

Finding Their Routes: Navigating Records of the NYS Canal System

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The original Erie Canal (1817-1862) was often considered a polarizing vehicle for New York State’s transportation industry. Despite its monikers—from “Clinton’s Ditch,” to “the Grand Canal”—it provided a new form of transportation for a burgeoning immigrant population, and stimulated the emergence of boomtowns throughout New York State. The Western Inland Lock Navigation Company, Governor DeWitt Clinton and other canal promoters, were far-sighted: not only did they envision this main arterial waterway, the Erie Canal, but their groundwork allowed for the construction of branch and lateral canals that formed an intimate network across the state: the Black River, Champlain, Chenango, Chemung, Oswego, Seneca & Cayuga, and others. Some failed and were abandoned, but most left a lasting imprint on the Empire State.

Three Canals, 100 Years

Canal	I. Original Erie Canal “Clinton’s Ditch”	II. Enlarged Erie Canal “Old Erie Canal”	III. The NYS Barge Canal, aka, The New York State Canal System “1,000 Ton Barge Canal”
Size	40 ft x 28 ft x 4 ft	70 ft x 40 ft x 7 ft	120 ft x 75 ft x 12 ft
Length	363 miles	360 miles	524-mile system
Construction Began	1817	1834	1905
Completion	1825	1862	1918
Approximate closing and Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After 1840, some sections were closed; 1862-1870s (filled in) • Only small sections still exist. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Closed in fall 1917 • Home to “colonies” at end of era • Sections filled in to create NYS Thruway. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open to navigation

General Information

Canal Corporation of NY State	http://www.canals.ny.gov/history/history.html
Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor	http://www.eriecanalway.org/explore/plan-your-visit/category/historic-and-cultural-sites-and-museu
Hofstra University	https://people.hofstra.edu/geotrans/eng/ch2en/conc2en/eriecanal.html
Sadowski, Frank Jr	Erie Canal.org; http://www.eriecanal.org

Archival Materials

1. **New York State Archives** (Canal Collection) “The Mighty Chain: A Guide to Canal Records in the New York State Archives.” New York State Archives. Publication #FA05. 1992.

The majority of canal-related records are contained in this vast collection at the New York State Archives. The bulk of the records are for the years 1817–1926, including passenger lists for 1828-1832, laborers’ receipts, weigh masters’ and lock tenders’ oaths, boat registers, and records of the canal commissioners.

Land Surveys (NYS Archives):

NYS Archives has digitized the Holmes Hutchinson Series. This includes names of land owners living within close proximity to the canal.

2. **New York State Historical Association** (Cooperstown)

<http://www.nysha.org/library/online/eriecanal.htm>

- Also New York Heritage Digital Collections:

http://cdm16694.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/srr_ecm

3. **New York Public Library**, Main Branch, New York, NY.

4. **New York Historical Society, Museum & Library**, New York, NY.

- Artifacts, Broadside, Drawings, Images, Objects, Paintings, Portraits, Relics, Souvenirs.
- Archival material relating to Erie Canal Enlargement (special archival collections, papers, and some manuscripts).

5. **Queens College**, Digital Culture of NY State, Waterways of New York

<http://dcmny.org/islandora/object/waterways%3Acollection?page=22&display=grid>

Images consisting of over 2000 postcards of the canals in NY State.

6. NARA: <https://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/036.html>

7. Other University Archives: Cornell, Hofstra, NYU, Syracuse University, University of Virginia.

8. SUNY Oswego (Oswego Canal)

<https://www.oswego.edu/library/sites/www.oswego.edu.library/files/penfield-library-genealogical-resources.pdf>

Partial List of Local/Smaller Archives with Canal-Related Materials

Eastern Division	Middle Division	Western Division
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fonda (Montgomery County) • Schenectady County Public Library (Digital History Archive) • Rome (Jervis Library) • Utica (Chenango and Erie Canal info at NYS Archives and NY Heritage Digital Collections) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chittenango Landing Canal Boat Museum (maps, journals, diaries, artifacts, photographs, architectural plans, etc.) • Erie Canal Museum, Syracuse (day books, journals, artifacts, maps, objects, etc.) • Fayetteville Public Library • Onondaga Historical Society (boat registers, diaries, letters, log books) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seneca Museum of Waterways and Industry • Tompkins County Public Library • Rochester: Monroe County Library • Buffalo Historical Society