

THE PACKET-BOAT, INDEPENDENCE

You are riding on a packet-boat on a two (2) mile stretch of one of the most historically important waterways in the United States - the Erie Canal was started here in Rome, New York in 1817. In fact, there is a marker on the bank showing where the first shovelful of earth was turned. The then Governor, DeWitt Clinton, was primarily responsible for the canal and it was affectionately nicknamed "Clinton's Ditch"!

The canal was finished in 1825, and a smiling Governor Clinton rode on his brightly colored boat, the "Seneca Chief", from Lake Erie to New York City for the greatest celebration in the State's history. Cannons boomed all along the canal to let people from one end to the other know that the Erie Canal was ready and the celebration was on!

The people along the canal were happy and, indeed, they had reason to be. Early on, the operation of the canal brought a sharp reduction in freight shipping charges and a much more comfortable ride, that being a fast packet-boat ride as opposed to a jolting stagecoach ride. The canal opened the west to trade and immigration; goods and raw materials could now flow more easily both eastward and westward - and a prosperous financial operation allowed for the seven (7) million dollar canal debt to be paid in full by 1836, as planned - can you believe their joy!

A team of horses could move 500 tons along a waterway such as the Erie; on land, it took 6 to 8 horses to move only 6 tons! The bulk of the Erie traffic was freight vessels, such as scows, lakers and bullheads; (covered cargo boats that carried cargo needing protection like flour or grain) - they were all pulled by horses or mules, as were the packet-boats.

Our packet-boat is a replica of an original packet-boat. They were called "packet" after the ocean-going ships that carried only passengers and mail. Canal packet-boats paid an average of 5¢ a mile with meals and bed, less if they chose to bring their own food and sleep on the deck. Horses worked 6 hours on and 6 hours off; extra horses or mules were carried in the bow of the boats, as frequent changes of teams were necessary. The speed limit on the canal was 4 mph and was strictly enforced to save wear and tear on the banks, but the express packet-boats exceeded that limit as the captains were willing to pay the fines in order to make good time.

The packet-boat had the right-of-way over other canal traffic. As the towpath was on only one side of the canal, passing another boat called for one boat to stop its team and swing wide. If the timing was right, the tow rope would sink to the bottom and the second boat could pass over it. Some boats carried sickles on the bow to cut the other boat's tow rope if the maneuver was not made correctly. Some bridges over the canal were low enough to sweep passengers or anything else off the deck as the boat passed underneath. Fresh produce and other things were sold to passengers from bridges along the way.

In 1836, the State began to widen, deepen and straighten the canal; it became 70 feet wide and 7 feet deep, with 11 less locks; you are now riding on a section of the straightened canal - the original canal runs through our Village nearer to our School-house. (By the year 1858, the packet-boat had been replaced by the railroad).

Between 1900 and 1903, New York State voted for the construction of a different canal along the same general route; this was to be called the Barge Canal. Delta Dam became the reservoir for the Barge Canal - navigation on the Erie Canal ended in the year 1917, the Barge Canal opened in the year 1917, is still in use today.