

# The Artificial River: The Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817-1862

*by*

Carol Sheriff

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## Synopsis

The story of the Erie Canal is the story of industrial and economic progress between the War of 1812 and the Civil War. *The Artificial River* reveals the human dimension of the story of the Erie Canal. Carol Sheriff's extensive, innovative archival research shows the varied responses of ordinary people—farmers, businessmen, government officials, tourists, workers—to this major environmental, social, and cultural transformation in the early life of the Republic. Winner of Best Manuscript Award from the New York State Historical Association: “*The Artificial River* is deeply researched, its arguments are both subtle and clear, and it is written with grace and an engagingly light touch. The book merits a wide readership.” —Paul Johnson, *The Journal of American History*

## Sort review

From *Publishers Weekly*: As an early-19th-century public works project, the Erie Canal dwarfed all others in terms of cost, size and imagination. By connecting Buffalo to Albany, the canal opened a waterway between New York City and the Great Lakes, dramatically transforming U.S. commerce and industry. In this work, which began as a dissertation, Sheriff, who teaches history at William and Mary, does an effective job of examining the impact of improved transportation on various segments of society: ditchdiggers, farmers, merchants, canal boat captains, politicians, housewives and missionaries. Most interesting is her finding that many of the motifs that define our current age began with the creation of the canal. From family values to government entitlements, and from government deficits to environmental destruction, today's issues seem to be reflected in this antebellum history. Illustrations not seen by PW. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title. From *Library Journal*: Completed in 1825 and enlarged between 1836 and 1862 at the initial cost of \$7 million, the Erie Canal not only created an economic revolution in the region but fostered new and unique communities made up of entrepreneurs, canal workers, and farmers. Utilizing a variety of primary resources, but especially the Canal Board Papers, Sheriff (history, College of William and Mary) relates the social history of those who lived, worked, and traveled the Erie Canal before the Civil War. This previously untold story is laced with accounts by businessmen who saw the canal as opportunity, immigrant laborers looking for steady work, and farmers who transported their produce by canal boat. Although all of these groups relayed their complaints, claims, and concerns to the Canal Board, we do not know the responses they received. Still, the issues raised tell a great deal about the local impact of the Erie Canal, and herein lies the strength of the book. Thoughtful and reflective, this an excellent example of the use of available primary resources in writing history. Recommended for academic and larger public libraries. ?Boyd Childress, Auburn Univ. Lib., Ala. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title. From *Kirkus*

ReviewsAn enlightening work of social history that makes a now familiar feature of the American landscape the focus of an exploration of 19th-century perceptions of progress, politics, and the common good. In 1817, when the first spadeful of dirt was overturned in upstate New York for the Erie Canal, crowds were festive, those present united in the call to "finish God's work in shaping the New World." In 1862, when the widening of the 363-mile waterway built to connect Albany and Buffalo was completed, no celebration was held: The public was not only used to the convenience of this great accomplishment, but ready to move on to a more advanced form of transportation--the railroad. Yet Sheriff (History/Coll. of William and Mary) does more than trace the ways this artificial waterway became "second nature." In well-structured chapters she shows how the Erie Canal changed Americans' views about property, business ethics, and labor. Damages to land along the canal, for instance, led to the assessment of land in terms of market, rather than agricultural, value. Particularly informative is Sheriff's history of how the canal reflected the rising public debate over ideas during the antebellum period, focusing on public morality, republicanism, and especially the common good, which in large part came to mean serving the needs of wealth-producing business. Sheriff is best in drawing episodes to illustrate such situations--the changing perception of "canallers," the development of the Democratic and Whig parties. She is less successful in bringing to life some of the influential individuals of the day, like New York State governor DeWitt Clinton. Though lacking the humanist expansiveness that adds literary heft, this study succeeds in providing early examples of some still unresolved problems of a capitalist democracy--the place of the worker and the responsibilities of state and business to a community. (drawings and maps, not seen) -- Copyright ©1996, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.About the AuthorCarol Sheriff is assistant professor of history at the College of William and Mary. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.The United States was a new republic in 1817. The generation of its original revolutionaries was fast dying; a second war with Great Britain had recently been settled; and expansionism was the mood of the day. The "children of the founders," as Carol Sheriff calls this first 19th-century American generation, sought to make its mark with engineering projects that would further national growth and prove to Europe that the new nation "played a leading role in God's plan to improve the earthly world." It did so in grand style with the Erie Canal, a huge waterway that linked Atlantic seaports with the Great Lakes. Sheriff's vigorous account of the canal's conception and building makes for an epic story and fascinating reading. --This text refers to an alternate kindle\_edition edition.Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.The Artificial River1Visions of ProgressON JULY 4, 1817, at daybreak, cannons boomed as a crowd assembled near Rome, New York, to watch the digging of the first spadeful of Erie Canal dirt. The honor fell to Judge John Richardson, who had been awarded the first contract to build a section of the waterway. Richardson addressed the gathering, proclaiming, "By this great highway unborn millions will easily transport their surplus productions to the shores of the Atlantic, procure their supplies, and hold a useful and profitable intercourse with all the marine nations of the world." He then

