

Holding Water

The Political and Economic Debates of the New York State Canal System
1895 – 1903

Erich D. Grome

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Dedication:

This work is dedicated to my mother and father. If it were not for your loving and unceasing care, support, and dedication to my upbringing and education, this historical piece would certainly not have been possible.

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Abstract:

With the allure of the famed Erie Canal deteriorating as swiftly as its traffic and physical condition by the latter half of the nineteenth century, New Yorkers gave serious thought to the future of the waterway. As the commerce of the state and its renowned metropolis of New York City declined relative to its rival states and ports during this period, many questioned if enlarging the canal system would lead to its revival and produce similar results for the economy of the state at large. An ever frequent scene of partisan conflict, the proposals to radically enlarge the Erie Canal faced relentless antagonism from competing railroads, distrustful farmers, and wary upstate residents, while receiving the habitually vacillating and oftentimes divided support of canal advocates across New York State. Promoters championed the project as vital to the state and nation to ensure cheaper and adequately regulated transportation rates, resulting in heightened commerce and prosperity, just as it had in the past. Conversely, opponents decried the proposal as antiquated infrastructure and a colossal waste of public funds. Taking its final form as the Barge Canal and approved by referendum in 1903, the significantly enlarged waterway changed course through canalizing lakes and rivers, bypassing numerous cities that its predecessor helped found. In this new canal era, the Barge Canal soon became a stimulus for economic success and expansion throughout the region, just as the Erie Canal had been catalyst for New York State the century before.

Treading Water and Land:

Deliverance; the question that has captivated the minds of mankind since its primordial existence. No, this is not in reference to some divine revelation, but rather to the theme of transportation, one that began with the debate that drove the first primitive human being to climb down from the safety of its tree and cross the open and treacherous grasslands in search of more fruitful prospects. Since this initial decision of exploratory movement to brave the unknown dangers that lay beyond the horizon, humanity has been in a continuous pursuit of improving and easing the means by which they travel from one point to another. Such inquisitive thinking resulted in the inventing of the wheel, unequivocally revolutionizing world history forever, but what about before that? Certainly, early humans encountered large bodies of water and realized their ability to float upon them, along with the similar ability of other materials. Subsequently, makeshift rafts and boats were constructed and thus, aquatic transportation was born, further shaping human civilization and its impact upon the planet. Evolving through time, mankind no longer wished to be bound by the borders and courses of the natural waterways and set out to construct channels that served their travel needs. With the advent of canals, humanity would endeavor to expand their development and tame the wilderness through the further utilization of cheap water travel. Eventually reaching the shores of North America and gazing upon upstate New York's vast woodlands, flanked on each side by the Great Lakes to the west and the Hudson River to the east, the new holders of this land eyed it with visions of opportunity and enterprise.

“The chief element in the prosperity of every State or Nation is the economy of transportation of persons and property. It is the most marked fact in the difference

between civilization and barbarism.”¹ Though espoused by Horatio Seymour in an 1882 letter, this notion was undoubtedly held by most enlightened people throughout history and certainly inspired DeWitt Clinton to pursue the imaginative undertaking. The fantastical venture alluded to was the construction of the Erie Canal from 1817 to 1825 through the pristine landscape of upstate New York to connect the Midwest to the Atlantic seaboard. The economic gains that would be achieved through the opening and settlement of these regions were enormous, resulting not only from the exploitation of natural resources but from the establishment of agriculture and manufacturing. These developments would undoubtedly occur across New York State, but more important would be its creation of a gateway to the inland western territories. The watery corridor would benefit populaces in the Midwest, New York City, and everywhere in between.

Such enthusiastic economic expectations served DeWitt Clinton and other advocates in refuting incessant naysayers, and the near immediate prosperity generated upon the waterway’s completion silenced all critics for nearly a generation. Yet, there was another distinct element employed for the promotion of and perpetuated by the Erie Canal, pride and patriotism.

The notion of patriotism that Clinton espoused was more multifaceted and overarching than the simplistic definition of nationalistic pride in use today. The interpretation that he and other statesmen of his generation, as well as the next few generations, held was an idea of enlightened thinking that inspired one to promote the cultivation and progression of knowledge, science, culture, economics, and general wellbeing of the public. Synonymous with civic duty, virtue, and responsibility, such a

¹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, Vol. 12 (Buffalo, New York: Buffalo Historical Society, 1908), p 474.

liberal ethos aimed to foster the betterment of society, manifesting in one respect with the construction infrastructural projects under the auspices of a just, benevolent government absent of self-serving motives. For DeWitt Clinton, the Erie Canal exemplified this ideal, espousing in his first address as governor in 1818:

When we consider that every portion of the nation will feel the animating spirit and vivifying influences of these great works; that they will receive the benediction of posterity and command the approbation of the civilized world; we are required to persevere by every dictate of interest, by every sentiment of honor, by every injunction of patriotism, and by every consideration which ought to influence the councils and govern the conduct of a free, high-minded, enlightened, and magnanimous people.²

Even when the project served to injure and impede his political aspirations, DeWitt Clinton poured every bit of his heart, mind, and soul into the pursuit of the Erie Canal as he knew the endeavor would be fundamental for the advancement of his compatriots. Others would comprehend and subscribe to Clinton's noble objectives, such as Senator Daniel Webster's rejection of sectional prejudice in pursuing beneficial projects, espousing in 1837, "We do not impose geographic limits to our patriotic feeling, or regard; we do not follow rivers and mountains and line of latitude, to find boundaries beyond which public improvements do not benefit us."³ Ultimately, the impetus for and result of the Erie Canal was best termed by the treasured Revolutionary hero Marquis de Lafayette who pronounced it "an admirable work of science and patriotism."⁴

As the Erie Canal succeeded to expand the limits of civilization and generate prosperity in its wake throughout both New York State and the United States, the

² James Renwick, *Life of Dewitt Clinton* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1841. Print), p 24.

³ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, Vol. 12 (Buffalo, New York: Buffalo Historical Society, 1908), p 508.

⁴ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York* (Albany: J.B. Lyon Co., printers, 1906), p 814.

waterway began to lag toward to the latter half of the nineteenth century. This was due in part to competition from railroads, apathetic and neglectful consideration by politicians and the public, and a transforming economy that outpaced the waterway. The railroad corporations proved to be a serious dilemma as the freight rates they charged in New York State were higher than neighboring regions, and New York City began losing commerce to rival ports along the eastern seaboard. As the Erie Canal was in a state of decline and disrepair, due to the monopolistic competition of the railways and general apathy of New Yorkers, it was subsequently unable to regulate these detrimental effects. Although some improvements were made, the aquatic highway's economic impact waned in the coming decades, coinciding with the commercial influence of the state and city of New York and forcing citizens to reassess the canal's future.

Finding themselves reaching out to their old, dilapidated friend, New Yorkers soon realized that the revival of commercial traffic through the reconstruction of the Erie Canal could provide the same results for the state's economy. However, the argument surrounding this infrastructural topic was multifaceted, with an assortment of aspects factoring into the debates of New York's politicians, businesspeople, and common citizens. The ensuing battle was not solely contemplating whether to maintain the canal as it was or to expand it, and the expansion's respective dimensions, but rather if it was justified to keep the canal at all. Representing canal interests in the varying and often confrontational regions of New York State were leaders or associates of numerous social, commercial, and distinctly pro-canal organizations their respective regions, such as the Canal Improvement Union, New York Produce Exchange, Canal Association of Greater New York, and Buffalo Merchants' Exchange. These groups, under the direction of the

skilled and able-minded men previously listed, were the driving force that kept the aspiration of an enlarged canal afloat. Through their tireless efforts of disseminating pro-canal material and convening with powerful state politicians, the improvement movement progressed, despite canal foes assailing and countering their exertions at every turn.

Alas, at the precipice of the twentieth century, many of these same hindrances that plagued the campaign for the Erie Canal would again arise to block the course of the Barge Canal. Principal among them was the firm existence of sectional jealousies and prejudices as there again was a geographic division of support between upstate and downstate New Yorkers. However, their relative stances would reverse from their previous canal confrontation as New York City residents had finally realized the immense importance of the Erie Canal, while upstate citizens were averse to change. Taking up the charge of espousing “the wisdom and patriotism of our forefathers,”⁵ governors Samuel Black, Teddy Roosevelt, and Benjamin Odell proved their political rectitude by pressing their constituents, regardless of their stance on the Barge Canal proposal, that only “high and patriotic motives should control your actions.”⁶ In the end, the majority of citizens heeded Governor Odell’s call as the long-awaited and hard-fought Barge Canal Act was passed by the State Legislature, approved by the citizens in a popular referendum, and officially signed into law. On that fateful November day in 1903, the canal men would have their day in the sun.

The narrative of the Barge Canal’s enactment is a compelling one, containing in-depth economic analyses, politicking at its finest, and groundbreaking engineering feats,

⁵ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 408.

⁶ "Farmers' Interest in Canal Improvement: Address by Gov. Odell at the Seneca County Fair," *New York Times*, September 25, 1903.

while also ripe with stories of politicking, corruption, and slanderous press. Its investigation offers historians and scholars the opportunity to explore the elements involved in the passage of major public works projects. Although this study is primarily focused on the economic arguments that drove the pursuit of the Barge Canal, its subject material touches upon elements of psychology, political science, and engineering. All else aside, the chronicle of the Barge Canal's gradual and beleaguered progress toward its final realization offers a riveting insight into the hearts and minds of early twentieth century New Yorkers, an era forgotten by most. Furthermore, the reader is provided a detailed sense of the historical processes that brought about a modernized waterway through the center of the Empire State, aiding the region in becoming an industrial nucleus for more than a half-century to come.

Literature Review:

Some subjects are blessed in the world of research as they are rich in source material, a result derived from the greater amount of general public interest they receive or from the changing inquisitive trends of historians. Other subjects fall by the wayside despite their relative importance in their respective region. New York State's immense public works project of the early twentieth century, the Barge Canal, is a primary example of one such overlooked subject, a discredit that is only heightened by the vast amount of attention given to its forerunner, the Erie Canal. A student in the United States, even the worst of students, would be hard pressed to have never heard of the Erie Canal as numerous history books, novels, and songs have been written on it and its legacy is firmly cemented in American folklore. Yet, its successor, the Barge Canal, has barely a blip on the radar screen of history, and subsequently, has drawn virtually no

attention from secondary sources on the circumstances surrounding its conception, construction, impact, and legacy. The principal source on nearly every aspect surrounding the Barge Canal comes from the foremost canal historian of the same era, Noble E. Whitford, and his detailed account provided in *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, published in 1922.⁷

Prior to the delving into the limited though valuable sources pertaining to the pursuit of the larger, more modern Barge Canal, one must have at least a basic familiarity with the plethora of sources regarding the Barge Canal's far more celebrated forerunner, the Erie Canal. The colossal list of Erie Canal sources compared to those notable few Barge Canal sources will highlight the need for more research on the latter canal and help address why enthusiasm has not been equitably shared amongst the two.

A discussion of the Erie Canal and the Barge Canal must reference the foremost historian of both canals, Noble E. Whitford. Although not as enthralling and riddled with anecdotes as other sources, Whitford's *History of the Canal System of the State of New York* is a straightforward, exemplary piece of historical research on the subject, and, as Whitford states himself at that time, one of the first fully documented works on the Erie Canal. The only significant work prior to Whitford's was the *Documentary History of the Canals* (1863), by Sylvanus H. Sweet, yet Whitford describes this work as "prepared in so short a time as to be deficient in many essentials" so he sought to satisfy the "need of a book," which "has long been felt by those interested in the affairs of the New York canals."⁸ However, there are issues with his work that need to be mitigated concerning

⁷ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York* (Albany: J.B. Lyon Co., 1906)

⁸ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the barge canal of New York state* (Albany: J.B. Lyon Co, 1922), p 5.

biasedness, conflict of interest, and overall issues of distance from the events in terms of time.

Due to his writing of this work over one hundred years ago, Whitford provides a better understanding and personal perspective on the political and popular attitudes of the era. Yet, the proximity to which he was associated with the project positive feature is a positive feature in some ways as he was a New York State Engineer, his father was a major figure in the previous expansions of the Erie Canal, and all such debate was occurring during his tenure in office. However, such proximity and relationships open his work up to criticisms of bias and impartiality, particularly as his reputation and legacy, as well as his father's and contemporaries', were at risk if the Barge Canal failed to live up to expectations. In addition, Whitford could not fully grasp the impact of the Erie Canal that has been exhibited by subsequent multifaceted accounts due to this propinquity in time, a shortfall that is overcome in a more detached, analytical manner in this work.

Segmented beautifully, Whitford discusses the varying stages of the Erie Canal's life that included the earliest suggestions of a manmade or human-altered waterway to the Great Lakes, the notable failed attempts at river canalization, the struggle of gaining popular and financial support for the massive endeavor, and construction of the original Erie Canal despite frequent threats from political opponents to block funding. Whitford would later follow this same basic setup for his later work, reusing the structure and detail patterns for his Barge Canal discussion. The rather lengthy account concludes with the canal's successful completion, later enlargements, discussions of other canal undertakings, the legacy of the canal as he understood it in 1906, and ending with his noting of the commencing of construction on the Barge Canal.

Whitford was clearly obsessive when it came to the apparent need to include every possible detail of the Erie Canal. In terms of information contained, *History of the Canal System of the State of New York* surpasses all, but what are lacking are the basic entertainment aspects that promote interest and keep people reading, such as anecdotal stories and personal tales of those who lived on and along the Erie Canal. Whitford's work instead reads like an encyclopedia that simply recounts the events of the canal's development in a chronological fashion. Such a critique applies more to writing style than content, but this is the key omission that separates it from the later, more popular treatments of the subject. Nonetheless, the wording and tone of his rather large tome expresses Whitford's uncompromising support of the Erie Canal's construction and continuation. Frequently citing the immense prosperity and positive attention that the canal received, Whitford paints a positive image overall of its worth, effectively showcasing it as a grand, innovative project that was pressed through to completion despite the stiff resistance of naysayers. Yet Whitford does not shy away from remarking on some negative aspects of the canal, such as the politicization of the Erie Canal Commission, and the seemingly wasteful spending on some retrospectively useless canals, like the Chenango Canal.

Despite the relatively older age of his works and his clear biases, Noble Whitford not only stands as the foremost chronicler on the Erie Canal, but even more so on the Barge Canal. Publishing a long, some would say excruciatingly long, composition in 1922 on everything surrounding the Barge Canal from early considerations to construction completion, the work contains many important details, but still lacks some aspects useful for the reader's greater comprehension of the subject. Whitford thoroughly

catalogues the extended political debate over the canal's construction, keeping readers aware of how the arguments that canal proponent and opponent groups evolved, with no figure of at least semi-importance omitted in his records. With all that in mind, it is somewhat understandable that he had a vested interest in positively portraying the Barge Canal advocates and their subsequent results. As Whitford's first work on the canal system was published in 1906, just shortly after the commencement of the Barge Canal's construction, one could argue that the previously described positive, reinforcing tone of the work reflects an aim to have readers reflect on the great success and perseverance that accompanied the Erie Canal's construction. Besides his love of the Erie Canal and its rich history, it can be speculated that the *History of the Canal System of the State of New York* was written as added insurance for the continuation of Barge Canal construction by encouraging the politicians and public of the waterway's past, present, and future worth.

With his two-volume accounts containing nearly every noteworthy detail on the histories of New York's canals, Noble Whitford's accounts have proved to be a critical resource for several interesting, insightful, and attention-grabbing works. The most relevant and acclaimed sources have been written in the past twenty-five years, seemingly indicating a growing curiosity in the Erie Canal, a curiosity that may very well inspire further investigation into the Barge Canal through a trickledown effect of inquiry. Not all can be listed for the sake of brevity, but the most analytical and pertinent accounts are Ronald Shaw's *Erie Water West: A History of the Erie Canal 1792-1854* (1966),⁹ Peter Bernstein's *Wedding of the Waters: The Erie Canal and the Making of a Great*

⁹ Ronald E. Shaw, *Erie Water West a History of the Erie Canal, 1792-1854* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1966)

Nation (2005),¹⁰ and Gerald Koeppel's *Bond of Union: Building the Erie Canal and the American Empire* (2009).¹¹ These three works, along with Whitford, embody the fascination and reverence that many hold for the Erie Canal, sentiments that hardly trickle down upon the Barge Canal.

Naturally, the three previously mentioned books pertaining to the pursuit, construction, and effects, both social and economic, of the Erie Canal share strong similarities amongst each other, with Bernstein and Koeppel's books having rather synonymous subtitles. Peter Bernstein's *Wedding of the Waters* focuses primarily on the economics and politics of the drive to approve the creation of the Erie Canal and less about the effort, labor, and engineering that went into its construction. The book stresses the United States' youth and the key role the canal played in linking the eastern seaboard to the Great Lakes, yet it is unique compared to the other two in its discussion of the economic ramifications across the country and the world following its construction. Bernstein goes much further than the other cited Erie Canal authors with this economic angle and goes as far as to declare the Industrial Revolution as a byproduct of the canal.

Despite the similar titles, the aim of Gerard Koeppel's *Bond of Union* accentuates the new American nation's infancy on the world stage and the origins the notion of Manifest Destiny; Koeppel credits the Erie Canal with bolstering that expansionary urge. It focuses on the personalities associated with the canal, but delves into much greater detail regarding its construction than other books on the subject, save Whitford. Koeppel conducted an extraordinary amount of research on the Erie Canal and in the process

¹⁰Peter L. Bernstein, *Wedding of the waters: the Erie Canal and the making of a great nation* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005)

¹¹Gerald T. Koeppel, *Bond of Union: building the Erie Canal and the American empire* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2009)

discovered major new findings on both its construction and later influences, notably including excerpts from the personal journals of the Irish workers and their disgruntled sentiments. Despite the different approaches, Koepfel and Bernstein both stress the tremendous impact that the Erie Canal had on the growing nation, and the enormous impetus it gave for the accelerated growth to come.

Although *Wedding of the Waters* and *Bond of Union* are more recent, published in 2005 and 2009, respectively, than Shaw's *Erie Water West* (1966), it would be fair to consider the latter as the most informative of the three. Ronald Shaw includes not only a large number of newspaper articles and pamphlets but a wide variety as well, incorporated into the work as excerpts and overall evidence reinforcing his study. These insertions ensure that the public opinions across the state and country are made available to readers in order to provide a more thorough understanding of the perception of the Erie Canal throughout its debate and construction. This inclusion of articles from the time period is a step further in numerical terms than Bernstein and Whitford take in their books, and thusly stands as an excellent source in examining the public mindsets of the era. Shaw does not come to a profoundly different conclusion than the other noted authors, as he similarly states the impact and importance of the Erie Canal, but the greater use of alternative primary sources adds credence and personality to his work.

