a recreational and educational space, rather than an industrial space.

What is lost when the new heritage landscape presents itself as a natural, pastoralized, idyllic, and historic



Figure 5. Tenement houses that backup to the Erie Canal in Rochester, New York. Albert Stone, “Tenements,” c. 1920. Courtesy of Monroe County Library System, Rochester, NY.

environment? Jackson believes it is problematic to simply think “of the landscape as something to look at, a spectacle conducive to day-dreaming.” It ignores the reality of the past in the name of the constructed present. “But we are *not* spectators; the human landscape is *not* a work of art,” he continues. “It is a temporary product of much sweat and hardship and earnest thought.”⁴²

The creation of the Erie Canalway NHC came about in the midst of economic decline. As a result, politicians sought to save their sense of place. They went to work. The supporters of the new designation celebrated the event in response to a larger fear—that their community (as connected to their canal) fell out of the larger American consciousness. Local residents helped to define and build a new heritage landscape through historical preservation and the implementation of new community-based events. As Jackson points out, much “sweat and hardship” went into the new heritage landscape. Built upon the old space, the Commission, tourists, and local residents continue to manually and imaginatively shape the landscape in new and innovating ways. This is not a preservation of the past, but a product of the present. Jackson declares, “we should never tinker with the landscape without thinking of those who live in the midst of it—whether in a trailer in an oil field or in a city tenement.”⁴³ Given the amount of economic and cultural work that has been put into the Erie Canal, we would be remiss not to add the creation of heritage landscapes to that list.

Notes

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4. John Brinckerhoff Jackson, “Ghosts at the Door,” in *Landscape in Sight: Looking at America*, ed. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1997), 116–117.
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7. Robert Archibald, *A Place to Remember: Using History to Build Community* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 1999) argues that history and historic preservation create a sense of community.
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11. Brian Phillips Murphy, *Building the Empire State: Political Economy in the Early Republic* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Penn. Press, 2015), 163.
12. Bernstein, 207 (see n. 10).
13. *Ibid.*, 262.
14. *Ibid.*, 325.
15. Carol Sheriff, *The Artificial River: The Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817–1862* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 27–51.
16. David Spanagel, *Dewitt Clinton & Amos Eaton: Geology and Power in Early New York* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2014), 128.
17. *Ibid.*, 131.
18. Terry S. Reynolds, “The Education of Engineers in America before the Morrill Act of 1862,” *History of Education Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (1992): 459–482; Robert Payne, *The Canal Builders: The Story of Canal Engineers Through the Ages* (New York: Macmillan, 1959). For an earlier and more limited story, see Robert J. Kapsch, “George Washington, the Potomac Canal, and the Beginning of American Civil Engineering: Engineering,” in *American Civil Engineering History: The Pioneering Years*, ed. Bernard G. Dennis (Reston, VA: American Society of Civil Engineers, 2003).
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22. *Ibid.*, 15.
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27. *Ibid.*, 101.
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30. *Ibid.*, 79.
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 40. Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor, "Annual Report 2014," National Park Service, Waterford, NY, https://eriecanalway.org/application/files/1614/5218/8562/ECNHCAR2014_final.pdf.
 41. The image was part of a larger series of images examining the way in which the Barge Canal would affect or change the Erie Canal's place in the city of Rochester, NY.
 42. John Brinckerhoff Jackson, "Notes and Comments," in *Landscape in Sight: Looking at America*, ed. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz (New Haven: Yale Univ., 1997), 343.
 43. *Ibid.*