

# THE ERIE CANAL

For years, people talked about building a canal to connect Lake Erie to the Hudson River. New York's governor, De Witt Clinton, wanted the canal. In fact, he ran for office on the promise of building a canal if he were elected. The people wanted a canal. That is why they elected De Witt Clinton governor by a landslide—43,310 to 1,479. Plus, the state government agreed to pay for the building of the canal.

There was, however, one more hurdle to jump before work on the canal could begin. The money had to be approved by a special five-person government committee. Of the five, two were against building the Erie Canal and two were in favor of building it. Another one—Judge James Kent—was undecided. Here is how James Kent made up his mind and how the Erie Canal was built.

## A Threat Backfires

In 1817, Daniel Tompkins was vice president of the United States. Before he became vice president, Daniel had been New York's governor. He was opposed to the Erie Canal, and he went to speak to the committee of five before they voted.

Daniel wanted to talk the group into voting against the Erie Canal. To make sure that happened, he tried to frighten them. He told them that soon, the United

*These men are working on part of the Erie Canal.*



## **"Low Bridge! Everybody Down!"**

About 300 bridges were built over the Erie Canal. Some of these bridges connected roads broken in two by the canal's crossing. Other bridges were built so that farmers could reach their fields.

To save money, these bridges usually were built low, close to the canal. As canalboats approached, the pilot would yell, "Low bridge!" so that all the passengers would duck their heads. Some bridges were so low that people had to lie on the deck to fit under them!

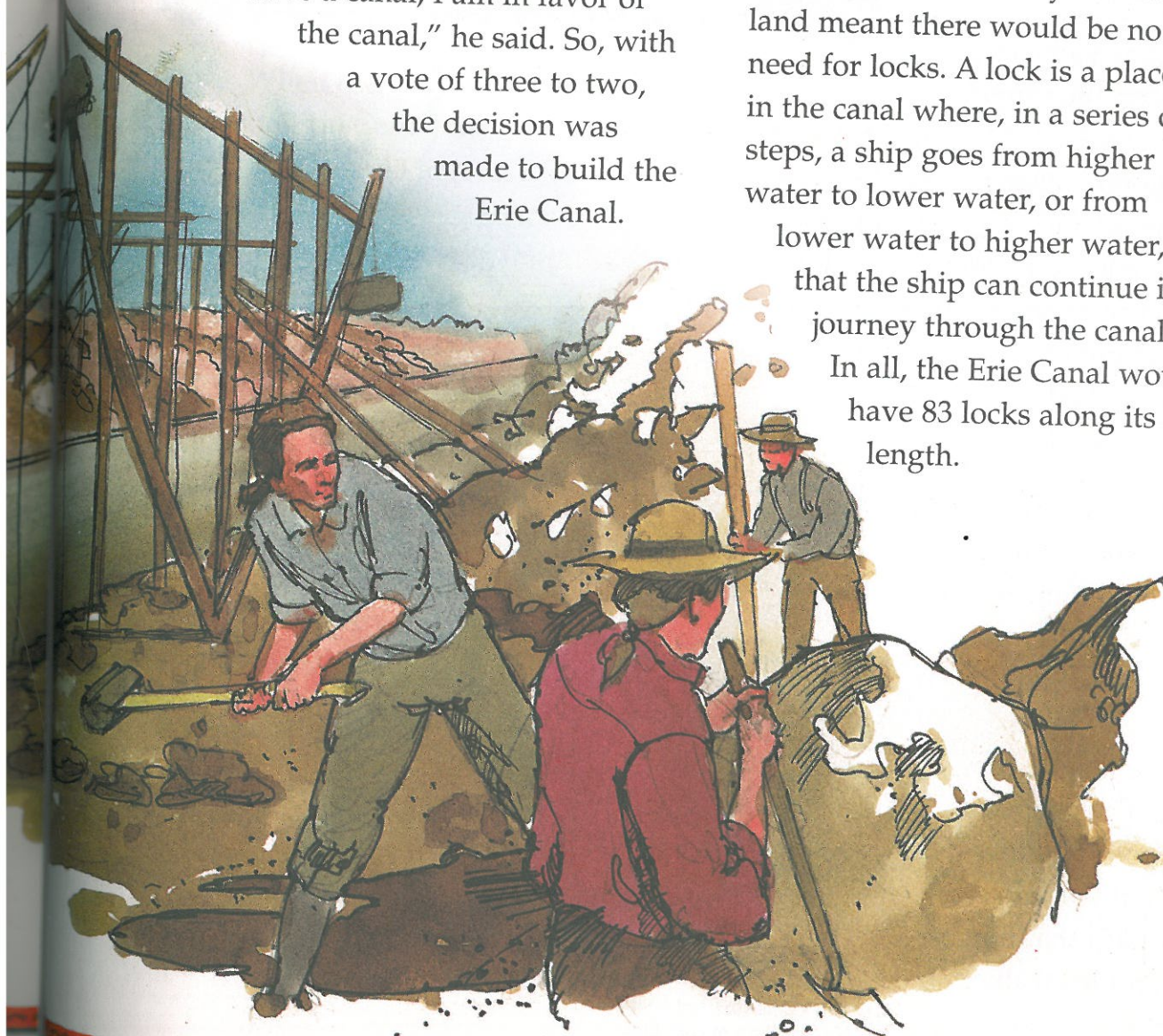
States would again go to war against England. He said New Yorkers should spend their money on getting ready for war, rather than on a canal.