Although the previous claim regarding the Erie Canal's significant amount of printed material, particularly in comparison to the Barge Canal, may seem unfounded with only four sources discussed, the fact of the matter is that the Erie Canal is discussed to a considerable degree in innumerable articles and books that widely range in main topic. The Erie Canal frequently takes a prime position in subjects regarding the history

of the Early Republic, transportation, Manifest Destiny, the Industrial Revolution, DeWitt Clinton, and general Americana. If one were to ask an average American anywhere in the country what the Erie Canal is, they would answer correctly ninety-nine times out of one hundred. However, if one were to ask those same Americans what the Barge Canal is, very few, if any, would answer correctly. The Erie Canal holds center stage, while the Barge Canal and the enormous political struggle that surrounded it simply fade into the former. A theory that helps to explain the seeming ambivalence of historical study to the Barge Canal is that the creation of the Erie Canal was centered around the frontier atmosphere accompanied by the question, “How can we do this?” While on the other hand, the creation of the Barge Canal focused on the modernization of the already conquered frontier with the newest technologies, an environment that instead asked the question, “Why should we do this?” The latter of the two questions speaks to the changing sentiments of New Yorkers and Americans from the early nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. As exhibited by the preceding works, the populace no longer wondered and debated about the possibility and feasibility of an endeavor as they had with the Erie Canal a century before, but now knows that virtually anything is possible with their ingenuity; it is just a matter of if it ought to be done. The few, but very reliable sources on the Barge Canal embody this notion and contain key examples of that very debate within their pages.

Just like Whitford’s previous work, his *History of the Canal System of the State of New York, History of the Barge Canal of New York State* provides an exceptional degree of detail that can satisfy some of the inquiries of the historian, engineer, and political theorist, but its meticulous account is impersonal, omitting many personal accounts and

speeches that accompanied the debate. Likely due to his proximity to the debates on the proposed modernization, Whitford provides an extremely detailed account of the Erie Canal, later expansions, Barge Canal debate, and its eventual construction. As stated previously, the account is mainly a positive interpretation of the Barge Canal, with him portraying the various railroad firms in a negative light for their frequent attacks on and criticisms of the project. Whether warranted or not, Whitford's attitude of the railroads can be seen early in his work in the following passage:

And chief among those who are thus attempting to undermine the waterways are the railroads. It would seem that the citizens of the state long ago should have perceived that this very opposition of the railroads proves the worth of the canals, and also that they should have ceased to be misled by the attacks.¹²

Yet, as with his previous work, Whitford does not provide specific references to or examples from newspapers displaying and reinforcing his argument of the public's opinion at the time or the alleged malign intent of the railroads. He often states that public opinion vacillated frequently on the issue of modernizing the canal and refers varying plans that were brought forth, but does not quote or cite such sources. Those who wish to understand the perceptions of the common citizen, mainly represented through commercial groups, would beg to be given specific cases, likely in the form of letters or articles, which express public support and dissent regarding the enormously expensive project. Such a shortfall will be compensated for in my documentation of Barge Canal events.

The greatest critique of Noble Whitford's 1922 work is exactly that; it was published in 1922, only four years after the official completion of the Barge Canal and nineteen years after the passage of the "\$101 Million Barge Canal Act." Such close

¹² Noble E. Whitford, *History of the barge canal of New York state*, pp 9-10.

proximity does not allow for any analysis of the canal's success, failure, or legacy. Of course, this is no fault to Whitford for he was simply compiling and publishing the information available to him through his associations and makes no real, honest attempts to predict the future course of the Barge Canal. Nonetheless, this account offers an invaluable angle and information of the events that surrounded the Canal Campaign of 1903, the focal point of this discussion. Whitford clearly labels the Barge Canal's proponents and opponents, presenting their central arguments and their varying degree of success. However, being detached from the Barge Canal's campaign for over a century allows one the proper perspective on the unfolding of its surrounding history. In this particular work, Noble Whitford was writing on current events that shaped his immediate reality, while this study observes the far-flung past reconstruction of a massive waterway that traverses the very land in which it is written, allowing for a fair, unbiased, time-trusted examination.

Shaping the argument and utilized information for much of his work, Noble Whitford frequently referenced volumes XII and XIII printed under the auspices of the Buffalo Historical Society, *An Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State* by Henry W. Hill (1908)¹³ and *Canal Enlargement in New York State* by Frank H. Severance (1909),¹⁴ respectively. In fact, toward the close of his discussion on the popular campaign surrounding the 1903 public referendum approving the construction of the Barge Canal, Whitford specifically noted the immense assistance these "two large volumes" paid to his writing of the *History of the Barge Canal of New*

¹³ Henry W. Hill, *An Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, Vol. 12 (Buffalo, New York: Buffalo Historical Society, 1908)

¹⁴ Frank H. Severance, *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, Vol. 13 (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909)

York State, referring more intensive readers to them.¹⁵ Written at the request of the Buffalo area's historical society following the commencement of construction upon the Barge Canal, New York State politician Henry W. Hill wrote *An Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, a lengthy tome cataloguing the history of the canals in the state. Containing an excellent analysis of the Erie Canal's history and the events leading up to formulating of the barge canal project, the work also provided an interesting perspective on the political and economic debates of waterway as Hill played a significant role in its eventual adoption. The second work, *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, was assembled and edited by the Buffalo Historical Society's secretary, Frank H. Severance. Containing a collection of essays by various authors on differing subjects of the New York State Canal System's history, the sections relevant to this study provided insight into the development of the barge canal campaign from inception to creation. Notably, some accounts within this work vary from each other as the authors apparently held different opinions or recollections of the same events. Together, the two volumes provide canal researchers with abundant information assembled relatively soon after the recorded episodes.

Although proving to be exemplary sources of information on the Barge Canal, both works were rooted in unavoidable conflict of interest and bias as all the authors were connected in one form or another to the pro-canal movement. Some could argue that history is written by the victors, but such a maxim hardly excludes these individuals from providing a fair and accurate portrayal of events. Like the concerns raised against Noble Whitford, the contributing writers wrote their accounts too soon after the recorded events

¹⁵ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the barge canal of New York state*, p 134.

to allow for proper perspective and were highly susceptible to embellishment and distortion of events in order to promote and protect their own reputations. Such would almost certainly lead to the misrepresentation of the anti-canal parties' viewpoints as the authors likely wished to instill in readers the importance and supremacy of their claims. This work will attempt to appropriately wade through this, at least slightly, warped lens of events and analyze each statement with a grain of salt so that a more accurate account may be given.

Standing in stark contrast to Noble Whitford's book, Michele McFee's *A Long Haul* was published in 1998 and provides a succinct narrative, utilizing more numerous photographs and diagrams.¹⁶ Discussing the sequence of events surrounding the Barge Canal's inception, McFee's account describes the state of the Erie Canal prior to its overhaul, the debate surrounding the Barge Canal's enactment, the canal's construction, and the commercial effectiveness of the canal following its completion. *A Long Haul* is a useful source on the Barge Canal in general and for anyone researching the topic. A wide assortment of photos, blueprints, and paintings are displayed, which helps those readers that are relatively unfamiliar with the Barge Canal understand what the canal was during its heyday. McFee's book allows readers to vicariously witness the large amount of commercial and social interchange that occurred on its waters that necessitated the canal's construction over a century ago.

In regards to any potential bias or ulterior motive, such as that of Whitford's account, McFee has no readily apparent aim in her telling of the Barge Canal's creation except to provide accurate, entertaining, and thought provoking material on the topic at

¹⁶ Michele A. McFee. *A Long Haul: the story of the New York State Barge Canal* (Fleischmanns, N.Y.: Purple Mountain Press, 1998)

hand. Also unlike Whitford, McFee is able to assess the Barge Canal's impact and legacy by being far removed from the construction and is subsequently able to view the canal's decline in commercial use. *A Long Haul* does not attempt, and neither will this analysis to a large extent, to declare whether or not the Barge Canal was worth its price tag on paper through data examination, especially as one cannot place a value on the intrinsic worth of the updated waterway. In fact, it is this latter aspect of intrinsic value that McFee latches onto, writing in a fond, nostalgic tone about the historical course of the Barge Canal. It is precisely this nostalgic nature that presents the greatest censure of the work as its layout and portrayal are akin to a typical coffee table book, bought only as a conversation starter or to impress. Perhaps this is warranted due to the lack of sufficient data that would be used to justify the Barge Canal's construction or impact. However, that is simply not the case as McFee's extensive bibliography and substantive writing vindicate the book's scholarly merit. In addition, *A Long Haul* is worthy of being called a scholarly source as it contains far greater knowledge, depth, research, and understanding of the subject matter than the mainstream coffee table book.

Providing a relatively succinct and precise description of the events that led up to the Barge Canal's inception and segueing beautifully into the details and dilemmas that surrounded its necessity, construction, and significance, Duncan Hayes' application to the National Register of Historic Places stands as the canal's most recent testament. Officially sent to the Keeper of the National Register in Washington, DC on August 29, 2014, the document hopes to achieve the entire Barge Canal's listing as an official historical site, which would remain protected from any potential future alteration or demolition. Many elements of the Erie Canal are already listed as historic places and the

Erie Canalway National Historic Corridor, containing portions of the original path, spans New York State. However this simply reinforces the common misconceptions that plague the story of the Barge Canal. Although the original path of the Erie Canal has been historically noted and protected, the Barge Canal has yet to be acknowledged in the same light and Hayes' application represents the efforts of a select few historians who strive to safeguard the latter canal's legacy for the future education of others, if not simply to remind people of the difference between the two canals.

After a quick introduction and description of the events that brought about the original Erie Canal, the second enlargements, and the other canal projects across the state, Hayes delves into the drive for the Barge Canal's construction, also known as the third enlargement, although this work deviated immensely from the previous two. The first half of his seventy page historical sketch describes the background of the public and private forces that shaped public opinion regarding the pros and cons that the Barge Canal would bring, debates that this paper will primarily address. The second half describes the process of the Barge Canal's construction and later impact, much of which this paper will not address save for an aside regarding its economic impact and an even more transcendent outlook on its overall influence on the people and state of New York. Like Whitford, Hayes cites the railroads as the primary opponent to the Barge Canal and comments on the frequently vacillating attitude of New York's citizens. Hayes leans toward the pro-canal advocates, as one might assume, but he seems to do his best to remain as impartial as possible while still exacting his aims with the Historical Register.

In the first half, Hayes pinpoints key arguments that were used by proponents and opponents of the Barge Canal's construction. Hayes mentions the negative perspective

that many had on the Erie Canal following the debacle of the “Nine-million Dollar Act” and the corruption that was subsequently revealed from its failure. Anti-canal foes espoused the view that canals were an antiquated means of transportation, that the funds should be spent on more applicable and reasonable projects, and that the canal’s cost was being borne by New York citizens for the benefit of non-New Yorkers. Proponents fired back with arguments of its enormous potential economic gains, whose increased revenues would help fund all the projects that opponents claim the canal’s construction cost would detract from. Most importantly, as with Whitford, Hayes cites and describes the major influence that railroads played in the debates, a fact that McFee lightly touches on. Proponents argued that the canal regulated rail fares, reduced the damage of its monopolistic competition, and would provide a means of transportation that no other major city on the eastern seaboard could offer, ensuring that New York City would remain the economic mecca of the United States. What Hayes also indicates in his work, particularly through Teddy Roosevelt’s speeches, is the conviction that many people held in that progressive era that if something, specifically public infrastructure, has the potential to be built, than it is the right and duty of the people and government to construct it for the betterment of all society.

Hayes is inevitably biased as his undeniable goal is to pose the Barge Canal in the best light possible as to secure its acceptance by the National Register of Historic Places. The incentive toward demonstrating the Barge Canal’s significance in New York State’s history invokes his bias. With that being said, no source that has been discussed is innocent of the sin of bias and each the aspects of each historian’s work must be assessed with this fact in mind. Regardless, the details acquired from Hayes’ account in this

investigation will use solely the facts of the article and carefully assess any potential partiality, specifically in considering the impact and legacy of the Barge Canal described.

Despite the general enthusiastic, “we can do anything and everything” mind-sets of New Yorkers and Americans during the turn of the century, a major infrastructural project, particularly one that was the most expensive in the state’s history, requires an economic foundation on which to base its merit. Several authors have written on the topic of the Barge Canal’s economic impact, in terms of its construction cost, potential commercial gains, and its ability to prevent railroad monopolization. There is no published book that solely discusses the economic influence of the Barge Canal, yet there are notable journal articles on the issue. In addition to the journal articles, the previously cited works, particularly Whitford, touch upon the economic reasoning, and other works discuss the wider topic regarding the competition between canals and railroads. Nonetheless, the economic and financial arguments lobbied by the proponents and opponents of the Barge Canal must be analyzed closely, regardless of their veracity in hindsight, as perception is reality for those New Yorkers casting their votes in 1903.

Providing an appropriate segue between the mainly historical sources and economically-focused articles, Roy G. Finch, New York State’s last State Engineer and Surveyor, composed *The Story of the New York State Canals: Historical and Commercial Information*.¹⁷ Written in 1925 to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of the Erie Canal’s completion, this work is very short in comparison to the previously described historical works, but provides a brief account of the Erie and Barge Canals’ histories. Following a discussion on the earlier Erie Canal, Finch alludes to the debate

¹⁷ Roy G. Finch, *The story of the New York State canals: historical and commercial information* (Albany: J. B. Lyon Co., printers, 1925)

over constructing a ship or barge canal to replace it, and proceeds to describe the dimensions, construction, and course of the Barge Canal. Concluding his work, Finch remarks how the greater use of the automobile, in addition to the already existing railroads, could benefit the canal's efficiency in material transportation. In addition, Finch indicates an important facet of the canal debate in relation to transportation as varying factions called for improved road conditions and increased rail travel in place of further waterway funding. In this instance, Finch is not attempting to refute the other transportation arguments, but rather is writing on the potential cohesion of these transport methods to create a more efficient, productive system of logistics.

After reading this pamphlet, one can easily ascertain that Finch was an ardent supporter of the Barge Canal project. This statement is further reinforced by his status as New York State's State Engineer and Surveyor, which opens him up to criticisms of bias. Although he does not directly attempt to provide the reader with numerical data, it is clear from his language that he views the canal as an economic success. On the note of economic success, Finch marks that "the total appropriation for the Canal System to date, including the terminals and grain elevators, is \$170,729,774. This cost has not been excessive, considering the magnitude and extent of the work."¹⁸ Finch's work is also prone to bias due to its publishing to celebrate the one-hundredth anniversary of the original Erie Canal's opening, a fact that would lead an author to excitedly embellish and overemphasize the subject without an overly objective nature. In any case, this short work initiates the economic-specific conversation on the Barge Canal's economic influence in New York State and the United States as a whole.

¹⁸Roy G. Finch, *The story of the New York State canals: historical and commercial information*, p 11.

As an economist and historian of the Erie and Barge Canals alike would know, the issue of funding for these massive public works is often an issue of fervent debate, as many want to reap the potential benefits, but few want to foot the bill. This matter was a subject of serious debate for everyone involved in the issue as varying groups pointed out where they believed the money could be better and more fairly spent, such as on improving roads, schools, and hospitals.¹⁹ Declaring it too costly, antiquated, and inefficient, railroad firms used this hot button concern in an attempt to derail the canal campaign. Carter Goodrich explodes this subject with his noteworthy 1960 work, *Government Promotion of American Canals and Railroads, 1800-1890*. Although this book does not coincide with the 1895-1905 timeframe that this paper covers, it offers an invaluable assessment of New Yorker's mindsets in regards to funding the project, and similar examples of these sentiments can be found surrounding the Erie Canal's construction and its later expansions.

Goodrich does not necessarily favor canals over railroads, but rather states that they have a complimentary relationship. However, railroads strove to eliminate the canals from competition as railways grew in financial and commercial strength. The railroads had the distinct advantage of being less labor intensive to construct, and could be constructed nearly anywhere. This subsequently garnered greater political influence for the railroad as the preferred medium of transportation, but certain inherent advantages of waterborne travel could not be diminished, namely the cheaper cost of transportation. Summarizing his arguments, Goodrich prefers canals over railroads were the former's construction is reasonably allowed, due to terrain and cost difficulties, while railroads fill

¹⁹ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the barge canal of New York state*, p 42.

the void that canals cannot. Like Finch, Goodrich sees railroads as a means of connecting other forms of transportation, chiefly the canals, to commercial businesses of both urban and rural areas.

The central lesson, as it pertains to this topic, is the reasoning why so many New Yorkers voted in favor of constructing the Barge Canal, despite its enormous cost and lack of Federal assistance. Support can be found in Goodrich's investigation of the earlier Erie Canal as the Canal Commissioners, specifically DeWitt Clinton and Gouverneur Morris, petitioned Congress in 1810 for funding of the project.²⁰ After being rejected multiple times, this steeled the resolve of New York citizens and politicians to refuse any Federal assistance and fund the undertaking themselves. Following the canal's completion, obvious success, and clear positive effect on opening the western territories, New York State continued to fund expansions to its canal, even refusing Federal aid offers. Although citizens were concerned about the cost of these projects due to possible increases in taxes resulting from high state debt, the cost-benefit analysis of continuing these expansions without Federal aid was not as influential as one might think. This speaks to the "spirit of improvement" that Goodrich introduces in his first chapter; the notion that people pursued the construction of public works for the abstract, grandiose ideas. This observation by Goodrich can lead one to infer that New Yorkers retained the same sentiment regarding the funding of the Barge Canal when the Federal government again did not offer financial assistance without the caveat of at least partial control of the waterway. New York citizens quickly rejected this offer and persevered to construct the canal on their own dime. Similarly to Whitford, Goodrich describes the various groups,

²⁰ Carter Goodrich, *Government promotion of American canals and railroads, 1800-1890* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), p 46.

primarily economics-oriented and trade unions, which were frequently found to advocate these canal projects. As Whitford identified, these groups pushed canal construction to not only assist in commercial transport, but to provide a bulwark against the extortion-like railroad rates as well. Although Goodrich does not directly speak about the Barge Canal, his work helps one to understand the willingness to accept the \$101 million price tag.