drove his spade into the ground, and--according to the Utica Gazette --"was followed by the citizens, and his own laborers, each vying with the other in this demonstration of joy of which all partook on that interesting occasion."a Amid an enthusiastic and popular celebration of the nation's Revolutionary heritage, the state of New York had begun construction on what was to be one of the longest artificial waterways in the world.<sup>1</sup>Events leading up to that sunrise ceremony began hundreds of millions of years earlier, with a series of continental collisions giving rise to the Adirondack and Appalachian mountains. Byproducing intimidating obstacles to human migration, those natural barriers--together covering an area between what are today southern Canada and northern Alabama--checked the westward expansion of the vast majority of Euro-American settlers in the original colonies, and in the newly formed states, of North America. Those who did venture beyond the Atlantic basin took advantage of several gaps left by the prehistoric collisions. In the northern colonies, the only such break was the one through which the Mohawk River flowed easterly from central New York to the Hudson River, which in turn ran southward into the Atlantic Ocean. While Dutch and British colonists took up farming along the Mohawk and other natural rivers and lakes of central New York, they, too, found their westward migration restrained once they reached Lake Oneida, near the head of the Mohawk. From that point, more than 150 miles east of Lake Erie, no major waterway permitted easy access through the western interior. Until shortly before Judge Richardson broke ground on the canal that would extend 363 miles between Lake Erie and the Hudson, residents of the region had no reason to believe that such a waterway would ever exist in their lifetimes.<sup>2</sup>But some western New Yorkers dreamed it might. The desire for a canal running the width of upstate New York emerged in the early eighteenth century and reveals something about the aspirations and values of settlers in the region. If eighteenth-century inhabitants generally dismissed such an artificial waterway as mere fantasy, an undertaking beyond the realm of human accomplishment, they did project more realistic, shorter channels. For them, the topography of upstate New York was evidence not of the shifting crust of the earth but of the Hand of Providence. God, they reasoned, would not have created breaks in mountain chains or riverbeds unless Man (to use the contemporary term) was destined to finish the work. Yet canals of any length required great investments of labor and capital, and the Dutch and the English governments had not seriously considered devoting such resources to develop their New York colonies, even though they had both undertaken extensive transportation projects in their own countries. Still, local interest in canals suggests that at least some settlers on the New York frontier shared an interest in commercial exchange and modernization. As early as the seventeenth century, Iroquois and Dutch traders had made use of the region's natural waterways to exchange furs and guns. In more recent times, European settlers had been attracted to the region's river valleys precisely because of the connection to markets they provided.<sup>3</sup>Of course, as many historians would be quick to point out, trade alone does not make for a commercial society organized around the ideal of progress. They would agree that farmers sought ways to unload agricultural "surpluses," but the very term "surplus," these scholars argue, suggests that the average farmer did not intentionally produce

for trade, and certainly not for a market beyond the local community. And when farmers did exchange goods and services with neighbors, these transactions rarely involved cash--not because cash was in short supply, but rather because they saw no use for assigning monetary values. Instead, they calculated value in terms of social worth, and simply kept accounts of what they owed and were owed. A farmer, for example, might work for two days in his neighbor's cornfield in exchange for five chickens, since that was what it would take to feed his family during the time he spent away from his own farm duties. Or he might simply hold the neighbor accountable for two days' labor at some later time. These farmers sought, not to accumulate wealth, but to secure a "competency" that would allow their families to live a comfortable and independent existence in a community limited in geographic reach. Historians have found ample evidence suggesting that such a moral economy endured in some parts of the country into the nineteenth century. Whether New Yorkers of the colonial period tended to see themselves as peasants seeking a competence, businessmen pursuing profits, or consumers yearning for luxuries, their interest in canals suggests that at least some had aspirations to engage in broader market exchange.<sup>4</sup> Certainly by the turn of the nineteenth century, families emigrating to New York--whether from New England or from the Old World--saw access to markets as a prerequisite for settlement. To meet this demand, private land developers, such as the Dutch-owned Holland Land Company, invested heavily in roads connecting interior lands to commercial entrepôts. Access to markets made the land much more valuable, and by the time work began on the Erie Canal, upstate New York had a system of turnpikes and roads linking remote farming areas to natural waterways, over which settlers sent their produce to distant markets. Beginning in 1792, the Western Inland Lock Navigation Company and the Northern Inland Lock Navigation Company tried to turn a profit by improving some of the waterways themselves. Drawing on the financial resources of stockholders, many of whom would become the strongest advocates of the Erie Canal, the Western Company built canals, dams, and locks along the Mohawk River. These efforts aimed to establish more reliable commercial links among inland New York and the entrepôt of Albany on the Hudson, from which goods could go on to the Atlantic port of New York City. Although the company failed to make a profit because of the scheme's technological limitations and financial miscalculations, its goal nonetheless suggests that, as early as the 1790s, investors believed that farmers wanted an improved means of transporting their goods to an international port.<sup>5</sup> Settlers in upstate New York already took part in a system of economic relationships that revolved around the long-distance trade of goods and services for specie or credit. Some farmers hoped to use these market relationships to gain no more than economic independence and physical comfort--to sell the fruits of their labor in exchange for things they did not make or grow themselves. Mary Ann Archbald, who emigrated from Scotland in 1807 with her husband and children, held such aspirations. Three years after arriving in the United States, the Archbalds sold their initial tract of land and bought a farm directly along the banks of the Mohawk River to gain easier access to the New York market. The Archbalds had considered moving to Ohio, but worried that the new territory was "at a great