But Daniel's plan backfired. Judge Kent became very angry at the way the vice president tried to influence the group. The judge stood up and gave his vote. His became the third "yes" to the Erie Canal! "If we must have war or have a canal, I am in favor of the canal," he said. So, with a vote of three to two, the decision was made to build the Erie Canal.

### Work on the Canal

On July 4, 1817, the first piece of earth was turned for the Erie Canal. Construction started in the middle of the state, near the little settlement of Rome. This may seem a strange place to start, for Rome still was in the wilderness. However, the land there would be easier to dig than the land in the west or the east. That is because there were few rocks in this area, and the land was fairly flat. Flat land meant there would be no need for locks. A lock is a place in the canal where, in a series of steps, a ship goes from higher water to lower water, or from lower water to higher water, so that the ship can continue its journey through the canal.

In all, the Erie Canal would have 83 locks along its length.



Along its length, different contractors were each charged with digging part of the canal. Each contractor then hired the men he needed to do the job. He built the workers a place to live and supplied the workers with the digging tools they needed.

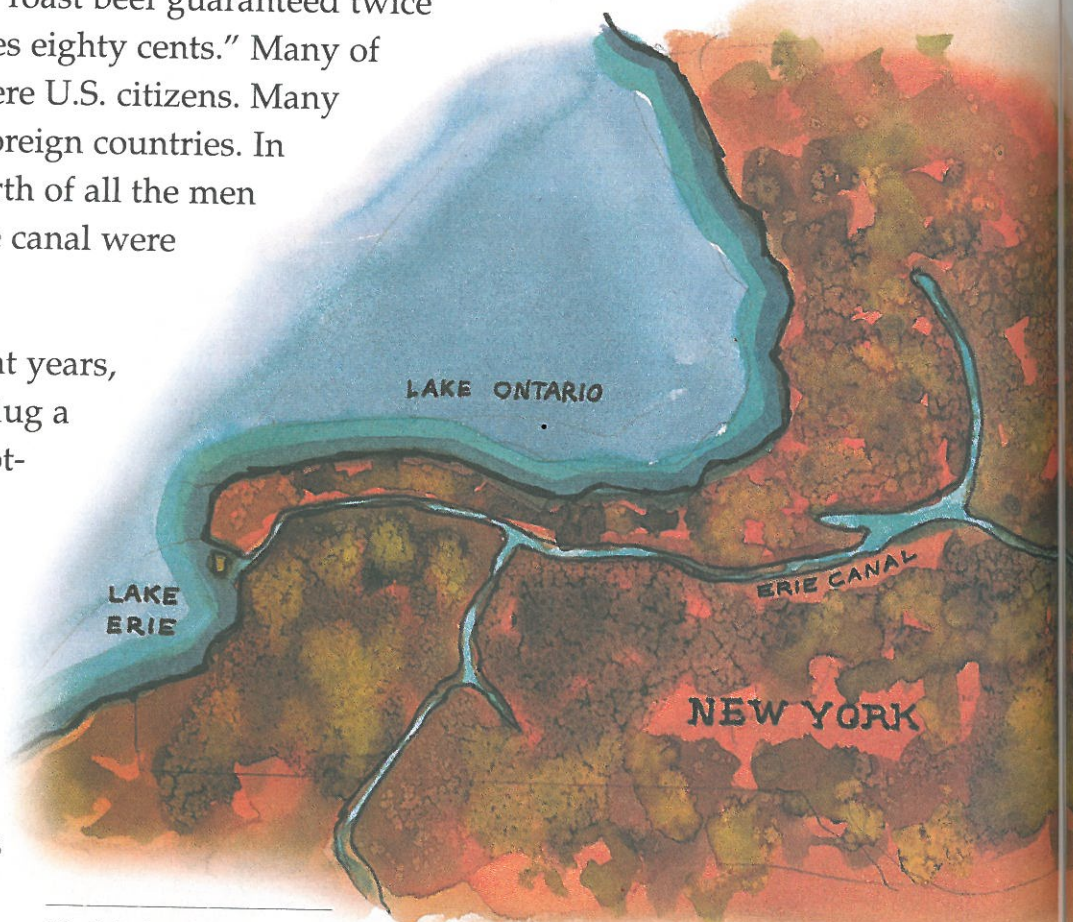


*This painting shows a scene along part of the Erie Canal.*

Many came to work on the canal.