Continuing on the discussion of the fierce competition between railroads and canals, Wilfred H. Schoff writes of the economic importance of the Barge Canal in a much wider perspective in his third installment of “The New York State Barge Canal,” published in the 1915 edition of the *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society*.²¹ Schoff’s clearly is in full support of the Barge Canal and water traffic over railroads. The author additionally cites railroad traffic as primarily way traffic, meaning that it provides mostly short transportation of goods, as compared to the Barge Canal’s mainly through traffic, meaning that it provides an avenue to transport goods long distances. The Barge Canal, in his view, was marked as the most efficient and effective form of transportation as it provides better through traffic, but also way traffic via the canal terminals. Schoff cites that despite the dramatic increase in railway miles, the Barge Canal still carried more surplus grain to be exported during the era surrounding the 1903 canal campaign. Additionally, Schoff cites the importance of the canal in regulating railroad rates, an argument frequently used by canal proponents, and declares that New York State is thusly “assuming a great liability” in protecting the surrounding states from the railroad’s

²¹ Wilfred H. Schoff, "The New York State Barge Canal. Part III." *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society* 47, no. 8 (1915): 593-599.

rates.²² The author writes fondly, almost in a romantic nature, how the Barge Canal connects the entire country, allowing a farmer in the heart of New York State to send his goods nonstop to any port on the globe. Unfortunately for Barge Canal enthusiasts, Wilfred H. Schoff's lifeworks offer the greatest source of biasness as he was an antiquarian and classical scholar whose work focused primarily on the study of waterways, water travel, and maritime trade. His own enthusiasm is his downfall in presenting the importance of the Barge Canal, but his account is noteworthy as it accurately expresses the viewpoints of canal proponents.

After reviewing the previous secondary sources on the economic aspects of the Barge Canal, an analytical reader or researcher may become frustrated by the infrequency of negative, or at least critical, assessments of its overall cost and impact. One exception is H.G. Moulton's 1915 article, "The Cost of the Erie Barge Canal" in *The Journal of Political Economy*, provides an antagonistic approach to the canal, critiquing everything from its seemingly wasteful costs to its empty-headed proponents.²³ Although he does not draw a final conclusion on whether the Barge Canal was worth its large cost, Moulton presents the numbers and facts that damage the canal's reputation and allows readers to decide the canal's worth.

Assessing the overall value of the canal, Moulton begins with a purely numerical analysis by adding up the construction costs and dividing them by the number of canal miles. The Barge Canal's cost per mile was in his estimation a damningly high \$330,000 at the cessation of construction, though it is reduced to a (still large) cost of \$260,000

²² Schoff, Wilfred H.. "The New York State Barge Canal. Part III." *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society* 47, no. 8 (1915): 593-599.

²³ H. G. Moulton, "The Cost of the Erie Barge Canal." *Journal of Political Economy* 23, no. 5 (1915): 490-500.

with the inclusion of the Hudson River as it is part of the course from Buffalo to New York City. Moulton continues to critically assess the canal with his denouncing of the canal proponents for their portrayal of “the wonderful possibilities of water transportation and fanning the enthusiasm of the public to a white heat.”²⁴ According to his logic, the advocates were wrong for their endorsement of the waterway as the construction of canal terminals, essential components of a functional canal system, were not planned. Moulton even criticizes the depth of the canal as another instance of wasteful spending, with it being unnecessarily deep at twelve feet. It would not be fair to say that Moulton does not embrace the concept of expending large sums of state funds for public works, as he gives no indication that the canal is not important for the public and commercial good of the state. Moulton is simply criticizing the seemingly blind way in which New York citizens approved the project and expended huge sums of public money. Certainly, his article was one of many works published at the time of the Barge Canal’s construction that questioned its viability, but its publishing in 1915 places it past the time period relevant to this study of the canal campaign. One could justifiably conclude that Moulton held an anti-canal opinion, but still performed his duty as a scholar by letting readers form their own conclusions. With the latter point in mind, Moulton is rather accurate in his depiction of the Barge Canal advocates and provides a welcome difference in opinion from the previous authors.

There exist several other sources containing economic discussions and data pertaining to the effectiveness of canal transportation, with some regarding the former’s relation with railroads and others solely presenting a cost-benefit analysis. However,

²⁴ Moulton, H.G.. "The Cost of the Erie Barge Canal." *Journal of Political Economy* 23, no. 5 (1915): 490-500. p 494.

these sources are not explicitly about the New York State Barge Canal and may not even mention the waterway, offering only insight on similar projects. In addition, investigating these sources is not needed as the purpose of this analysis is not necessarily to prove or disprove the economic arguments espoused, but rather to present the points made by pro and anti-canal forces throughout their debates. Just as it is with the historical texts concerning the Barge Canal, the frequency of economic-specific arguments is severely lacking, a particularly worrying fact as the canal was the largest state-funded construction project up to that date and its primary function is to serve commercial interests. This seeming lack of discussion again speaks volumes about the level of interest that exists for the massive Barge Canal, especially when compared to its predecessor, the Erie Canal, or contemporary project, the Panama Canal; a waterway that Roy Finch passionately declares is a mere fifth of the length.

Nonetheless, the existing literature contains a wellspring of economical information that is inserted amongst the narrative text and utilized to reinforce the authors' discussions, allowing some to be labelled economic historians. By including the relevant figures and data that were vital to the arguments of the proponents and opponents of the Barge Canal, Noble Whitford and others allow their readers to understand the numbers and facts that were presented to politicians and the public during that era. Although the term was not created until 1960, these writers, particularly Whitford, can correctly be called cliometricians, better known as economic historians. Engaging in the study of cliometrics, these economic historians utilize public history, personal accounts, investigative research, economic data, and the general attitude of the time period to adequately portray the subject. It is imperative to list the applicable authors

as cliometricians to distinguish their contributions to the study of the New York State Barge Canal.

Sifting through the various, although relatively numerically-limited, accounts we observe that there are no historians on this subject that are reasonably unbiased regarding the need to and importance of constructing the Barge Canal. This revelation may come as no surprise to some as historical topics, particularly those regarding political debates and that have received little attention, oftentimes are written by authors who, prior to proper research, wish to portray the subject in a positive or negative view, often to an extreme. In this specific work, I will illustrate, to the best of my abilities, the historical, political, and economical debate surrounding the enactment campaign of the New York State Barge Canal in an unbiased, nonpartisan approach.

Purpose and Distinction:

The objective of this work is to impart a historical narrative of the political and economic arguments surrounding the procession of the Barge Canal from its inception in 1895 and earlier to its final legislative and popular approval in 1903, with special attention given to the evolving contentions of the politicians, press, and public. Revealed will be the developing roles, methods, and rationales that the waterway's proponents utilized in promoting the argued necessity of the Barge Canal's construction, while the project's adversaries challenged and belittled the waterway's importance while presenting countering evidence and claims. The veracity or eventual realization of the varying economic and historical claims made by pro and anti-canal forces is not the central focus of this work, but rather their impact upon the public is crucial as the Barge

Canal's fate was ultimately determined by popular referendum. As such, studying the Barge Canal's campaign provides a unique perspective on lobbying efforts of this era.

Notably, this composition provides a more recent perspective on the infrequently noted waterway, as well as an in-depth analysis of the lobbying efforts. Such is significant as this paper signifies the first scholarly work written on the topic in nearly a century, with the exception of Michele McFee's *A Long Haul*, which is written and presented in a different manner than this work. Furthermore, none of the other accounts have focused specifically on the promotional aspects of the waterway enlargement campaign. As the Erie Canal and Barge Canal are celebrated for the immeasurable prosperity they bestowed upon New York and the entire nation, the study of this topic allows for the unique blending of economics and history into a single chronicle, formulating an auspicious cliometric study.

Throughout the course of the campaign to achieve legislative and popular approval of the one-thousand ton barge canal, the waterway's advocates were forced to repel one proposal after another meant to delay or defeat its construction. Some such schemes were reasonable suggestions, such as a ship canal or smaller barge canal, while others were obstructive stall tactics, notably the proposed construction of a railroad in the bed of the drained canal. Ultimately, it was the deduction of the barge canal advocates, and subsequently their duty to illustrate to the public and politicians of New York State, that "None of these plans will hold water or check the thousand ton barge canal plan a moment."²⁵

²⁵ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 329.

Chapter I
Decline of Clinton's Ditch:
Cataloguing the Erie Canal's Collapse from 1881-1895

Meandering through the once-virgin woods of upstate New York, an artificial river carved a corridor of agriculture and industry. Bearing the produce of a blossoming economy and connecting the heartland of a burgeoning nation to its golden gateway, the Erie Canal certainly blessed the people and state of New York with unrivaled commercial supremacy. Completed in 1825 and constituting the most viable and accessible route between the eastern seaboard and Midwest markets, the canal provided “a river of gold” that flowed across New York State, transforming wilderness into agriculture, villages into cities, and spurring an industrial heartland.¹ Thanks to the canal, New York City became the principal port of call for goods entering and exiting the United States, rapidly expanding in population and wealth. Yet, as the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century approached, the Big Apple's trade dominance faced social, economic, and technological challenges that sought to usurp its throne.

The Long Road Ahead:

Debates over how to best reverse this detrimental trend of declining commercial dominance involved several key participants, including politicians, trade associations, and local citizens on both sides of the proposed canal solution. These factions each held their own respective rationales regarding causes and solutions for this downturn, with some proposals overlapping and others standing in stark contrast to one another. Primarily, the two contending parties in the deliberation that ultimately produced the Barge Canal were railroads and those averse to the railroad's dominance, with other

¹ William L. Stone, in David Hosack, *Memoir of De Witt*. (New York: Printed by J. Seymour, 1829), p 450.

participants in and ideologies of politics and commerce aligning themselves respectively. Both sides drew heavily on past examples, and if one is to better understand the arguments presented both for and against the eventual replacement of the Erie Canal by the Barge Canal, the factors contributing to the former's deterioration must be illustrated.

As one might imagine, the notion of constructing the Barge Canal, a waterway capable of transporting one-thousand ton vessels across the heart of New York State, did not simply spring into existence in 1903 and achieve enactment. Instead, the campaign contained narratives of perseverance and animosity on both sides of the debate, narratives that parallel the construction of its predecessor, the Erie Canal. However, there remain distinct differences in approach to the two canals as the Erie Canal settled key questions that the Barge Canal subsequently no longer needed to address, most notably the ability to construct such a project and the government's role in its construction. Thusly, a brief inquiry into the campaign for the Erie Canal's creation is necessary to provide a more thorough comprehension of the arguments later presented by proponents and opponents of the Barge Canal.

In the Beginning:

Blessed with good geography, New York State laid claim to the only natural break in the Appalachian Mountains. It also contained within its borders an overabundance of water in the form of lakes, rivers, and streams. Guided by early fur traders searching for water passage to the Great Lakes, early New Yorkers could see a potential avenue from the deep and expansive harbor of New York City, up the tidal waters of the Hudson River, and westward via the Mohawk River. From there, a fur trader would carry his canoe only three miles to Wood Creek, follow the creek through

Oneida Lake, and into Lake Ontario via the Onondaga and Oswego Rivers.² Such a journey showed how feasible a waterborne route was through the state and into the interior of the continent and that this path would certainly be utilized in the eventual construction of the canal. Naturally, one needed greater reasoning other than the simple identification of a viable route to display the degree of social and economic benefit that a canal could offer. Although the central counterpoint made against the canal was the belief at the time that it was nearly impossible to construct, other arguments centered on the project's immense cost, while some only stood in resistance in an attempt to derail the career of the canal's greatest supporter, DeWitt Clinton. Conversely, advocates lauded the Erie Canal's immense potential economic gains, capacity to populate the interior of New York State and the Midwest, and ability to counter Great Britain's interests in the continent. These varying contentions would develop over time, eventually acclaiming the canal advocates correct in their canal convictions.

Although jeeringly referred to as Clinton's Ditch in reference to Governor DeWitt Clinton's spearheading of the canal campaign, the concept of the Erie Canal finds its roots as far back as 1724 in the writings of Cadwallader Colden. In his *History of the Five Indian Nations*, the future lieutenant governor of the New York province advocated an economic reasoning for the improvement of natural waterways extending across the state to Lake Erie as the trade route would be "much more advantageous than the Way the French are obliged to take by the great Fall of Jaraga (Niagara)..."³ History would prove Colden's assumption correct in regards to the improved navigability of natural

²Cadwallader Colden, *Papers relating to an act of the Assembly...* (New York: Printed and sold by William Bradford 1724), p 14.

³ Cadwallader Colden, *Papers relating to an act of the Assembly...* p 34.

waterways when the Barge Canal was constructed, but such a plan was not viable upon initial attempts. The impracticability of such was exhibited through the efforts of the Northern and Western Inland Lock Navigation Companies. Such enterprises were incorporated by the New York State government as a result of the incessant beseeching of Christopher Colles' 1784 petition and championed by war hero General Philip Schuyler.

A man of frequent travels and projects, Colles proposed multiple improvements to transportation around the country, wishing to improve the internal infrastructure of the country primarily through local, state, and federal funding. Despite his numerous undertakings, this endeavor claimed Colles' utmost attention, as he was certainly aware of its grand potential. The company attempted to canalize the Mohawk River and upper Hudson River, and though the venture made some improvements, it was ultimately deemed too costly and failed. Such a conclusion resembled the fate of the contemporary project of George Washington's Patowmack Canal and other efforts in the southern states. Although it caused severe doubt regarding future projects, the effort did provide a strong case for the necessity of a large funding base and evidence that improving the navigability of rivers was not the appropriate and efficient course of action.⁴ Ambitious projects resulting in failure and the subsequent doubt that hung as a shadow over similar future projects ultimately became a theme of the New York State canal story, making it easy for supporters and opponents of progress alike to formulate their arguments.

Interest Initiates Inquiry and Investigation:

By the early nineteenth century, public and political enthusiasm for great works of internal improvement was escalating across the new nation, attracting the attention of a

⁴ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York* (Albany: J.B. Lyon Co., printers, 1906), p 43.

youthful, up-and-coming politician, DeWitt Clinton. Approached by canal proponents, the recruitment of DeWitt Clinton proved to be the greatest asset of the project as he, in the view of one contemporary supporter, “devoted the best powers of his vigorous and capacious mind to this subject; and he appeared to grasp and realize it, as an object of the highest public utility, and worthy of his noblest ambition.”⁵ After embarking on a cross-state journey with other project leaders, Clinton assembled a proposal in 1811 outlining the merits and path of the future Erie Canal. But when he and Gouverneur Morris travelled to Washington, D.C. to obtain federal funding for the endeavor, the pair was sorely disappointed at President Madison’s rejection, which was based on a seemingly hypocritical objection of sectional favoritism.⁶ Motivated by rejection, the New York State government was impassioned to carry on the canal’s construction without federal funding, vowing to raise the required construction costs themselves and retain absolute authority over the canal and its proceeds.

Evident in the attempts of New York lobbyists in 1811 and 1817, the campaign for the construction of the Erie Canal was fundamentally embroiled in the debate on the federal government’s role in developing internal improvements. Entering the nation’s capital with high hopes, Morris and Clinton frequently pressed Congress and President Madison for funding in the realm of \$6,000,000. However, despite the strong lobbying and insistence of the well-respected politicians, several key issues prevented their success. The New York State Legislature sent a number of letters imploring the President to push Congress to fund the canal’s construction. Under much pressure from the letters and the commissioners, Madison addressed Congress, though only half-heartedly due to

⁵ David Hosack, *Memoir of De Witt Clinton* (New York: Printed by J. Seymour, 1829), p 384.

⁶ James Renwick, *Life of Dewitt Clinton* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1841. Print), p 222.

being “embarrassed by scruples derived from his interpretation of the constitution,” with a request to fund the project.⁷ In his letter to Congress on Christmas Eve, 1811, Madison highlighted that the canal “comprises objects of national, as well as more limited importance,” along with “advantages [that] have an intimate connection with arrangements and exertions for the general security.”⁸ It is rather understandable why Madison did not support the federal funding of the Erie Canal as it would be favoring sectional interests. This conviction ran especially deep with Madison as he wrote a sizeable portion of the Constitution and is widely considered to be the “Father of the Constitution,” and worried that the apparent favoring and support of one state’s interests could create state jealousies and threaten the young nation. Apparently, the New York State Legislature held similar assumptions, expressing their frustration in the *Report of the Commission Appointed to Attend at the Seat of the General Government*, in which it was claimed that the project was the victim of “state jealousy;” claiming that the other state representatives had “hope that the envied state of New York will continue [to be] a supplicant... of the generosity of the Union.”⁹ Though it was quite the fulsome and prideful statement to make, it was warranted and likely true.

Yet, it is likely that Madison’s indifferent support was due to the championing of the canal by and the growing influence of DeWitt Clinton, who was critical of Madison’s domestic and foreign policy. Renwick comments on the matter, saying that “personal rivalry, political hostility, and local prejudice may then have reasonably been expected to

⁷ Charles G. Haines, *Public documents relating to the New-York canals* (New-York: W.A. Mercein, 1821), p 631.

⁸ James Madison. “New York canals. Communicated to the Congress, December 24, 1811” (American State Papers, 1811)

⁹ Charles G. Haines, *Public documents relating to the New-York canals*, p 652.

exist in the mind of Madison.”¹⁰ The latter reasoning, “local prejudice,” refers to Madison’s loyalty to his native Virginia and its Patowmack Canal, which would stand to suffer from a successful and extensive New York canal. After all, Madison had no qualms with the federal funding of the Cumberland Road, which greatly benefitted Virginia and received roughly \$7 million in funding from 1806-1841, and apparently received “no significant discussion of the Constitutional questions involved.”¹¹ The two, Madison and Clinton, would find themselves at odds with each other the following year in the presidential election of 1812, with Clinton losing by a narrow margin. One can see politicking rearing its ugly head under the guise of strict constitutionalism.

The debate on national funding of internal improvements was reignited in 1817 with the passage of the “Bonus Bill” through the efforts of John C. Calhoun, Henry Clay, and Daniel Webster, as well as the insistence of the Erie Canal Commission. Yet, Madison held firm in his constitutional stances, vetoing the bill and relegating the responsibility of internal improvement to the responsibility of individual states for the near future. Concerning the veto, it “not only directly opposed the invariable practice of the National Government, but also the reverse of his policy in sanctioning very similar appropriations for other States.”¹² Despite the setback, Madison’s hypocrisy only strengthened New York’s support and “determination that the State should undertake the work alone.”¹³

¹⁰ James Renwick, *Life of Dewitt Clinton*, p 222.

¹¹ Stephen Minicucci, "Internal Improvements And The Union, 1790–1860," *Studies in American Political Development* 18, no. 2 (2004): p 160-85.

¹² Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 81.

¹³ Ronald E. Shaw, *Erie water west; a history of the Erie Canal, 1792-1854*. (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966), p 67.