distance from markets ..." If the Archbalds hoped only to trade goods and services within a local community, the distance to "markets" would not have been an issue; instead they might have worried about isolation from neighbors. The Archbalds sold their cloth and wheat in New York City while also growing rye, corn, barley, peas, oats, and potatoes. Mary Ann Archbald manufactured the cloth herself from the wool shorn from the family's seventy sheep. The size of the flock alone suggests that the Archbalds produced for the market and did not merely find themselves with an unplanned "surplus" of goods. Yet Mary Ann Archbald spoke of her quest for "independence"--that is, her dream of owning their farm outright, of being free from indebtedness, and thus free from the control and whims of a creditor. Indeed, in 1828 Archbald would be able to boast, "There was also a considerable debt on the farm which [her son Jamie] had been paying as he earned it & expect to have it all cleared off this fall ... now, as being out of debt is, in my estimation, being rich I trust that I will in my nixt [letter] be able to tell you positively that I am rich." For Archbald, wealth came in the form of independence.<sup>6</sup> Personal motivations, though, often defy generalization. Other settlers had more entrepreneurial goals; they concentrated on reducing their production costs while selling their goods as dearly as the market allowed. In 1808, Mary Ann Archbald tried to offer a sweeping picture of her new home to the acquaintances she left behind. "We are a nation of traders in spite of all Mr. Jefferson can say or do," Archbald wrote. "[M]oney money is every thing ..." Coming in the midst of the Jeffersonian embargo on international goods, Archbald's comment makes clear that not only were upstate New Yorkers engaging in trade; they were engaging in long-distance trade. Moreover, many of these settlers aimed not just to secure independence but rather to earn money and to profit from their connections to a larger commercial world. By cutting off legal trade with European nations, the embargoes had the unintended effect of raising the prices of those American goods that nonetheless reached European ports. Those New Yorkers who continued to trade abroa... --This text refers to an alternate kindle\_edition edition.

Review "The Artificial River is deeply researched, its arguments are both subtle and clear, and it is written with grace and an engagingly light touch. The book merits a wide readership." —Paul Johnson, *The Journal of American History* "A beautifully written and unpretentious book that reveals how little historians have known about something they have written so much about: the Erie Canal." —Richard White, University of Washington "[Sheriff] renders the Erie Canal's history from a fresh point of view . . . the everyday lives of ordinary people who lived along the waterway." —Paul Grondahl, *Albany Times Union* "Broadly conceived, imaginatively researched, incisively argued, and gracefully written." —Robert H. Wiebe, Northwestern University "An excellent study of an important, all too often neglected period." —Lee Milazzo, *The Dallas Morning News*--This text refers to an alternate kindle\_edition edition.

From the Back Cover The story of the Erie Canal is the story of industrial and economic progress between the War of 1812 and the Civil War. Carol Sheriff uses innovative archival research to document the varied responses of ordinary people to this major environmental, social, and cultural transformation in the early life of our Republic. --This text refers to an alternate kindle\_edition edition.