They were lured by the promise of good food and good wages—"roast beef guaranteed twice a day, . . . and wages eighty cents." Many of those who came were U.S. citizens. Many others were from foreign countries. In fact, about one-fourth of all the men who worked on the canal were from Ireland.

For the next eight years, thousands of men dug a 363-mile-long, 4-foot-deep ditch across New York State. Beside it for its whole length, the men also shaped a 10-foot-wide tow path. It was along this path that horses and mules walked,



*The Erie Canal stretched from the Hudson River to Lake Erie.*

towing the sail-less, engine-less canalboats through the water by the ropes that connected horse to boat.

### Completion of the Canal

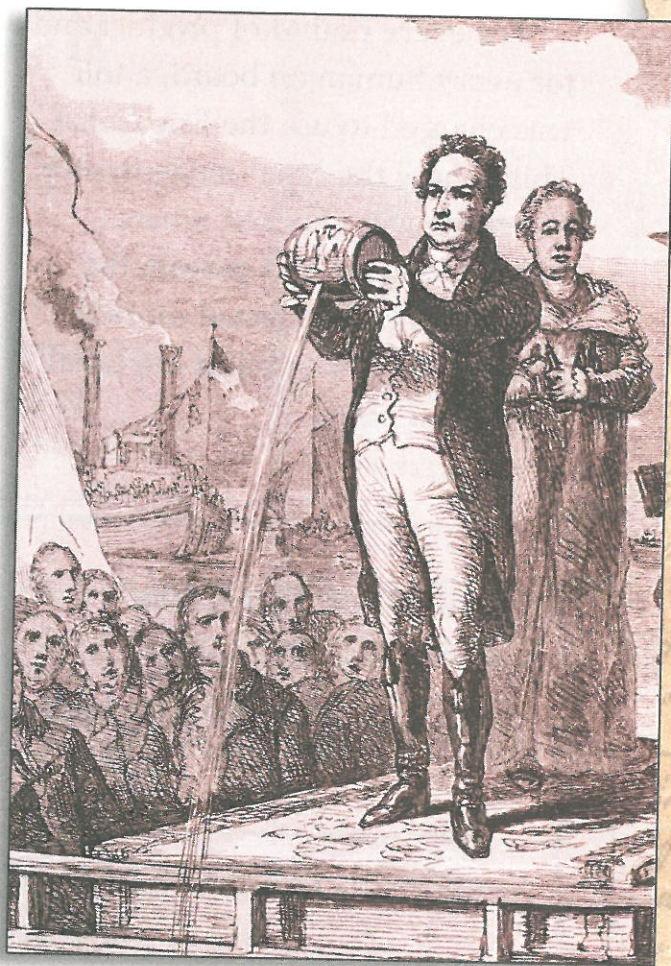
On October 26, 1825, it was time to celebrate. In Buffalo, Governor Clinton and others boarded several canalboats and began their journey down the finished Erie Canal. Almost every town they passed greeted the boats with cheers and good wishes.

When the boats reached the end of the Erie Canal, they turned south into the Hudson River. Then, they followed the Hudson all the way to New York City and the Atlantic Ocean.

When they reached the ocean, Governor Clinton poured a keg of water from Lake Erie into the Atlantic. With this "Wedding of the Waters," the entire length of the Erie Canal was open for business.

### The Importance of the Erie Canal

The Erie Canal went over budget. Originally it was to cost under \$6 million. However, it ended



Governor Clinton pours a keg of water from Lake Erie into the Atlantic Ocean to celebrate the opening of the Erie Canal.

up costing almost \$8.5 million to finish the canal. Even at that tremendous cost, the Erie Canal turned out to be a bargain. Immediately, boats filled the canal. The canalboats moved eastern goods, such as guns and needles and cloth, to western markets and moved western goods, such as potatoes and flour, to the East. The canal also moved people, as many Easterners used the boats to travel to the west to new land.

For every pound of product and for every human on board, a toll was charged to use the Erie Canal. This is how the canal made money. Everyone was shocked when, before a decade had passed, the Erie Canal had collected more in tolls than it cost to build the canal in the first place!

For decades, people relied on the Erie Canal. It was not until the railroads came that they turned their backs on the slow, smooth travel of the canalboats for the faster, dirty, bumpy rides of the country's new fangled trains.

### Show What You Know

These four pictures show the steps a ship must take to sail through a canal lock. Write the letter of the sentence under each picture that illustrates it.

- A. The lock gates close behind the ship.
- B. The gates open, and the ship leaves the lock.
- C. The ship enters the gates of the lock.
- D. Water is let out of the lock, and the ship is lowered to a new level of water.