Clinton Digs His Ditch:

Although the enactment of the project was greatly stifled by the War of 1812, DeWitt Clinton continued to pursue the project, issuing his noteworthy “New York Memorial” letter and speech in 1816. Officially titled the *Memorial of the Citizens of New York, in Favour of a Canal Navigation between the Great Western Lakes and the tide-waters of the Hudson*, the letter reignited public interest in the project with “an enthusiasm which resulted in public meetings in almost every city and village between Albany and Buffalo.”¹⁴ Citing his report, Clinton relays the project’s economic benefits in that “agriculture should find a sale for its productions; manufacturers a vent for their fabrics; and commerce a market for its commodities.”¹⁵ Gaining the attention of upstate New Yorkers, Clinton continued on the “increased economy and comfort of living” from “the cheapness and abundance of raw materials,” which would be “consequently advantageous to towns and villages.”¹⁶ Capping the enormous potential economic gains, Clinton “calculated that the expense of transporting on a canal amounts to one dollar a ton for one hundred miles while the usual cost by land conveyance is thirty-two dollars a ton for the same distance.”¹⁷ He also drew on the emotions of New Yorkers regarding the recent War of 1812 as the Great Lakes region increasingly became the scene for the early battles of the war. Clinton used arguments similar to those presented in a newspaper in 1815, which stated, “It is said that a piece of ordinance worth \$400 at the foundry had cost the Government \$2,000 when delivered on the frontier... The debts that the Nation

¹⁴ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 73.

¹⁵ DeWitt Clinton, *The canal policy of the state of New-York delineated in a letter to Robert Troup, Esquire* (New York: Printed and Pub. By E. and E. Hosford, 1821), p 28.

¹⁶ DeWitt Clinton, *The canal policy of the state of New-York*, p 29.

¹⁷ DeWitt Clinton, *The canal policy of the state of New-York*, p 28.

had incurred for the mere transportation of war materials would have gone far toward constructing a canal.”¹⁸ By identifying how the federal government’s lack of foresight in infrastructural expenditures had actually cost them more greatly, such arguments highlighted the pivotal role the canal could play in national security and defense, as well as cost efficiency.

However, New York citizens and politicians did not always present a united front as downstaters expressed hesitation despite Clinton’s assurance of the canal’s overall benefit. A letter written by Commissioner Myron Holley in 1817 described the “malignant hostility” the New York City delegates had for the canal due to their “great fears that their city will be subjected to ruinous taxes.”¹⁹ This anxiety was only heightened with the second rejection of federal funding by President Madison in 1816, but Clinton’s political acumen again proved essential. The statesman managed to alleviate his constituents’ fears with a sound plan of debt repayment and again redirected the funding rejection as a passionate call to arms for New York’s citizens against apparent federal hypocrisy. Occurring within just a few months in 1817, DeWitt Clinton secured the passage of the bill appropriating \$7,000,000 for the construction of the Erie Canal, and also won the governorship of New York State. With Clinton’s popularity skyrocketing and enthusiasm at its apex, construction of the long-awaited Erie Canal commenced on July 4, 1817 in Rome.

Despite initially slow progress through the dense, untamed wilderness of upstate New York due to “unfavorable season, the inexperience of the contractors, and the late

¹⁸ “Remarks of Mr. Tallmadge,” *Columbian Gazette* [Utica] 7 Apr. 1818: 2, Early American Newspapers.

¹⁹ Barbara K. Walker and Warren S. Walker, *The Erie Canal, gateway to empire* (Boston: Heath, 1963, Print), p 13.

commencement of operation,” engineers James Geddes and Benjamin Wright overcame the steep learning curve, opening the first fifteen-mile section between Utica and Rome in 1819.²⁰ However, discontent and impatience grew amongst the populace, and newspapers pitted against each other in the debate. In an article on June 6, 1818, the *New York Columbian* defended the project, cheering the “widening acceptance” of internal improvements with “old and deep-rooted prejudices giving way, and a spirit of liberal inquiry taking place.”²¹ Feeling slighted by the article, the *National Advocate* retorted by first noting the biased opinions of its arguments as “the *Columbian* groans with letters from contractors, agents, etc. whose interests, of course, claims prior distinction.”²² The paper argued that Clinton would grow tired of the canal when he realized it would be a failure and claim, “I would have gone on with the canal, but my opponents were also opponents to internal prosperity of the state.”²³ Gladly associating himself with Clinton’s opponents, the writer responded to Clinton’s hypothetical statement, saying, “Go on sir.”²⁴ Although most opponents did not doubt the economic gains that would accompany the Erie Canal’s completion, and those that did were rarely taken seriously, many still resisted the project due to the immense political benefit it would bestow on DeWitt Clinton.²⁵

Within the state government, Martin Van Buren’s Bucktail faction vehemently fought the continued construction of the canal, even as the group held a majority of positions on the Canal Commission. The Albany Regency, as the Bucktails were also

²⁰ DeWitt Clinton, *The canal policy of the state of New-York*, p 34.

²¹ “Pennsylvania and New-York,” *New York Columbian* 6 June 1818: 2, Early American Newspapers.

²² “The Canal, etc.” *National Advocate* [New York] 8 June 1818.

²³ “The Canal, etc.” *National Advocate* [New York] 8 June 1818.

²⁴ “The Canal, etc.” *National Advocate* [New York] 8 June 1818.

²⁵ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 92.

known as, previously succeeded in a prior attack on Clinton by shortening the term of his governorship through a state constitutional convention, and subsequently aided in his defeat in the following election for governor by portraying him as incompetent, highlighting the unfinished canal. Continuing to undermine the Erie Canal simply for its perceived connection with DeWitt Clinton, the Bucktails attempted to alter the path of the waterway to the “Ontario route,” terminating in Oswego, rather than the “Inland route,” ceasing in Buffalo. Failing in this sabotage effort, the Bucktails chose to attack Clinton’s only remaining political position as head of the Canal Commission. They succeeded in removing him, but the move backfired as it ignited public outrage against the Bucktails and won widespread support for the embattled politician. In New York City on April 20, 1824, over ten thousand people assembled in City Hall Park to condemn the removal of Clinton and to express their appreciation for “his long, able and gratuitous services in the prosecution of the New York canals.”²⁶ In a city that once deplored him, the meeting’s speaker rang his praises, declaring, “*De Witt Clinton is the man!* Every tongue utters his name; every heart bears testimony to his services.”²⁷ With this wave of enthusiasm, DeWitt Clinton was nominated for governor by the People’s Party, and was reelected by a wide margin in 1824. At last, after fifteen years of painstaking involvement and steadfast dedication, Governor DeWitt Clinton boarded the *Seneca Chief* in Buffalo to inaugurate the official opening of the Erie Canal on October 26, 1825.

Paving a Path of Liquid Gold:

Following the undeniable success of the Erie Canal, the federal government gradually changed its stance on the need for greater federal funding of internal

²⁶ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 120.

²⁷ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 120.

improvements, notably citing the immense project of the First Transcontinental Railroad. However, this policy shift did not readily affect the Erie Canal as federal involvement was neither desired nor warranted by the citizens and politicians of New York State.²⁸ Any demand or calling for federal assistance in the canal's management, maintenance, or construction were mainly attempts by canal opponents to defeat future fund appropriations.²⁹ The federal government's role was determined to apply strictly to the harbors and trade routes along the Great Lakes, but not within the canal system itself. Such can be seen in 1859, as the New York State Legislature "asked for a refunding of the expenditures upon the Buffalo pier and breakwater" as "the Government should properly protect, at national expense, the harbors at Buffalo and Oswego and the other harbors along the Great Lakes, which were used to shelter national shipping, or as ports of shipment for commerce designed to traverse the lines of the Erie canal."³⁰ This sentiment held firm throughout the century and into the later debate surrounding the Barge Canal's enactment, as exhibited in later discussions.

The triumph and extensive use of the Erie Canal incited canal mania within the state and across the country, prompting the construction of the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal, as well as the Chenango, Oswego, Chemung, Black River, and several other minor waterways.³¹ In a short period of roughly twenty years, the young American republic morphed from a nation with arguably the worst internal transportation infrastructure to a land that could be traversed entirely via water without ever leaving its borders. With the transportation cost dropping to a previously unfathomable low of 0.81cents per ton-mile

²⁸ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 907.

²⁹ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 248.

³⁰ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 245.

³¹ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 672.

in 1860, the United States, and specifically New York, experienced an economic boom as trade flourished in all corners of the country, carried on the waters of the canals.³²

“Cursed by its own success,” the Erie Canal’s original capacity of approximately one and half million tons was surpassed by its second year of operation, eventually requiring the commencement of its First Enlargement in 1834.³³ Just as the completion of the original Erie Canal nearly instantaneously spurred the First Enlargement, the latter’s completion in 1862 was celebrated with the demand to further expand the existing locks to meet increased demand. For a time, it seemed that canal traffic and tonnage would only continue to increase exponentially. upstate New York cities such as Albany, Utica, Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo prospered tremendously in this era and would continue to prosper as they effectively became inland port cities. Agricultural goods, industrial products, and newly arrived immigrants utilized this aquatic highway to settle and exploit the natural resources of the Midwestern United States. Standing as the terminuses of the canal, Buffalo and New York City dramatically increased in wealth, population, and prominence. Politicians, merchants, and citizens reveled in the fantastic amount of economic and social growth the Erie Canal had brought, seemingly blinded by their own optimism and the ceaselessly alluring the glint of gold.

Fool’s Gold:

Although trade continued to flourish for decades to come, the prosperity that followed the initial opening of the original Erie Canal in 1825 and Enlarged Erie Canal in 1862 created an overoptimistic calculation of future traffic and subsequently a false sense

³² Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 253.

³³ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 141.

of security.³⁴ As “revenue from tolls was so large during the decade after completion of the Erie,” politicians and canal commissioners of New York State “entertained extravagant notions as to their volume in the future.”³⁵ Becoming convinced that all improvements and repairs of the canal could be completed using only toll revenues represented a major misstep that was “exceedingly unfortunate in view of the diminished and diminishing revenue” of the canal, which was annually losing freight tonnages to the increasingly competitive railroads.³⁶ This foolhardy belief is demonstrated in the annual message of Governor John Young in 1847, saying:

With what entire confidence may we not rely upon the income of the canals to protect us against taxation on account of the present State debt, and for its ultimate extinction? -- I speak now of the revenues to be derived from the canals in their present condition, assuming that the capacity of the Erie canal will not permit of a material augmentation of its business. Secure the trade of the great opening west, by enlarging the Erie canal, and how unimportant is our present indebtedness considered in connection with the revenues that may reasonably be expected.³⁷

Undoubtedly, the fact that the annual tolls from the canals had by that time increased to nearly \$3,000,000 was a powerful argument to support the optimistic views of the Governor regarding the Erie enlargement. But the state’s leaders were too nearsighted that they “considered that to impose a direct tax would be unjust and that no reasonable excuse could be given for such action, inasmuch as the canals continued to yield a rich return and these revenues were fully adequate to pay interest on the cost of improvements.”³⁸ It was not until the late 1870s that canal authorities, the Canal Auditor

³⁴ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, Vol. 12 (Buffalo, New York: Buffalo Historical Society, 1908), p 198.

³⁵ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 152.

³⁶ Francis S. Thayer, *Annual Report of the Auditor of the Canal Department for 1875*, (Albany, New York: Published by New York State, 1876), p 18.

³⁷ *State of New York Messages from the governors*, (Albany: J.B. Lyon Co., State printers, 1909), p 8.

³⁸ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 193.

in this case, understood that “it was hazardous to attempt to realize from the tonnage of the canals any more revenue than would barely suffice to pay their running expenses,” and thusly it was concluded that funding must “be procured by taxation.”³⁹ However, the enactment of taxes to support the Erie Canal proved more difficult to accomplish than canal proponents had hoped.

Canal Course Intersected by Railway:

As the canal system entered the second half of the nineteenth century, the waterway was being crippled by varying failures and vices that allowed for the entrance and unbridled success of an emerging form of transportation, railroads. The inability of the New York State government to complete the canal renovations in a timely manner caused indifference and animosity to mushroom amongst citizens, commercial interests, politicians, and newspapers, and further escalated by the corrupt “favoritism of the ‘canal ring’”⁴⁰ This, coupled with the monetary and manpower demands of the Civil War forced the Enlarged Erie Canal to be prematurely declared completed in 1862, with sections between Syracuse and Albany left incomplete.⁴¹ Public opinion on canals began to polarize, embodied in rival opinions found in two articles of the *Scientific American*, one contending that “canals seem to have outlived their usefulness; they have been superseded by railroads,”⁴² while the other retorted that “no railroad can ever compete with it either in cheapness or expedition.”⁴³ Unfortunately for the canal, the failure to determine a consistent and adequate means of finance for the continued maintenance of

³⁹ George W. Schuyler, *Annual Report of the Auditor of the Canal Department for 1877* (Albany, New York: Published by New York State, 1878), p 21-22.

⁴⁰ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 155.

⁴¹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 155.

⁴² "Canals and Railroads," *Scientific American*, 13, no. 32, (April 17, 1858).

⁴³ "Canals Versus Railroads," *Scientific American*, 13, no. 38 (May 29, 1858).

the persistently eroding waterway, as well as enlarging the overcrowded and overused corridor, resulted in the loss of revenue, usage, and competitive edge to the ever-growing network of railroads.

Often ridiculed as an increasingly antiquated form of transportation by the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century, the Erie Canal, and canals in general, held reasonable and undeniable advantages over their more modern, industrial counterpart. Endorsing the horse-drawn canal traffic over iron horse-drawn railway traffic, historian Alvin Harlow complimented the canals for “not emitting smoke and sparks and required only a small quantity of food, which he carried with him.”⁴⁴ The sheer reduced cost of transporting goods upon the canal, and water in general, proved to be the greatest argument for the canal proponents as waterborne travel simply required a boat without holes and a well-fed horse or mule. Citing the average cost of railway and canal freight charges were \$4.42 and \$1.88 per ton, respectively, from 1860 to 1865,⁴⁵ canal travel proved to be a third less expensive per mile than railways as it created “less friction” than any other form of travel.⁴⁶ However, despite the lower transportation costs of canals, railroads were increasingly dominating the percentage of freight tonnage transported across the state.

In just a three-year period from 1873 to 1876, the canal’s market share shrank from more than half of the aggregate tonnage of the New York Central and Erie railroads to approximately one third.⁴⁷ Compared to canals, railroads were marked by greater speed and accessibility, attributes which constituted firm rationales for increased use by

⁴⁴ Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Towpaths; the Story of the American Canal Era*, (New York and London: D. Appleton, 1926), p 82.

⁴⁵ Francis Paton Kimball, *New York--the Canal State; the Story of America's Great Water Route from the Lakes to the Sea, Builder of East and West* (Albany, N.Y: Argus Press, 1937), p 3.

⁴⁶ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 152.

⁴⁷ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 186.

commercial and public transportation. Furthermore, unlike state-owned canals, railroad purchased and consolidated rival firms, allowing them to limit competition and better control rates as economies of scale increased. Characterized as “the Railroad Conspiracy,” this growing trade dominance alarmed canal proponents and merchants alike as railroads were eventually able to fix transportation rates at whatever levels they pleased, exploiting businesses by raising rates during the winter while the canal was inoperable and driving trade away from the canal by lowering rates during the navigable season.⁴⁸ This perceived unfair competition formed the crux of the pro-canal case, centering on the monopolistic behavior of the railroad firms and its economically detrimental effects on the Erie Canal and the prosperity of New York State.

The railroad companies presented the canal with fierce competition as they offered several advantages over the canal in the transportation of goods, an ironic twist for the Erie Canal as railroads were first constructed in the state as a means to supplement the waterway. In addition to the previously mentioned superiorities of speed and accessibility, as well as its tendency to purchase and consolidate rival firms, arguments presented by railroad advocates over canals regarded the former’s ability to “be used at least eleven months out of the year, whereas canals in northern climates could not be used more than eight months.”⁴⁹ Evident by its nearly 6,000 miles of track present in 1882, railways could be constructed in nearly any environment, free from the restrictions of elevation or water supply, as well as assembled with much lesser time, lesser cost, and with greater ease.⁵⁰ Primarily focusing on the cost element, railway advocates cited

⁴⁸ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 184.

⁴⁹ Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Towpaths; the Story of the American Canal Era*, p 82.

⁵⁰ Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Towpaths; the Story of the American Canal Era*, p 83.

Sylvanus H. Sweet's "Documentary Sketch of the New York State Canals," which provides an average construction cost of \$17,367 per mile for all New York canals and an even higher cost of \$19,255 per mile for the Erie Canal alone.⁵¹ Sweet subsequently compared these costs to those of railroads, arguing that railroads never cost over \$15,000 per mile, while branch lines could cost "as little as \$600."⁵² However, one must be cautious of the wording used for the latter amount of \$600 as it cleverly used one specific instance, allowing railroads to appear more cost effective.⁵³ As it related to customer satisfaction, it was understandable why and how railways dominated the transportation market as, without government-funded enlargements, the canals were at best in their prime condition and performance with little room for improvement of services, while the various railroad firms held the near limitless potential to consolidate each other, expand their branch lines, and set rates however they pleased. Railways were free to punch and jab at their watery competition, while canals were constrained by the bonds of politics and government bureaucracy and could not fight back. Still, the railroads arguably held tremendous advantages over canals when solely using a cost-benefit, consequently leading canal protagonists to approach and argue the importance of a modernized canal with an angle of public benevolence and intrinsic need.

Golden Age Gone:

The Enlarged Erie Canal reached its peak of 6.7 million tons of freight in 1872, but witnessed toll revenues decrease steadily from 1868 onwards, seeing its first red year

⁵¹ Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Towpaths; the Story of the American Canal Era*, p 83.

⁵² Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Towpaths; the Story of the American Canal Era*, p 83.

⁵³ John D. Kernan, "The Function of New York's Barge Canals in Controlling Freight Rates," in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, p 138.

in 1877. Although still experiencing occasional profitable years, deferred maintenance resulted in serious deterioration of the canal's infrastructure. Such neglect could often lead to breaches in the banks of the canal, causing destruction to neighboring lands, disrupting trade and travel, and consequently forcing many to find other means of transportation, oftentimes permanently.⁵⁴ One common explanation for the increasing degradation of the canal was the combination of factors involving mismanagement and lack of canal and state treasury funds, leading to decreased upkeep ability of the engineers, and ultimately reduced use by commercial interests.⁵⁵ The railways' increasing share of tonnage and revenue as compared to the canal can be indicated as both a cause and an effect of this diminishing quality of the Erie Canal system. This unfortunate negative feedback loop for the aging waterway resulted from the derivation of maintenance costs from toll revenues, as railroads took an increasing share of commerce, decreasing canal toll revenues, which reduced upkeep funds and subsequently the quality of the waterway. With a decaying and increasingly unreliable canal, commerce gradually gravitated toward the more reliable railroads, intensifying the decline of the aquatic highway.