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## What people say about this book

RDD, "A Great History of the Erie Canal's Impact. In "The Artificial River: The Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817-1862", Carol Sheriff argues, "Part of the transportation revolution, the Erie Canal played a major role in the transformation of the young Republic's geography and economy and helped to set off the industrial and marketing revolutions that swept across the northern United States early in the nineteenth century" (pg. 4). Sheriff uses the canal as a window into these various developments, drawing upon the work of William Cronon, John Demos, and Paul Johnson. Her sources include letters, official records of the Canal Board, and various publications. Sheriff argues that canal promoters linked the waterway's construction and success to notions of republicanism in the early republic. She counters this notion, writing, "Very few of the thousands of men who worked on the deep cut or the combined locks would have qualified as republican citizens – in either their own or other minds" (pg. 45). She continues, "New Yorkers did not agree on what made that artificial river materialize in the first place. While the Canal sponsors praised politicians and government officials, artisans paid honor to themselves and their workmanship. Laborers, meanwhile, gave a quick hurrah before moving on to another public works project" (pg. 51). Sheriff writes, "For reasons they did not anticipate, though, their artificial river would evoke feelings of ambivalence among many of the same people who celebrated the efficiency with which the Canal moved people and goods" (pg. 55). In this way, New Yorkers "viewed economic progress with at least a touch of ambivalence: although they looked forward to loading their wheat and apples on the eastbound boats that docked in front of their doors, they feared that the state's attempts to encourage the building of commercial mills and warehouses would jeopardize yeoman's economic investments and legal standing. This tension posed vexing problems for progress-minded landowners throughout the United States" (pg. 80). On the other hand, "Perhaps remembering that the Canal corridor had been touted as a sort of middle landscape between the extremes of civilization and savagery, New Yorkers sometimes argued that the state should use its regulatory powers to shield the public from some of the potentially harmful forces of the expanding commercial world" (pg. 91). Plans to enlarge the canal "brought a rash of petitions appealing to the state's moral obligation to protect as well as promote its citizens' commercial investments" (pg. 121). Sheriff writes, "Because the Erie Canal was the literal conduit of commercial exchange, New York State's businessmen argued that the state should use the Canal to enhance market growth while limiting the potential for busts" (pg. 127). Later, "From a middle-class perspective, the Canal had become a haven for vice and immorality, the towpaths attracted workers who drank, swore, whored, and gambled. And unlike canal diggers, who moved on, boat workers remained" (pg. 138). Invoking the mindset of the Second Great Awakening, Sheriff writes, "Canal workers, simply by their daily presence, threatened both Jacksonian and Whig visions of progress. Reformers warned that the consequences of neglecting the spiritual welfare of boatmen would be far-reaching" (pg. 150). Looking forward in time, Sheriff concludes, "By helping to make possible this busy

commercial setting, the Erie Canal had guaranteed its own obsolescence. Railroads, not canals, would ultimately meet the middle classes' raised expectations" (pg. 173). She continues, "If the Erie Canal compressed distance and time, the railroads annihilated them, or so it appeared to the amazed observer in the mid-nineteenth century" (pg. 173)."

Rocco Dormarunno, "Impressive book about an impressive public work. For too many people, the Erie Canal was simply an artificial waterway that opened the American west (back then) to the Atlantic, and, in the process made New York City a business entrepot. Carol Sheriff, in her book, "The Artificial River: The Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817-1862" digs a lot deeper to reveal the complexities of "Clinton's Big Ditch". There were the engineering problems to be surmounted. There were financial considerations. There were the legal knots that plagued the Canal Commission. The relationship--even the definitions--of nature, art and technology became blurred to so many people. But what I came away with the most was the utter chaos and disturbance the building and maintenance of the canal created. This was not a harmonious public work, dug by noble laborers, which enriched the lives and purses of the entire populace. Instead, as Professor Sheriff demonstrates, there was a great deal of strife between the canal builders and the local residents. The wealth went to the few, and the builders got nothing--not even praise or thanks. This, in turn, created a new class of anonymous laborers which was counterpoint to the ideals of Republicanism. And, as Sheriff points out, DeWitt Clinton would have shook his head in disbelief, had he known this would have happened. As a whole, however, "The Artificial River" reminds us of the tremendous efforts that went into the making of the Erie Canal. And equally impressive, is the tremendous effort Professor Sheriff put into this well-researched and quickly paced book."

Duo Cyclor, "A revealing history of an important phase a American development. The author did an excellent job of describing the development and operation of Erie canal. The book was well written and the descriptions by the author created vivid images in my mind. I enjoyed learning of all of unintended consequences resulting the construction and operation of canal. The canal is still there and a number of years ago my wife and I pedaled along it from Buffalo to Albany. This book brought back memories of that trip."

lorenz m. worden, "The author is an excellent story teller and has the enviable and somewhat rare .... While using the Erie Canal as its focus, the "Artificial River" examines the entire impact of the canal in the context of the social and economic milieu of the period. The text is supported and augmented by ample footnotes. The author is an excellent story teller and has the enviable and somewhat rare ability to convert dry data into an exciting "you are there" narrative. LMW 3-214-17"

bsurveyor, "A journey back in time.. An excellent perspective.. Having just completed a bike

journey along the entire length of the Erie Canal, I looked for an intimate view of the Erie Canal during its' greatest prosperity. This read did not disappoint."

Hank Reed, "Good reading. Very interesting because there was a lot of information about local sites. Amazing amount of history dredged up about riders and merchants."

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