As early as 1850, state officials, specifically the canal auditor, called attention to the fact that the tolls on passengers and on packet boats were rapidly diminishing under the competition of the railways, evoking the concern of legislators.⁵⁶ Yet, inexplicably, as Whitford expresses, "the same Assembly canal committee reported favorably on petitions to remove tolls on property carried by the railroads, recommending the repeal of the law

⁵⁴ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 157.

⁵⁵ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 246

⁵⁶ *Report of the Select Committee of the Legislature of 1849, on the Publication of the Natural History of the State of New-York, No 131* (Albany: The Legislature, 1850), p 189.

requiring tolls on freight.”⁵⁷ It was in this era of over exuberance and rapidly increasing wealth that legislators convinced themselves that the tolls on railroad freight was no longer in the best economic and social interests of the people, declaring railroads “the people’s own highway.”⁵⁸ Ultimately culminating in the abolition of railroad tolls in 1851, railroad regulations had been gradually reduced in the years prior, causing the important sources of revenue to be drawn away from the canals.⁵⁹ In hindsight, those politicians could not see how the chant of “free commerce” regarding the lifting of tolls on railroads subsequently allowed a transportation monopoly to form that sought to limit commercial freedom. However, as Whitford remarked, “The exhibition of the power of railways and of capital, even at that early period, is a striking one.”⁶⁰

This sentiment appeared to be widely held across New York State, particularly following the attempted purchase and dissolution of the canal system by the railroads, with large pro-canal conventions held in Rochester and Utica in 1859.⁶¹ Attended by numerous influential figures from across the state, they declared their purpose of “rescuing the canals... by exposing and resisting the Railroad Conspiracy.”⁶² It would be difficult to dismiss the people’s fear of the “railroad menace” and its apparent financial grip on the state’s legislature when learning of the 1858 petition and referendum, “abolishing the executive and legislative departments of the government, and vesting their powers in the president, vice-president, and directors of the New York Central Railroad Company.”⁶³ Thankfully yet shockingly, the referendum was only defeated by a

⁵⁷ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 191.

⁵⁸ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 195.

⁵⁹ Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Towpaths; the Story of the American Canal Era*, p 154.

⁶⁰ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 221.

⁶¹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 184.

⁶² Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 184.

⁶³ Charles Z Lincoln, *The Constitutional History of New York from the Beginning of the*

margin of 6,360 votes.⁶⁴ Newspaper editors lampooned the railroads as well, declaring that if the canals were sold, “they would be used as a mighty instrument for the political and pecuniary oppression of the people.”⁶⁵ Nevertheless, the railroads continued to meddle in the politics, economy, and canal affairs of New York State, but chose the more inconspicuous tool of rate discrimination as its primary method of influence.

As the century progressed into its fourth quarter, railways remained strong, reducing trade to one option of transportation through rate discrimination, specifically the “cutting summer and raising winter rates to a point which has more than once driven the boatmen - partners of the State - from the canals.”⁶⁶ The economic potential of the canals appeared to be plateauing, while the railroads were still ascending. For many citizens and politicians, the eureka moment came in 1877 with the unsettling realization of that year’s increasing annual losses in canal tonnages and revenues, revealing the detrimental effect of the railroad’s competition.

Saddling the Iron Horse:

Weary of oppressive railway tolls, fearful of commercial usurpation by other states, and desirous of a transportation route that was truly for the public good, political and popular sentiment developed a new viewpoint on the role of the Erie Canal in the growing, industrial economy. In the midst of a great reckoning concerning the future utility of the aged aqueduct, a growing dissatisfaction grew across the United States concerning the need to regulate railroads as they continued to manipulate their rates. As

Colonial Period to the Year 1905: Showing the Origin, Development, and Judicial Construction of the Constitution, Vol. II, (Rochester, N.Y.: Lawyers Co-operative Pub., 1906), p 233-234.

⁶⁴ Charles Z Lincoln, *The Constitutional History of New York*, p 234.

⁶⁵ Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Towpaths; the Story of the American Canal Era*, p 155.

⁶⁶ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 196.

laws regulating railroad rates were uncommon in this period, the Erie Canal, and major waterways in general, became the only means of regulation until the creation of the Interstate Commerce Commission in 1887. Championing the plight of the common man against the supposed robber barons of the railroad industry, the Erie Canal appealed to the need to counter the former's monopolistic tendencies. Although not usually acknowledged as such, the portrayal of canals as a means to lessen the burden on a certain sector of the populace at the expense of businesses and taxpayers presents an early example of populism.

As populism was often viewed as a chiefly Great Plains movement against railroads, its roots were naturally found in the earlier challenges of railways spearheaded by a politician from Minnesota. Headed by and named for United States Senator William Windom, the Windom Report held that "Erie Canal rates exerted an influence over all other rates from the Gulf states to the St. Lawrence River and from the Atlantic Ocean to the foot-hills of the Rockies."⁶⁷ Extolling the "competitive influences exerted by the Erie Canal," Windom continued in his speech, and subsequent report, before Congress to cite Albert Fink, Railway Trunk Line Pool Commissioner.⁶⁸ A seemingly audacious statement, Fink claimed that "whenever rates from Chicago to New York were reduced by reason of the opening of the Erie Canal season there followed a reduction from all interior cities," and through the commercial dominance of these cities, rates would be reduced across the country.⁶⁹ Although Noble Whitford found these claims somewhat overstated, he applauded Windom and others who identified and attempted to curb the

⁶⁷ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 452.

⁶⁸ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 452.

⁶⁹ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, (Albany: J.B. Lyon, Printers, 1922), p 20.

injurious rates imposed by the railways:⁷⁰ “the natural laws of rivalry and trade adjust and correct evils in the market, but, as the railway is artificial, so must the restraining power that adjusts the relations . . . be artificial also.”⁷¹

Nonetheless, the railroads continued their notorious practice of lowering rates during the canal season to levels that were often not profitable, and dramatically hiking rates during winter months when the canal was inoperable, subsequently recovering their losses and garnering tremendous profit.⁷² Those reliant on the transportation of their goods by railway and their mindful consumers scorned such deception, having witnessed prices rise in those respective seasons, creating volatile price fluctuations. As agriculture was the principal occupation of many upstate New Yorkers, farmers were frequently cited as among those most severely hampered by the “gouging” railroad rates.⁷³ Canals were heralded as the only means to ensure protection against such discriminatory rates, as historian John McMaster notes how “a farmer cannot own railroad wagons. But for a hundred dollars he can buy a boat and transport the goods himself.”⁷⁴ This core argument of regulating rail rates for the sake of fair competition and the common good of local citizens served the interests of canal proponents.

⁷⁰ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 20.

⁷¹ *Documents of the Assembly of the State of New York, No 38, January 22, 1880* (Albany, New York: New York (State). Legislature. Assembly, 1880), p 675.

⁷² John A. Place, *Annual Report of the Auditor of the Canal Department on the Tolls, Trade and Tonnage of the Canals of the State of New York For the Year 1880* (Albany, New York: Weed, Parsons and Company, Printers, 1881), p 13.

⁷³ Horatio Seymour Jr., *Annual Report of the State Engineer and Surveyor on the Railroads of the State of New York for the Year 1880* (Albany, New York: Weed, Parsons and Company, Printers, 1881), p 4.

⁷⁴ Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Towpaths; the Story of the American Canal Era*, p 83.

Free and Open Waterways:

Finding the solution to both declining canal commerce and the railroad's discriminatory freight rates, ex-Governor Horatio Seymour determined the abolition of canal tolls as the paramount approach. Dated February 27, 1882, the statesman expressed this remedy in a letter to his friend Honorable Jeremiah W. Higgins, Chairman of the Assembly Committee on Canals, as they were deliberating the abolition of canal tolls. First expressing his experience and unbiased nature, Seymour noted that he had observed and investigated the internal commerce of both railroads and waterways, and determined "that the interests of the State demand a liberal policy with regard to both of these promoters of its wealth and prosperity."⁷⁵ Noting the apparent hypocrisy in their policy, he questioned, "Shall the State be as wise and liberal towards its own canal and boatmen as it has been towards the railroad corporations?"⁷⁶ Seeking to balance the hypocrisy charge, Seymour offered a lighthearted analogy to convey to lawmakers their flaw in logic, and was a passage that contained so much wit and wisdom that it would be shame to paraphrase:

All would deride the folly of a city government which should impose a tax upon those who used their streets as thoroughfares or marts of commerce upon the ground that these avenues were expensive to maintain. Is there any more wisdom in the government of a State which imposes tolls or taxes upon those who use its avenues for the purpose of bringing to it articles needed to promote its commerce and its industries? While other sections are trying to divert traffic from our cities by making cheaper routes, is it wise for us to drive it away by taxation?⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Gustav H. Schwab, "New York City's Part in the Reconstruction of the State's Waterways" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909), p 59.

⁷⁶ Gustav H. Schwab, "New York City's Part in the Reconstruction of the State's Waterways" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 59.

⁷⁷ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 196.

Wishing to improve the economic health of New York's citizens and commerce, he professed that "tolls are taxes of the most hurtful kind to the whole community... they fall oppressively upon labor, industry, and commerce."⁷⁸ Calling for the cessation of canal tolls, the ex-governor rationalized that, "despite what many may think," this action was not just to relieve the burdens of the canal and its users, "but to lighten taxation in every part of the State."⁷⁹ Reinforcing the importance of canals as a guard against the increasingly insidious railroads, he declared that "while our canals are maintained and their traffic is untaxed, the State will always be protected from the evils of combinations or unjust discriminations."⁸⁰ Taking the protective role of the canals another progressive step further, the ex-governor asserted, "If they [canals] do not carry a pound of freight, it would be wise to keep them in order, so that they would be ready for use to defeat unjust and hurtful charges against the business of New York."⁸¹ As others followed his respected example, Seymour's letter marked the evolution in public sentiment in regard to "the fiscal canal policy of the State," as commercial bodies and public citizens generally took a "broader and more statesmanlike view of the function of the canal system" and no longer considered that it must be a direct paying investment.⁸²

Defeating Differential Rates and Internal Dissent:

The framing of the Erie Canal as an essential balance against the domination of the railroad firms and the slowly rising progressivism of the era coalesced to create the

⁷⁸ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 195.

⁷⁹ Gustav H. Schwab, "New York City's Part in the Reconstruction of the State's Waterways" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 59.

⁸⁰ Gustav H. Schwab, "New York City's Part in the Reconstruction of the State's Waterways" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 59.

⁸¹ Gustav H. Schwab, "New York City's Part in the Reconstruction of the State's Waterways" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 59.

⁸² Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, pp 181-2.

concept of free and natural waterways for the promotion of the general welfare. Following the abolition of railroad tolls in 1851, politicians, merchants, farmers, economists, railroad tycoons, and common citizens alike witnessed the correlating decline in the tonnage travelling upon the canals and rise in railroad tonnage. Strongly urging the State Legislature in his 1862 annual address, Governor Edwin D. Morgan testified that “the railroads have seriously diverted business from the canal,” citing statistics exhibiting the decline in canal traffic since the abolition of railroad tolls in 1851.⁸³ In the ensuing years, many more would question why tolls on railway cargoes had been abolished while canal tolls remained, an argument that became more firmly entrenched as the canals increasingly became publicly funded due to declining revenues.⁸⁴ After all, the canal was a state-sponsored infrastructure that directly or indirectly contributed to the livelihood of the majority of New York State’s population.

The New York Legislature acknowledged this inconsistency in policy, with Governor Samuel Tilden endorsing this notion in his 1875 Governor’s Message, holding that “canals should not be considered solely as revenue producers, but rather should be managed for the needs of the commerce of the whole people.”⁸⁵ The *Albany Argus* emphatically supported Tilden’s assertion, remarking on the bipartisan support to “act favorably on the recommendations” so that “businesses will be promoted, the honest contractor benefitted, and reform organized.”⁸⁶ With justification found in the state’s constitution, as highlighted by Horatio Seymour Jr.’s 1881 *Report of the State Engineer*

⁸³ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 185.

⁸⁴ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 185.

⁸⁵ Charles Z Lincoln, *The Constitutional History of New York*, p 737.

⁸⁶ "Canal Reforml," *Albany Argus*, March 20, 1875.

and Surveyor, there were grounds for such legislation. In this report, Seymour presents the same query as those previously mentioned, stating:

The railroads have gained large sums since the abolition of tolls on their business, and these sums have been lost to the boatmen and to the State. From 1852 up to 1880 the tolls on the freight carried by the New York Central and Erie railroads would amount to over one hundred and fifty millions of dollars. This has benefited the stockholders at the expense of the boatmen, forwarders, etc. Why should not the tolls be taken off the boatmen as well as the stockholders? What opposition should there be to this? ... The canals could be run cheaper if free.⁸⁷

Confirmed by legislation enacted by the New York Legislature in 1882, the abolition of canal tolls established that trade conducted on the waterway would no longer be subject to taxation. Despite a slight increase in tonnage the following year and a complete lack of defensible data, Silas Seymour's 1884 *Report of the State Engineer and Surveyor* emphatically stated that the abolition of canal tolls was an abysmal failure, declaring that "it must be regarded as foregone and inevitable conclusion that, that the CANALS MUST GO."⁸⁸ Though Whitford dismissed Seymour's "unqualified opinion," it would seem confusing to a sound-minded person that the official responsible for the operation of a major infrastructural work, in this case the Erie Canal, would call for the termination of his own position.⁸⁹ Perhaps, based upon his ardent defense of railroads, Silas Seymour had ulterior motives as he called for the reinstating of tolls or the sale and management of the canals to private enterprises.⁹⁰ Regardless, the clear difference in opinion between the two state engineers exemplified the divisions between canal and railroad advocates in this era.

⁸⁷ Horatio Seymour Jr., *Annual Report of the State Engineer and Surveyor on the Railroads of the State of New York for the Year 1880*, p 23.

⁸⁸ Silas Seymour, *Annual Report of the State Engineer and Surveyor of the State of New York for the Year Ending in 1883* (Albany, New York: New York State, 1884), p 33.

⁸⁹ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 21.

⁹⁰ Silas Seymour, *Annual Report of the State Engineer and Surveyor of the State of New York for the Year Ending in 1883* (Albany, New York: New York State, 1884), p 33.

Underlying all of these arguments existed the ultimate determinant of public and political opinion regarding the debate to modernize or scuttle the Erie Canal: the desire to renew and retain New York City's, and indirectly New York State's, commercial supremacy as the dominant port on the eastern seaboard. Economists and politicians alike soon saw the correlation between the decreasing tonnage of the Erie Canal and the rapidly diminishing trade gap between New York City and other major port cities. Fear of losing the commercial crown resulted in the formation of several commerce and public interest groups, one of which was the New York Produce Exchange. Composing a manifesto in 1884, the group complained to the New York State Legislature concerning "the export trade of the port of New York, chiefly in food products, has declined relatively to that of its rival ports, and if this decline in our export trade is suffered to continue a similar decline in our import trade is sure to follow."⁹¹ The simple truth is that with the deteriorating tonnage and condition of the Erie Canal relative to railroad transportation, New York City no longer held any distinct advantage over rival ports, such as Philadelphia and Baltimore. In fact, the two aforementioned cities held an advantage over New York City in rail rates as "Philadelphia received rates two cents a hundred pounds under New York, and Baltimore three cents under New York."⁹² When comparing rail mileage between the three cities and a common starting point (often Cleveland, Ohio), the difference in rates was understandable. The approximate rail mileage between Cleveland and the cities of New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore are 629, 451, and 375 miles, respectively. This would help to explain why New York was

⁹¹ John D. Kernan, "The Function of New York's Barge Canals in Controlling Freight Rates," in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 89.

⁹² Francis Paton Kimball, *New York--the Canal State*, p 35.

charged the highest rail rate and Baltimore the lowest. Here, one has clear numerical evidence to contradict any theory stating that New York City's commercial dominance necessitated a reliance on railroad.

Staying the Course:

Thus, it became abundantly clear that New York City and New York State must take advantage of its geography, a natural break in the Appalachian Mountains that no other state held. Buffalo politician Senator Benjamin Williams, along with most New Yorkers realized choice they had to make between the railroads and canals, voicing, "We cannot rely upon our railroads for the preservation of our trade. Our advantage over our sister states consists in the possession of a route which makes a waterway possible from West to the seaboard."⁹³ Although the statement would come years later in 1898, a considerable number of New Yorkers agreed with the Interstate Commerce Commission that "the canal has been a most important element in her (New York's) commercial supremacy; if that element drops out, she must expect to lose that part of her supremacy that was due to it."⁹⁴

As the latter half of the nineteenth century progressed, both New Yorkers and Americans found themselves facing a rapidly evolving world as industry was on the rise and new technological improvements outpaced the ability of infrastructure to accommodate change. The slower moving, smaller capacity canal boats were quickly becoming obsolete in a new economic environment that demanded greater size and speed of trade. Remarking on the sensations described in the New York *Daily Advertiser* as early as 1827, Alvin Harlow characterizes the "principal factor in the downfall of canals"

⁹³ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 194.

⁹⁴ Francis Paton Kimball, *New York--the Canal State*, p 35.

as “speed mania,” as railroad passengers were amazed by a decrease in travel time by only a few minutes.⁹⁵ This abrupt and unceasing advancement certainly characterized much of the latter half of the nineteenth century, mesmerizing the populace and inspiring their imaginations to reach loftier heights in scientific and industrial achievement. Concurrently, such rapid technological growth evoked longing for a simpler, slower-paced existence, one that was exemplified in the earlier images of the Erie Canal. Interestingly, these two ideals of industrial progressivism and nostalgic revival united in the drive to modernize a dilapidated and outdated waterway into an exemplary instance of contemporary commercial trade, ultimately materializing as the New York State Barge Canal. Yet, although the minds of many New York State residents were solidified in the decision to improve and not abandon their historical lifeblood, the extent to which the Erie Canal was to be renovated and enlarged remained a serious matter of debate. With many opting for the bare minimum in terms of cost and dimensions, the infamous Nine-Million Dollar Act received hasty approval from the New York State Legislature, much to the dismay of canal advocates, nearly proving to be a fatal blow to any future canal endeavors.

⁹⁵ Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Towpaths; the Story of the American Canal Era*, p 78.

Chapter II

From Disastrous Debacle to Decisive Discussion: Examining the Dilemmas and Debate Surrounding the Fate of the Enlarged Erie Canal from 1895-1898

Finding its true baptism through fire rather than water, the campaign to further improve and enlarge the Erie Canal to modern standards was marred by the ruinous results of the Nine-Million Dollar Act of 1895. Fashioned through haste and marked by waste, the act was the result of ill-prepared and outdated cost estimates, which were no fault of the state engineers, but rather the impetuous politicians. Regardless of blame, the legislation came to be known as the “Nine-Million Dollar Debacle,” and reignited intense political, public, and press scrutiny of any future canal projects. Any subsequent proposals regarding the expansion of the canal faced an even steeper uphill battle than before, yet proponents were reinvigorated by that battle to continue against the current.

Commencement of Contemporary Canal Considerations:

Endorsed and approved by an amendment of the Constitutional Convention of 1894 and passed by the State Legislature in 1895, both of which were approved by the popular vote of New York State citizens, the act called for \$9,000,000 to be expended to deepen the canals to from seven to nine feet. State engineers, superintendents of public works, and businessmen alike deemed the increase in depth essential to the future commercial success of New York State. Speaking on the competition from railroads, State Superintendent of Public Works, Edward Hannan, rhetorically asked himself, “How can the canal, seven feet in depth, continue to attract commerce from rival routes? It cannot be done.”¹ Solidifying the importance of waterway improvements, Superintendent

¹ Edward Hannan, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Works on the Canals of the State for the Year Ending September 30, 1894* (Albany: Wynkoop Hallenbeck

Aldridge remarked that canal depths should be enlarged as to enable a significant speed increase for boats, as well as greater carrying capacity.² With these changes, canal boatmen could have had the potential to halve their transportation time, effectively doubling their profits, and arguably making them more competitive in relation to the railroads and other transportation routes.³ This relationship between depth and shipping speed, along with the greater desire for a modernized waterway that would be more sustainable and maintainable over the long term, were the principal arguments presented by experts to State Legislature at the time of the enactment of the Nine-Million Dollar Act. Curiously, state legislators did not seem to contemplate the earnest suggestions of the engineers and superintendents on the need for a twelve-foot depth and greater fund allocation, however canal advocates across the state were still elated at their apparent victory.

Founded in 1885 at the behest of influential state politicians, notably former-governor Horatio Seymour and George Clinton, the Canal Improvement Union faced severe challenges as “the waterways had come to be generally regarded as of little consequence and as having a rapidly diminishing influence upon transportation.”⁴ With “comparative few friends and many open enemies,” the organization gained momentum through conventions, town meetings, and speeches, attracting the attention of the public’s hearts and minds.⁵ Through persistence and effective agitation, the Canal Improvement

Crawford, 1895), p 28.

² George W. Aldridge, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Works on the Canals of the State for the Year Ending September 30, 1895* (Albany: Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford, 1896), p 10.

³ George W. Aldridge, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Works on the Canals of the State for 1895*, p 10.

⁴ Frank S. Gardner, “The Canal Improvement Union” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909), p 2.

⁵ Frank S. Gardner, “The Canal Improvement Union” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank

Union stood as the standard-bearer of the canal campaign, procuring the support of various other mercantile groups, such as the Chamber of Commerce, Produce Exchange, Board of Trade and Transportation, and Merchants' Exchange of Buffalo.⁶ In spite of the efforts of a railroad-organized bureau, "from which millions of printed anti-canal documents flowed in unceasing streams to all parts of the State," the canal group claimed a decisive victory with the 1895 passage of the Nine-Million Dollar Act.⁷ Convinced of the success of their cause, the canal's greatest promoter, the Canal Improvement Union, "had been allowed to go out of existence."⁸ This proved to a grave mistake as the project quickly developed into a political and financial fiasco following the complete depletion of funds and cessation of construction, all the while fighting a losing and everlasting battle against the natural elements of weathering and erosion. The time surrounding the unveiling of the Nine-Million Dollar "Fiasco" saw "the real friends of the canal system of the State become discouraged at the apathy of the public and appalled by the efforts of the anti-canal interests."⁹

Interests Align in Canal Contemplation:

Certainly, the most contentious issue of the canal improvement was not necessarily how or why the Erie Canal should be enlarged, but, in reality, how much money should be allocated. There exists to this day no sound, accurate, unbiased explanation for why only \$9,000,000 was allocated for the further enlargement of the

H. Severance, p 2.

⁶ "The Canal Union. Prospect Of A Large Conference. The Meeting At Rochester," *New York Tribune*, July 11, 1887.

⁷ Frank S. Gardner, "The Canal Improvement Union" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 3.

⁸ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State* (Albany: J.B. Lyon, Printers, 1922), p 42.

⁹ George H. Raymond, "New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909), p 157.

Erie Canal, an appropriation which was roughly equal to the construction cost of the original waterway seventy-five years earlier. Perhaps the numerically alliterative statement of “nine million dollars for a nine-foot depth” easily rolled off the tongue and politicians felt voters would find the political jingle amusing and memorable. Or perhaps, the legislators crafting the bill took a more educated approach to determining the \$9,000,000 allocation by multiplying the annual maintenance cost of \$1,500,000 dollars by six years, as the New York State Legislature delineated that construction must be completed by 1901 at the latest and further discussion would be had at that point.¹⁰ In his *Annual Report for 1898*, Superintendent Aldridge noted that “all the facts seem to warrant the conclusion that the sum of \$9,000,000 was inserted in the bill at the instigation of the various commercial bodies of the State as a sum more likely to be acceptable to the taxpayers than the larger sum indicated.”¹¹ Whitford simply stated that “the sum was arbitrarily fixed by the Legislature and without consultation with the State Engineer,” and theorized that \$9,000,000 was “probably it was believed [by politicians] to be all the people would be willing to authorize at the time.”¹² Nevertheless, the appropriation proved to be far too little.

This apparent minimalist approach to the appropriation of construction funds may confuse some today, just as it had confused many at the time, but the atmosphere of the 1894 Constitutional Convention was not overly friendly to canal interests. There was no doubt among the various factions at the convention that the canal issue had to be

¹⁰ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 25.

¹¹ George W. Aldridge, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Works on the Canals of the State for the Year Ending September 30, 1898* (Albany: Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford, 1899, p 21.

¹² Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 25.

addressed as “the system was retrograding rather than being advanced, and it would only require a short time to complete the abandonment.”¹³ Canal adversaries focused on the monetary aspects to dissuade improvement, proposing amendments for the taxation of property along the canal, and another for the sale or lease of canal land.¹⁴ The latter proposal was immediately dismissed due to the longstanding state constitutional precedent forbidding any sale or lease of canal lands. Additionally, the proposal was quickly recognized and dismissed as a clear ploy of the railroad firms, whose massive capital accumulation would allow for the purchase of substantial amounts of canal lands, allowing for its abandonment.¹⁵ The former was also dismissed as it was seen as an unfair burden on those who directly benefitted from the canal, when in reality, the majority of New York’s citizens benefitted indirectly from the waterway, as canal advocates claimed. Overall, people were not overly upset with the canal funding plan of “an annual tax of thirteen-hundredths of a mill upon all taxable property,” as most at the time had become aware of and accepted the need for improved canals.¹⁶ This supportive sentiment, along with some political jabs, was expressed in the *New York Tribune*’s 1895 article, explaining that “the people understand that the increase of State taxes is due to growth of the State and the necessary expense of maintaining its canals,” as well as “the Republican Legislature paying the debts of its Democratic predecessors.”¹⁷ The article concluded by declaring that both the citizens and legislature knew “it is essential that the Erie Canal

¹³ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, Vol. 12 (Buffalo, New York: Buffalo Historical Society, 1908), p 226.

¹⁴ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 222.

¹⁵ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 373.

¹⁶ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York* (Albany: J.B. Lyon Co., printers, 1906), p 356.

¹⁷ "In The Western Counties Feeling Of The Voters On The Pending State Issues." *New York Tribune* 5 Aug. 1895.

should be enlarged if we are to hold that trade [dominance]...” as “that is the great political question of the year with us.”¹⁸

The sale of the canal to the Federal government was a particularly divisive consideration as many felt the Federal government should rightfully cover three quarters of the annual maintenance costs due to the benefit it provided to so many other states.¹⁹ However, the notion of transferring ownership of the historical, cultural, and economical lifeline of the New York State to the Federal government evoked reminiscences of the latter’s initial rejections of assistance in 1810 and 1817, eliciting the steadfast attitude that captivated New Yorkers to undertake the canal project originally.²⁰ Most newspapers either ignored or opposed the measure, with the exception of the *New York Times*, which argued in favor of the canal’s transfer to the Federal government.²¹ Standing in “conspicuous opposition up to the eve of the vote,” the *Times* suddenly redirected its opinion to its historic stance of supporting the canal appropriation, along with the rest of New York City’s populace, who seemingly awoke “almost in a night to the importance of the project.”²² With the successful passage of the bill, the effort fell flat, with Whitford simply deriding this approach as a method aimed to divert public attention from the main consideration of cost and pandering to the selfish emotions of some New Yorkers, an exceptionally deplorable tactic as even some canal adversaries did not wish to see the

¹⁸ "In The Western Counties Feeling Of The Voters On The Pending State Issues." *New York Tribune* 5 Aug. 1895.

¹⁹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 222.

²⁰ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 211.

²¹ M. M. Wilner, “The New York State Press in the Campaign for Enlargement of the Canals” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909), p 188.

²² M. M. Wilner, “The New York State Press in the Campaign for Enlargement of the Canals” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 188.

transfer of the canal to Federal authority.²³ Such amendments failed as the canal advocates “in various parts of the State who had entertained diverse opinions” on the course of the waterway’s improvement, such as the dimensions, appropriation amount, and funding method, “harmonized their views and agreed upon a common course of action.”²⁴ With the canal advocates holding the hearts and minds of New York’s politicians and citizens toward the necessity of improving the canals, the canal opponents may have resigned themselves to a new, subsequently more successful strategy of underfunding the project.

Although this cannot be authenticated as such supposed conversations likely occurred in private, the railroad firms notoriously meddled in the affairs and debates on canal improvements and sought to defeat the canal advocates with their own proposal. This hypothesis of the railroads’ deceptive commercial competition in order to further subjugate and hopefully defeat the canal movement was reinforced by Superintendent of Public Works, George W. Aldridge, in his *Annual Report of 1896*. Firstly admitting that no concrete conclusions can be drawn, “only surmised,” Aldridge points out that for no readily apparent reason, railroad rates on wheat transportation between Buffalo and New York City suddenly dropped fifty percent during the 1895 canal season.²⁵ Such “would seem to indicate an ulterior motive,” as there had been “no special increase in the carrying capacity of these [rail]roads, nor any material or abnormal increase in their equipment.”²⁶ Noting the coincidental timing of this rate reduction with the then-

²³ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 383.

²⁴ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 227.

²⁵ George W. Aldridge, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Works on the Canals of the State for 1895*, p 11.

²⁶ George W. Aldridge, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Works on the Canals of the State for 1895*, p 11.

upcoming popular vote on the enactment of the Nine-Million Dollar Plan in November, “one cannot fail to find suspicion in the actions of the railroads.”²⁷ Not mincing his words, Aldridge contended that since the railroad corporations were “not in any sense benevolent institutions,” it must have dawned on them that if “the canals could, before the vote in November, be discredited by an overwhelming reduction in its trade and tonnage that the people would negative the proposed appropriation,” effectively ending the canal era.²⁸ If successful, the railroads could have relegated the canals to a state of disrepair and eventual abandonment, eliminating their longtime trade competitor. Regardless of likely factional interference, the canal adversaries were certainly delighted in witnessing the Nine-Million Dollar Plan commence only to witness it fall fatally short of its commission.

Half Measure:

While debating the improvement, the leaders of the Constitutional Convention gave the State Engineer, Campbell Adams, a mere twelve days to present an estimate of the costs. Basing his figures on a severely outdated survey from 1876, since the state government’s frequent refusal to allot funds for a new survey, Adams estimated the cost at approximately \$12,000,000 with all conditions favorable.²⁹ Still, Adams’s estimate was ignored, and the enlargement bill was introduced on January 9, 1895 by Assemblyman Clarkson calling for an expenditure of \$9,000,000.³⁰ Facing relatively minimal opposition, the Nine-Million Dollar Act passed the Assembly on January 19th and Senate

²⁷ George W. Aldridge, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Works on the Canals of the State for 1895*, p 11.

²⁸ George W. Aldridge, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Works on the Canals of the State for 1895*, p 12.

²⁹ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 25.

³⁰ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 355.

on February 21st, signed by the governor on March 9th, and approved by popular referendum in November.³¹ Upon commencement of the Nine-Million Dollar Plan, engineers conducted new surveys and construction estimates immediately soared to upwards of \$16,000,000. Despite the estimated cost standing at nearly double the appropriated amount, construction commenced in 1895.³²

Hoping to make the most of the limited funds expended for their work, the state engineers and contractors began surveying, reconstructing, and deepening the Erie Canal to a depth of nine feet. Although foolhardy, the state engineers at first remained optimistic that “by cutting out certain pieces of work,” the project could be completed within the budget.³³ Yet, as early as 1897, the implausibility of the Nine-Million Dollar Plan became clear to the state engineers and contractors and subsequently to the press and public. Of the media outlets, the *Buffalo Express* was the first to break the story on December 6, 1897, detailing the little amount of work that had been completed and the relatively large amount of funds already spent.³⁴ The veracity of the newspaper’s hearsay claims was proven true with the formal suspension of improvement work months later.³⁵ The press and public were outraged at the apparently careless and inefficient spending of public funds, condemning either the State Engineer, the Superintendent of Public Works, or state politicians for the tremendous lack of foresight, depending on the relative position each held regarding the canal. By early 1898, the entirety of the \$9,000,000 had

³¹ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 355.

³² George W. Aldridge, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Works on the Canals of the State for 1895*, p 19.

³³ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 25.

³⁴ M. M. Wilner, “The New York State Press in the Campaign for Enlargement of the Canals” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 189.

³⁵ M. M. Wilner, “The New York State Press in the Campaign for Enlargement of the Canals” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 189.

been spent with less than two thirds of the total work completed. Governor Black addressed the New York State Legislature on this issue in an attempt to appropriate an additional \$7,000,000 to complete the work, but the legislature refused, maintaining that any further expending of public funds on the canal project required a popular referendum.³⁶ With popular support for the waterway improvement plummeting as “their [New York State citizens’] sense of disappointment at the results was keen and the blame fell heavily,” forcing construction to come to a halt by start of the 1898 canal season.³⁷

Failures Incites Fraud Fears:

With allegations of fraud and extravagance leveled against the canal project’s administration and prosecution by members of the political and media spheres, the State Legislature passed bills requiring a governor-appointed commission to investigate the supposed wrongdoings. Reminding the public of the earlier proceedings of the Tilden Investigation of 1875, the commission completed and released their report on July 30, 1898. Unfortunately, allegations and revelations of fraud were not uncommon to the history of the aquatic highway. The charge of corruption against the waterway’s administrators was apparently an inescapable accusation due to the immense size of the project, the prevalence of corruption in this era, the disreputable politically-appointed characters in its execution, and the intense, unceasing competition of the railroads. Money was often taken from the canal funds to be used for “sundry purposes and dissipated,” ironically often loaned to railroads.³⁸ An 1868 investigation revealed that “gross frauds had been for a long time perpetrated by various individuals and

³⁶ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 373.

³⁷ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 375.

³⁸ Francis Paton Kimball, *New York--the Canal State; the Story of America's Great Water Route from the Lakes to the Sea, Builder of East and West* (Albany, N.Y: Argus Press, 1937), p 30.

combinations of men against the State” amounting to “several millions of dollars.”³⁹ Appearing angry yet unsurprised, the *Albany Evening Journal* decried how “immense, long-continued and wide-reaching frauds were matters of general report and belief... which everyone was aware of the condition,” yet no action was taken.⁴⁰ Despite calls for reform, little was taken and the problem persisted, culminating in the aforementioned Tilden Investigation.

Relishing in his recent anti-corruption success against Boss Tweed, Governor Samuel Tilden sought to cleanse the canal operations of “insidious waste” that plagued its management. Following the formation of an investigative committee, 1876 saw “several canal officials were indicted, the canal auditor was suspended from office for unlawfully dealing in canal certificates, a member of the legislature was charged with bribery, and legal proceedings were urged against certain contractors.”⁴¹ Despite being clothed in the noble cause of anti-corruption and being both Democrats, politicking reared its ugly head as then-Speaker of the Assembly, Jeremiah McGuire, accused Tilden of conducting the inquiry solely in order to gain greater political prowess.⁴² As Whitford remarks, this instance of political hostility was common of all canal investigations as “the temporarily dominant party has been so persistently assailed for its management of canal affairs, that the truth in these attacks can scarcely be separated from the falsehood.”⁴³ It is interesting to note that this fraud investigation not only cast a shadow over future canal improvement

³⁹ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 270.

⁴⁰ “Annual Report of the Canal Appraisers,” *Albany Evening Journal*, January 31, 1868.

⁴¹ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 298.

⁴² Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 298.

⁴³ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 298.

measures in regards to dissuading public support, but also resulted in stricter canal finance laws.

When the Nine-Million Dollar Plan was first proposed and later required greater funding, these corruption-induced regulations proved a tremendous hindrance. Conscious of the negative impact the investigation would have upon the public sentiment, Tilden urged citizens to recognize the true faults, stating, “Unfortunately the abuses now practiced against our canals and their commerce are exciting strong prejudices against the great public works rather than against the wrong-doers and the wrong-doing which tend to destroy them.”⁴⁴ However, such financial and political indiscretions at the hands of the canal commissioners and contractors left deep scars in the psyche of New Yorkers, scars that would be frequently reopened and filled with the salt of impropriety. Much to the pleasure of canal adversaries, the “frenzy of enthusiasm for all forms of canal-building” that once existed among New York’s citizens had fluctuated throughout the years, reaching “the point of extreme disaffection for all canals” by the third quarter of nineteenth century.⁴⁵

The political bombshell of the Nine-Million Dollar “Fiasco” detonated with the release of this investigative report. Although later absolved of all wrongdoing, the report contained numerous criticisms of both the State Engineer State Engineer Campbell W. Adams and Superintendent of Public Works George W. Aldridge, accusing them of the previously mentioned shortcomings of the Nine-Million Dollar Plan. Pressured by severe media criticism, Governor Frank Black appointed a seven-person investigative

⁴⁴ Samuel Tilden, "Canal Reform: Special Message of the Governor" *Daily Albany Argus*, March 20, 1875.

⁴⁵ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 781.

commission to determine if any misconduct had occurred and, if so, whether legal proceedings should be pursued.⁴⁶ Chaired by George Clinton, an ardent canal advocate, the committee identified irregularities and technical violations, noting that only 36% of the work had been completed and a further \$15,000,000 would be needed to complete the improvement.⁴⁷ However, no evidence of fraudulent behavior was found.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, State Engineer Adams and Superintendent Aldridge faced censure from the commission, blaming Adams for the poor funding estimates and failure to properly predict construction difficulties and accusing Aldridge of extravagant and unnecessary expenditures.⁴⁹ Both canal officials fervently denied responsibility for the shortfalls, persistently citing the aforementioned hasty, twelve day accumulation of data, which cited an outdated survey as legislators had previously refused to allot funds for an updated survey. More so, when Adams presented his rough estimate of about \$13,000,000, the State Legislature “reduced the amount to an even nine million dollars... without consulting Mr. Adams.”⁵⁰ Instead of placing blame where it rightfully belonged as Adams had done, Superintendent Aldridge took a different approach to expressing his innocence by denying his involvement and authority in the project. First remarking that he was not yet in office when the Nine-Million Dollar Act was passed, Aldridge then clarifies that he had “no authority to employ engineers as such, or make up the plans or estimates for contract,” as “this duty is delegated to the State Engineer.”⁵¹ Still, Aldridge

⁴⁶ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 374.

⁴⁷ M. M. Wilner, “The New York State Press in the Campaign for Enlargement of the Canals” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 189.

⁴⁸ Mark J. Koziol, “Riding to the Rescue: How Theodore Roosevelt Saved the Erie Canal” (paper presented at the New York State Conference on History, Friday, June 8, 2001) p 20.

⁴⁹ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 375.

⁵⁰ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 355.

⁵¹ George W. Aldridge, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Works on the Canals of the State for 1898*, p 21.

did not betray the State Engineer as he repeatedly reinforced Adams's claims, even adding that he knew the project would flounder, but did not cease construction as doing so would violate pre-established contracts, possibly resulting in legal damages greater than the cost of the work.⁵² Ultimately the investigative committee concluded that "the new work was well done, that prices bid were reasonable and that the contracts were let to the lowest bidder," highlighting the value of the canals as the cheapest form of transportation and importance as a freight regulator, and urging the continuance of the enlargement regardless of cost.⁵³ Regardless of the canal authorities' absolution, the allegations of fraud and inadequacy of the Nine-Million Dollar Plan again stained the image of canal improvements in the public eye.

Fallout of the Fiasco:

Following this enormous debacle, opponents of the canals believed that the idea of enlarging, or even the continued maintenance, of the canal system had been defeated. Although the improvement campaign once declared by an 1887 *New York Tribune* article to be "the most powerful and influential aggregation of commercial and manufacturing interests in New York State,"⁵⁴ by 1898, "not a single man or organization could be found willing to again put forth any effort for the canals."⁵⁵ The controversy proved so great that Governor Black was denied his reelection bid by Republican party bosses, with Teddy Roosevelt being chosen in his place.⁵⁶ Despite their lack of wrongdoing, the

⁵² George W. Aldridge, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Works on the Canals of the State for 1898*, p 23.

⁵³ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 377.

⁵⁴ "The Canal Union. Prospect Of A Large Conference. The Meeting At Rochester." *New York Tribune*, July 11, 1887.

⁵⁵ Frank S. Gardner, "The Canal Improvement Union" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 3.

⁵⁶ Mark J. Koziol, "Riding to the Rescue: How Theodore Roosevelt Saved the Erie Canal," p 20.

subsequent absence of criminal charges brought against Adams or Aldridge “created a firestorm of protest” amongst the press and citizens, with Governor Roosevelt verbally assailed at public rallies, according to *The New York Journal*.⁵⁷ When a proposal for a convention to spur the rebirth of the Canal Improvement Union was met with “little active support or cooperation,” other canal advocacy organizations, notably the New York Board of Trade and New York Produce Exchange, raised the fallen banner of canal improvement, calling on Governor Teddy Roosevelt himself to give his endorsement.⁵⁸ It was in this atmosphere of bitterness that canal adversaries attempted to finally strike down the canal movement by again attempting to sell the waterway to the Federal government.

Proposed at the near apex of the anti-canal sentiments in January of 1898, the Pavey Resolution, named for State Senator Frank D. Pavey, called for an amending of the New York State Constitutional provision to allow “the sale, lease, or other disposition of the canals” to the Federal government. Despite the allegations of fraud, meetings were held in New York City and across the state, where “public sentiment found expression in speech and resolution, as it did through the press, in strong opposition to the Pavey Resolution.”⁵⁹ The Merchants’ Association of New York, a group “representing 160 different lines of trade and industry and several hundred business firms,” marched in firm resistance against the bill.⁶⁰ Days later, the Pavey Resolution was firmly squashed in the

⁵⁷ "No Canal Frauds, Says Roosevelt," *The New York Journal*, August 31, 1899.

⁵⁸ Frank S. Gardner, “The Canal Improvement Union” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 4.

⁵⁹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 238.

⁶⁰ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 238.

State Legislature, and was “interpreted as another effort to delay if not wholly defeat further canal improvement.”⁶¹

Ironically, the Pavey Resolution actually saved the canal movement as “the agitation over the Pavey Resolution,” along with the investigation into canal affairs, “led advocates to the conclusion that it would be safer and wiser not to press the \$7,000,000 referendum to a vote.”⁶² Finally finding themselves agreeing with the anti-canal groups, canal proponents determined that “the plan of enlargement was years behind the times,” and only proved to be “injurious to the cause of canal improvement.”⁶³ Canal advocates gave a retrospective sigh of relief as they realized “it was fortunate that so small a sum was appropriated and the work stopped where it was.”⁶⁴ They undoubtedly understood that the further enlargements that would be necessitated would have been difficult to procure. Instead of completing the patchwork efforts of the Nine-Million Dollar Plan, canal proponents pursued a grander, durable, more modern waterway, eventually taking form as the Barge Canal.

Thinking Deeper:

In the midst of New York’s intra-state combat over the fate of the canal system and the future of transportation, the Federal government was conducting its own research into the prospects of water transporting for trade and national defense purposes. Brought about by the increasingly influential Deep Waterways Association, the Deep Waterways Commission was established in 1895 for the serious discussion of a ship canal. With

⁶¹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 239.

⁶² Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 244.

⁶³ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 158.

⁶⁴ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 158.

members appointed by President Grover Cleveland, former mayor of the major pro-canal city of Buffalo and governor during the 1883 abolition of canal tolls, the commission set out to determine the most cost-effective route for a ship canal from the inland United States to its eastern seaboard. Releasing their findings on January 8, 1897, the commission determined that a ship canal with a twenty-eight foot depth would be feasible and economically viable. Notably, these results stood in stark contrast to Thomas Symons's report, under the direction of the War Department, presented later that year.

The commission strongly recommended the construction of a ship canal around Niagara Falls connecting Lake Erie to Lake Ontario, as well as the construction of two ship canals by canalizing the natural waterways present, subsequently abandoning the original canal routes.⁶⁵ One route entailed canalizing the waterways of the Oswego River and continuing east through Oneida Lake and the Mohawk River into the Hudson River. The other route involved the expansion of the Champlain Canal to allow ships to travel to New York City from the St. Lawrence River.⁶⁶ Regarding this latter route suggestion, the report did not provide ample justification to conclude that commercial traffic would be directed toward New York City rather than to Montreal. With the route proposed, outgoing ships from the Great Lakes would sensibly continue to Montreal rather than redirect southward through the ship canal to the more expensive and distant port of New York City. Conversely, an incoming ship would logically access the Great Lakes through the St. Lawrence River and Montreal rather than New York City. Nonetheless, the proposal piqued public interest and most of its recommendations, except depth, would

⁶⁵ James Burrill Angell, *Report of the United States Deep Waterways Commission, Prepared Detroit, Michigan, December 18-22, 1896* (Washington: Govt. Print. Off, 1897), p 14.

⁶⁶ James Burrill Angell, *Report of the United States Deep Waterways Commission*, p 29.

later be incorporated into the later Barge Canal, but it contained a grievous suggestion, the omission of the western portion of the canal as “an undesirable project.”⁶⁷ The commission defended this latter decision by determining that “all important points... such as Rochester and Syracuse, can be better and more cheaply served directly from Lake Ontario or local canals.”⁶⁸ Although the argument provided financial reasoning, citizens of western New York greatly despised this report as it incidentally diminished their importance and worth, and the strong pro-canal populace gravitated toward the conclusions drawn by a different Federal agency.

With the tremendous degree of support and interest found across the country for grand infrastructural projects that invoked national pride, such as the aforementioned ship canal proposal, the Department of War found itself exploring the issue of water travel. Under the direction of the Secretary of War, the River and Harbor Act of 1896 called for the dredging of harbors and shipping routes along the natural waterways of the United States. As it related to New York State, the act performed the dual roles of improving shipping lanes and harbors, notably at Buffalo, Rochester, Oswego, and New York City, as to ensure the integrity of interstate commerce without interfering with New York’s sovereignty over its canal. The other critical role was to provide for greater national defense, a relevant concern at the time as the Venezuelan affair created precarious tensions between the United States and Great Britain, which held dominion over Canada.⁶⁹ The act included a provision to survey all the details pertaining to a possible “ship canal by the most practicable route, wholly within the United States,” between the

⁶⁷ James Burrill Angell, *Report of the United States Deep Waterways Commission*, p 15.

⁶⁸ James Burrill Angell, *Report of the United States Deep Waterways Commission*, p 15.

⁶⁹ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the canal system of the State of New York*, p 268.

Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean entirely.⁷⁰ Major, later Colonel, Thomas Symons, a close confidant of Teddy Roosevelt, was chosen to map the route and determine the most advantageous course.

Deliberating the Deepwater Route:

The idea of a ship canal that would “permit ships to proceed from foreign ports to the heart of the continent uninterrupted” enticed the imaginations of Americans in public meetings and the press “like a brilliant aurora borealis, shone brightly over the whole lake region.”⁷¹ Unabated by the glamour that the ship canal presented, Symons concluded in his report on June 23, 1897 that the construction of a ship canal was feasible, but would not be economically efficient. Instead, Symons proposed the construction of a barge canal with a twelve foot depth, barge capacity of 1,500 tons, and a cost of approximately \$50,000,000.⁷² Noting the allure of uninterrupted trans-oceanic transportation, this travel would require a new type of vessel that could navigate the lakes, canals, and oceans and such a vessel would have a cost of \$35 to \$50 per ton, while the comparable barges would only have a cost of \$10 to \$20 per ton.⁷³ Symons concluded his argument, “If a ship canal were built, the greater cheapness of barge canal transportation would prevent its use by large ships, and cause it to be used almost entirely by fleets of barges which

⁷⁰ Thomas W. Symons, “The United States Government and the New York State Canals” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909), p 126.

⁷¹ Thomas W. Symons, “The United States Government and the New York State Canals” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 122.

⁷² *Proposed Ship Canal Connecting the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean Hearings before the United States House Committee on Rivers and Harbors, Fifty-Fifth Congress, Second Session, on Apr. 1, 1898* (Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1898), p 40.

⁷³ Thomas W. Symons, “The United States Government and the New York State Canals” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 128.

could be almost equally as well accommodated in a smaller and cheaper canal.”⁷⁴ This report became the center of tremendous contention not only between pro and anti-canal advocates, but significantly amongst canal proponents, who were split on the course of further improvement.

Among the displeased canal proponents, S.A. Thompson of Duluth, Michigan, a prominent member of the Deep Waterways Association, argued against Symons’s conclusions before the House committee on rivers and harbors April 1, 1898. Later published by the governmental printing office in 1900 under the title *Proposed Ship Canal Connecting the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean*, Thompson expressed his belief in the necessity of a deep water ship canal. Primarily grounding much of his ship canal case on alleged errors in Symons’s report and by disagreeing on opinion-based statements, the report was arguably poorly assembled and argued. His first objection was to Symons’s statement that a twelve-foot depth would be preferable for canal travel, while Thompson argued that the deeper a waterway was, the greater the reduction in transportation cost.⁷⁵ This was true, but Thompson based his assessment on a depth change from seven to nine feet when he was arguing for a ship canal with a depth of twenty-six to thirty feet. Not only was this a poor comparison given the dramatic difference in the depths he was referring to, but Thompson did not realize that when a waterway reached a certain depth, depending on the overall dimensions of the canal prism, it experienced diminishing marginal returns on the ratio of depth to cost of transportation. For the proposed canal through New York State, this depth was reached at

⁷⁴ Thomas W. Symons, “The United States Government and the New York State Canals” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 129.

⁷⁵ *Proposed Ship Canal Connecting the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean*, p 9.

roughly twenty-one feet, decreasing with each additional foot.⁷⁶ Although his argument was accompanied by numerous tables and charts regarding depth and rate changes, Thompson apparently did not identify this fatal flaw in his argument.

Continuing with his disagreements with Symons, Thompson attacked the latter's dismissal of the military role that a ship would play in the defense of the United States against Great Britain and its Canadian dominion. Symons simply stated that war with Great Britain, and subsequently Canada, was unlikely, and if war did occur, the strongest battleships could not be spared on the Great Lakes and that the region's large merchant marine fleet could handle any issues.⁷⁷ Additionally, the St. Lawrence River, the only natural nautical entrance to the Great Lakes "lie along and near our border, and within easy reach" of American artillery. Consequently, a canal large enough to allow the passage of warships was not only unnecessary, but it constituted wasteful spending.⁷⁸ Thompson countered with the fact that Canada was building a canal through Ontario to connect Lake Huron to Lake Ontario, which could be used for military purposes and would be out of range of any American artillery. Again, Thompson framed a poor argument as the canal under construction could only be accessed by possible warships that had first passed through the St. Lawrence River, which would be thoroughly protected, according to Symons. Possibly realizing that his oppositional statements were doing more harm than good, Thompson conceded that war was unlikely and attempted to redirect "the controlling considerations which demand the construction of the canal are commercial rather than military."⁷⁹

⁷⁶ House Document No. 149, 56th Congress, 2^d Session, p 125.

⁷⁷ *Proposed Ship Canal Connecting the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean*, p 19.

⁷⁸ *Proposed Ship Canal Connecting the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean*, p 20.

⁷⁹ *Proposed Ship Canal Connecting the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean*, p 21.

With the new focus on the commercial advantages of a ship canal over a barge canal, Thompson presented two final points that he felt solidified the argument. Firstly, it was contended that shipbuilding would evolve so that one singular type of vessel would be able to traverse the oceans, lakes, and canals in an economically efficient manner. Of course, Symons vehemently rejected that such a craft could be constructed and operated at an effective cost, and even if it could, canal transporters would use barges due to the lower overall cost, citing the figures previously included. Thompson countered the barge's supposed lower cost of usage by referencing the rapidly compounding expenditures of transfer fees and the opportunity costs associated with the time lost during transfer.⁸⁰ Employing a data table in his report, to transport wheat from Chicago to Liverpool, England cost 5.72 cents per bushel at a distance of 4,340 miles, while transporting wheat from Buffalo to New York City cost 7.12 cents per bushel at a distance of 472 miles.⁸¹ According to these figures, it cost 1.4 cents more per bushel to travel 472 miles on the Erie Canal than it cost to travel ten times that distance without utilizing it, with transfer costs comprising 70% of the canal's cost. Granted, Thompson admitted that the construction of the barge canal would reduce transfer costs, especially with the improvement of terminal facilities in Buffalo and New York City, yet "what is needed is not a reduction of these transfer charges, but their destruction."⁸² With some strong points and several flawed ones, Thompson's proposal ultimately turned to a call on American nationalism, a call wholly illustrative of the sentiments of the era:

Would it not be well, therefore, both for our national interests and the progress of humanity in general, to open a pathway to the sea and give the ability in invention, the skill in construction, and the genius for organization, which have

⁸⁰ *Proposed Ship Canal Connecting the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean*, p 37.

⁸¹ *Proposed Ship Canal Connecting the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean*, p 39.

⁸² *Proposed Ship Canal Connecting the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean*, p 41.

wrought such results as these within the narrow limits of the lakes, a broader field in which to come to full fruition?⁸³

Yet the most interesting grievance Thompson lodged against Symons's assessment came toward the end of his discussion when he decried the engineer's barge canal as a minimalist approach. Arguing for the larger ship canal as the best and only permanent solution to safeguard against the diversion of commercial traffic to Canadian ports, Thompson asked the rhetorical questions, "Shall we try to make it trickle through a 12-foot ditch with a tollgate at each end? Shall we commit the immeasurable folly of squandering \$50,000,000 simply to 'raise the Erie Canal to the next higher stage of inefficiency?'"⁸⁴ Characterizing Symons's proposal as just another bandaging, minimalist strategy afraid to take the necessary next step, Thompson declared his answer with an additional question, "Or shall we build a ship canal, broad and deep enough to give free passage to ocean vessels--- a fitting pathway for the mighty commerce to be carried on its waters?"⁸⁵ This criticism had been wielded by contending canal proponents in past debates and would be asserted emphatically in the impending schism of enlargement advocates in the legislative clash of 1901. Symons himself had employed the critique in his earlier assessment of the Nine-Million Dollar Plan and would utilize it again when rejecting the minimalist legislation of 1901. Although seemingly lengthy in discussion, the points and counterpoints that Thompson leveled against Symons's supposition, that a barge canal was preferable to a deep water ship canal as the latter was excessive in scope, would be employed frequently by canal antagonists in the coming years to place a wedge between canal advocates.

⁸³ *Proposed Ship Canal Connecting the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean*, p 33.

⁸⁴ *Proposed Ship Canal Connecting the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean*, p 46.

⁸⁵ *Proposed Ship Canal Connecting the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean*, p 46.

Full Measure Needed:

Regardless of which canal route or dimensions one supported, the investigations served tremendously in convincing the multitude of canal advocates, those undecided, and even some canal adversaries of the necessity of a modernized waterway in an era when the progression of technological advancements often outpaced itself. With lofty, grandiose statements like the one above, lowly citizens and powerful members of society alike became convinced of the greater good that an enlarged canal offered for the prospects of New York State and City, as well as the United States at large. Soon, notable politicians and businessmen, such as Teddy Roosevelt and Andrew Carnegie, realized and stood in fervent support of the proposal to not simply expand the existing canals, but to construct a larger, more modern system altogether to ensure not just the future prosperity of New York's economy, but the flourishing of its citizens, as well.

Chapter III

Casual Insight Turns to Contemplative Investigation: The Transition of Thought from Repairing the Erie Canal to Replacing it with the Barge Canal through the Exploratory Reports of 1900

In his first Governor's Message in 1899 before the New York State Legislature Theodore Roosevelt addressed the central issue of economic decline weighing on the hearts and minds of his fellow New Yorkers. Emphasizing the significance of the state's waterways, he declared, "It is essential to the State no less than to the city of New York that our commercial supremacy should be maintained. With this end in view the canals should be administered economically and with an eye single to the welfare of the whole people."¹ Nominated over his predecessor, Samuel Black, due to public outrage over the "Nine-Million Dollar Debacle" of canal enlargement, and elected governor on a platform of governmental, bureaucratic, and financial reform, Roosevelt was quick to put the supposed improprieties of canal administrators behind him. Vowing to restore economic competitiveness and prosperity to the state, Roosevelt called for the continuance of Governor Black's Commerce Commission (assigned to determine an effective remedy for New York's commercial decline), and the formation of a new committee to establish a new state policy on canals, known most often as the Committee on Canals.² The continuation of the former committee and the creation of the latter were indisputably vital in the cause for New York State's waterways, and Roosevelt can rightfully claim a fundamental role in the latter's perpetuation. The governor was a firm believer in canals as a resource for the public good in general rather than just for the benefit of those who

¹ Theodore Roosevelt, *Annual Message as Governor*, Speech presented at Executive Chamber. Albany, New York. (1899, January 1).

² Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, (Albany: J.B. Lyon, Printers, 1922), p 43.

conduct commerce upon its waters. Thusly, Roosevelt commended those who shared and assisted in this vision, celebrating “the readiness with which able and high-minded private citizens will do special public work when they are convinced of its necessity from the public standpoint.”³ Although he would quickly leave the governorship and the Barge Canal project for higher office in Washington, D.C. (and the larger Panama Canal project), Roosevelt left an indelible imprint in the future course of the waterway and ensured its completion. Assembled and continued upon Roosevelt’s requests, each board had a duty: the first was to determine the policy for the future of the state’s waterways, and the second was to resolve the apparent decline in the commerce of New York City and State. Their reports would prove to be complements of each other, ultimately arriving at the same deduction that the enlargement and modernization of the Erie Canal was critical in the commercial revival of the Empire State and its beloved metropolis.

The Committee on Canals:

The Committee on Canals set about to thoroughly resolve all questions regarding the future of New York State’s waterways. In order to properly study and assess the canal questions, the committee held various meetings throughout the state, which included those with the public, business interests, and other learned figures who held informative knowledge on the subject.⁴ The most significant of these meetings were hosted by the New York Produce Exchange throughout October, 1899, where the State Committee on Canals conferred with the former’s own canal committee, along with numerous commercial organizations. Prior to this meeting, the New York Produce Exchange

³ Theodore Roosevelt, *Annual Message as Governor*, Speech presented at Executive Chamber. Albany, New York. (1899, January 1).

⁴ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 45.

adopted a resolution in the summer and fall of 1899 which endorsed the “construction of a waterway connecting Lake Erie with the Hudson River... with a depth not less than fourteen feet... and if necessary a new alignment of canal should be made by canalizing the Mohawk, Seneca, and Clyde Rivers.”⁵ It would be a fair assumption that this resolution and the ensuing meeting between the two canal committees were “largely instrumental” in the forming of the state’s future canal policy.⁶ A congratulatory letter sent to Henry Hebert, chairman of the New York Produce Exchange’s canal committee, from Emil L. Boas on January 26, 1900 reinforced this conclusion, “as it is no doubt due to your [Hebert’s] efforts that the State Canal Committee shaped its report as now published.”⁷ In addition to these various inquiries into the opinions and judgments of various canal parties, the Committee on Canals conducted copious surveys and calculations, which included committee member Frank Witherbee’s trip to Europe to study the canals of Belgium, France, and Germany.

Amid great anticipation of their findings, the Committee on Canals submitted their report, colloquially referred to as the Greene Report, to Governor Theodore Roosevelt on January 15, 1900, delineating much of the waterway’s future course and outlining what would become the State’s official canal policy. The committee concluded that the state’s canals should not be abandoned, but rather the Erie, Oswego, and Champlain canals should be enlarged, with the Black River and Cayuga-Seneca Canals maintained as feeders. Regarding the suggestion of enlargement, the committee

⁵ Henry B. Hebert. “Action of the New York Produce Exchange” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909), p 92-93.

⁶ Henry B. Hebert. “Action of the New York Produce Exchange” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 94.

⁷ Henry B. Hebert. “Action of the New York Produce Exchange” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 94.

recommended that the ship canal proposal should be “a proper subject for consideration by the Federal Government, but not by the State of New York.”⁸ The committee’s proposed dimensions of the enlarged canal included completing the deepening of the Oswego and Champlain canals to nine feet, as specified by the 1895 law, while replacing the Erie Canal with the construction of a new canal to a depth of twelve feet and capable of bearing one thousand ton barges. This involved altering the course of the canal to include the canalization of the Mohawk and Seneca Rivers, as well as Oneida Lake at an estimated cost of roughly \$60,000,000.⁹ To finance the new canal, it was suggested that the counties that bordered the waterway’s newly proposed path should bear the tax burden. Lastly, the Committee on Canals echoed the public reservations in the wake of the Nine-Million Dollar Debacle, stating, “The efficiency of the canals depends upon their management quite as much as upon their physical size.”¹⁰ Accompanying this call for proper administration of the state waterways were demands for the removal of capital restrictions on canal corporations, mechanization of locks and vessels, hiring of engineers and other workers based upon civil service standards, and a revision of the letting of public contracts so as not to repeat the mistakes of the Nine-Million Dollar Plan. Although some of these recommendations were straightforward, others necessitate further discussion due to their significance to the progression of the New York State’s canal policy.

In supporting the already established argument that waterborne travel was inherently cheaper than railroad travel, the report rejected the proposed abandonment of

⁸ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State* (New York: [Committee on Canals of New York State], 1900), p 3.

⁹ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 4.

¹⁰ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 5.

canals and subsequent reliance upon railroads, citing “ocean, lake, and canal rates being from one-third to one-fourth of those by rails.”¹¹ In discussing the detriments of ultimately choosing railroads over canals, the committee stated, “If the water route is abandoned, then New York must take its chances in the railroad competition with Portland, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Newport News and Savannah. In this competition it is hardly on an equality even, but is subject to many disadvantages” which will “see the relative proportion of exports through New York constantly decreasing, as it has been for the last ten years.”¹² The Committee on Canals concluded their argument for continuing and enlarging the waterways with a seemingly obligatory statement regarding the state’s geographic location in the union, stating that “New York has certain topographical advantages which it would be folly not to utilize. Through the valleys of the Hudson and the Mohawk and the comparatively low and level lands west of Oneida Lake it is possible to construct a water route connecting the Great Lakes and the Atlantic coast, and no such water route can be constructed through any other state.”¹³ Such an argument became one of the fundamental backbones of the pro-canal advocates, highlighting the inherent duty that New York State owed to the rest of the nation.

Despite continued enthusiasm for the ship canal proposal both across the New York State and in the Midwest, the Greene Report again rejected this proposition. Citing the cost figures from Colonel Symons’s earlier report, the cost per ton of carrying capacity of \$71, \$36, \$8 for ocean, lake, and canal transportation, respectively, the report “does not believe that it is possible to combine these three types into one vessel” in an

¹¹ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 9.

¹² Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 13.

¹³ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 12-13.

economical fashion.¹⁴ The committee instead suggested “two changes of cargo, one at Buffalo and one at New York, and using boats of 1000 tons' capacity going through from the lakes to New York and there transferring its cargo to the ocean steamer.”¹⁵

Ultimately, the Committee on Canals declared that the ship canal was an interesting project, but “not one for serious consideration by the State of New York” due to the high price tag and lack of reliable data, and thus should only come under discussion by the Federal Government.¹⁶

With the elimination of the ship canal plan, the committee concluded that a barge canal would be the most effective method, both in terms of cost and ease of construction. Considerations for constructing a canal capable of bearing 1,200 or 1,500 ton barges rather than 1,000 ton barges would be unnecessary as “the cost of transportation, or freight rate, would be substantially the same in both cases.”¹⁷ Additionally, the expense of building and maintaining the higher capacity barges, as well as the higher cost of constructing a canal of corresponding size, suggested that a 1,000 ton barge canal would be the most suitable option.¹⁸ This enlarged canal would deviate from its original path by canalizing the Mohawk, Clyde, and Seneca Rivers, as well as Oneida Lake, while reaching Syracuse through Onondaga Lake. This would eliminate numerous locks and the need to upgrade two aqueducts across the Mohawk, “the expense of rebuilding which... would be very expensive,” arguing that this plan “is cheaper than to follow the present route.”¹⁹ The new route also differed from the one proposed by the Deep Waterways

¹⁴ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 20.

¹⁵ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 20.

¹⁶ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 20.

¹⁷ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 25.

¹⁸ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 25.

¹⁹ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 26.

Commission; that proposal did suggest canalizing some of the same waterways, but also included the Oswego River and did not include the western portion of the Erie Canal. Overall, the Committee on Canals determined that the construction of a 1,000 ton barge canal was the preferential option as “money expended on the smaller project would be almost entirely wasted,” and instead, “a large barge canal would be a complete and permanent solution to the canal problem.”²⁰ The opinions of the committee can be best summarized with their own words, “We believe it is unwise to spend large sums of money in a mere betterment of the existing canal; what the present situation requires is a radical change, both in size and management.”²¹

Still in the shadow of the 1895 canal fiasco, and the alleged fiscal and managerial improprieties that accompanied it, the Committee on Canals wished to ensure the skeptical public of the new waterway’s merit, which greatly hinged on its improved administration and financing. Beginning with its financing, the committee first wanted to remind readers that “the Erie Canal has paid into the State more money by many millions than has been spent upon it.”²² While contending that the canal would directly or indirectly benefit all regions of New York State, the committee acknowledged that the “more immediate and positive” results would be felt first by the cities and canal counties.²³ The committee was conscious of the resentment and resistance felt by the citizens of the agricultural sector and non-canal counties, those counties not bordering any waterway directly connected to the canal system, which both felt the canal would benefit farmers and other industries in the Midwest at their expense. Seeking to counter

²⁰ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 28-29.

²¹ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 29.

²² Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 30.

²³ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 32.

this disaffection, the Greene Report recommended eliminating canal-based taxation on farmers and non-canal counties, instead levying the costs on canal counties, which contained 80% of New York State's population and 90% of its valued wealth in 1898.²⁴ According to this assessment, New York City alone would pay 69% of the canal expenditures, an understandable proportion when considering the metropolis also paid 62% of the state's taxes at that time.²⁵ Interestingly, New York's downstate residents were not overly averse toward the lopsided ratio of expense appropriation for the upstate waterway as it was increasingly understood, particularly following the release of the Commerce Commission's report, that the economic resurgence of the city was largely dependent upon an enlarged, modernized canal. Resistance to the cost of the proposed barge canal would remain relatively dormant in New York City, while the real battle would be waged throughout the rest of the state.

Continuing on their desire to right the perceived wrongs that plagued prior canal managements, the Committee on Canals highly recommended consolidating the offices of State Engineer and Superintendent of Public Works to eliminate unnecessary repetition, bureaucratic red tape, and wasteful spending of taxpayer dollars. Additionally, the committee pointed out the inherent risk that "these officers have equal powers and responsibilities, and neither is subject to the other. So long as they work in harmony all goes well, but if they see fit to antagonize each other there is an opportunity for a deadlock, and delay and confusion in the transaction of public business."²⁶ Yet, the board recognized that a constitutional amendment would be necessary to correct this hazard.

²⁴ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 31-32.

²⁵ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 34.

²⁶ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 39.

Like many Americans of this era, the committee members held the same sentiment regarding the need for greater civil service reform, pressing for engineers and contractors to be selected and promoted upon merit and skill, not nepotism or political affiliation. The report ultimately declared that legislature was “essential in order to secure permanently an efficient, honest, and economical administration of the canals.”²⁷

The last reform called for by the committee was for the removal of the \$50,000 maximum capital restriction placed upon corporations operating upon the waterways. Although the repeal of this constraint had been called for by numerous canal officials, including Campbell W. Adams and George W. Aldridge in 1895 and as early as Horatio Seymour Jr. in 1881, yet no action was taken. The Greene Report and Noble Whitford alike were equally puzzled on why the law was enacted in the first place. The committee discerned two motives, both centered on the hostility of the railroads toward their aquatic competitor. The first maintained that the law was passed at the insistence of the railroads to “destroy the usefulness of the canals,” while the second asserted that it was for the benefit of the canalmen to prevent the formation of large corporations, possibly owned or funded by railway firms, that would drive the smaller competitors out of business.²⁸ Regardless of whether or not the law was beneficial at some point, the Committee on Canals deemed it antiquated and detrimental to the canal’s success, particularly when competing with the seemingly unlimited capital supplies of the railroad firms which so often allowed them to put the waterways in dire straits. Not only was this law harmful to canal trade, but it was even more greatly damaging to New York State’s coffers as exhibited by testimony given by George H. Raymond in May of 1899. In speaking to the

²⁷ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 40.

²⁸ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 36.

committee, Raymond spoke on his incorporation of a canal transporting company in New Jersey with \$150,000 capital that had been operating on the New York canal for years.²⁹ Although the gentlemen chuckled at the cleverly dodgy act, the State of New York was losing millions of dollars from lost taxes on corporations and tonnages that never treaded the canal's waters due to this misguided law. Such blatant loopholes and their severely detrimental impacts solidified the Committee on Canals' affirmation that such capital restrictions must be lifted in order for the waterway to achieve any sort of prosperity in the future.

Commerce Commission:

Just as the stark and straightforward recommendations of the State Committee on Canals were reaching the political and public spheres, the report of the State Commerce Commission was released and erupted into a firestorm of heated canal debate. Presenting their voluminous 2,200 page report to the New York State Legislature only ten days after their colleagues, the Commerce Commission also concluded on January 25, 1900 that the issue of the Empire State's economic decline could be solved with an enlarged canal. Having held meetings and investigations throughout New York, the Midwest, and the rival port cities, the commission's report concurred with the main findings of the Greene Report of the Committee on Canals, but disagreed on specific details. Unfortunately, such impaired attempts of solidarity between the conflicting canal advocates, allowing opposition forces to meddle.

The report opened with an address from Governor Roosevelt to the State Legislature that fittingly embodied the forward-looking spirits of population at large,

²⁹ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 182.

regardless of their canal opinions, arguably comprising the most interesting and thought-provoking section of the commission's report. Outlining the report to his political constituents, Roosevelt marked that the commission unsurprisingly identified the railroads, especially the state's own firms, as "the main cause of the damage to New York's commerce."³⁰ The railways were charged with "differential agreements" in the interest of competing ports, discrimination that sought to "overcome the advantage which New York would have under natural conditions as the cheapest route to foreign markets from the products of the West."³¹ More so, New York-based railroads were severely chastised as they "have received benefits from the State and yet participate in the discrimination."³² The Commerce Commission determined that its best course of option was to "give widespread publicity to the facts," and suggested to "remedy the evils" by improving the canals of the state.³³ In an almost gratifying manner, Roosevelt proclaimed that although the Commerce Commission was appointed to inquire into all causes of the state's economic decline and seek all possible remedies, "it speedily discovered... the canal was really the central question."³⁴ For the governor, this chief conclusion was "further proof... of the immense importance of the canal and of the extreme unwisdom of abandoning it as an outworn institution."³⁵

As the Commerce Commission essentially focused the near-entirety of their report around the future of the New York State's canals, most of the proposals mirror those of the Committee on Canals. The reports of the Commerce Commission and the Committee

³⁰ Charles A. Schieren, *Report of the New York Commerce Commission* (Vol. 1. Albany: J.B. Lyon, State Printer, 1900), p 3.

³¹ Charles A. Schieren, *Report of the New York Commerce Commission* p 4.

³² Charles A. Schieren, *Report of the New York Commerce Commission* p 4.

³³ Charles A. Schieren, *Report of the New York Commerce Commission* p 4.

³⁴ Charles A. Schieren, *Report of the New York Commerce Commission* p 4.

³⁵ Charles A. Schieren, *Report of the New York Commerce Commission* p 4.

on Canals contained some overlaps in discussion that were relatively minor issues, but still warrant a passing mention. These canal-based recommendations included that proper terminal facilities should be constructed as necessary, canal piers should be reserved exclusively for canal boats, and a repeal of the \$50,000 capital restriction on canal corporations. For suggestions specific to New York City, the commission proposed citizens and the government should be allowed to undertake various improvements on piers and dock facilities. The preceding proposals could all be found throughout the complementary Greene Report and were all necessitated to improve the time and cost efficiency of the canal, frequently cited as the principal argument against the waterways in favor of the railroads. Additionally, improved terminal facilities and piers for the loading and unloading of goods would reduce the transfer costs and times, thus negating the economic argument of not having to break bulk – an argument presented by the still strong ship canal faction, including the aforementioned S.A. Thompson in his *Proposed Ship Canal Connecting the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean*. With these proposed improvements resolving the debated deficiencies, the conclusions of Colonel Symons's earlier report and the succeeding Committee on Canals were well justified in holding a barge canal as the most logical project. Yet the Commerce Commission allowed itself to fall into the same trap of timidity that had plagued all prior canal enlargement projects on the question of whether to build a modernized waterway or simply repair the old.

Standing at the proverbial fork in the road, the Commerce Commission deliberated between following the beaten path of merely patching up the current Erie Canal to dimensions set by the 1895 law or instead blazing a new trail by endorsing the larger and more costly restructuring of the waterway into a modernized aquatic highway.

Weighing all options, the commission rejected the ship canal proposal for its enormous cost and the unlikelihood of construction by the Federal government (a proposal which would be unacceptable to New Yorkers in the first place).³⁶ Ultimately, the commission chose the safer, more moderate route of completing the deepening of the existing waterways to nine feet rather than the prior committee's twelve foot recommendation.

To support their decision, the commission's members believed that the canals had not commanded enough traffic in recent years to convince the people at large of the project's merit, especially with its \$50,000,000 price tag at the time.³⁷ Based on Colonel Symons's earlier report, it instead concluded that completing the 1895 improvement at an expense of \$15,000,000 would still result in a transportation cost reduction of two thirds that of the far pricier \$50,000,000 plan.³⁸ Yet, the Commerce Commission's previously described timidity was revealed by another rationale that accompanied the rejection of the twelve foot plan. The members admitted that the twelve foot plan would be ideal, but only "if assured that the money was available and the project freed from doubt as to its ultimate completion."³⁹ Perhaps one cannot condemn the commission for their cautious approach, as the memory of the 1895 fiasco was still fresh, but it must be remembered that it was exactly this meek, "take whatever you can get" attitude of canal advocates that both produced the minimalist 1895 plan and perpetuated it.

Consequently, it would be hard to determine if the Commerce Commission did the canal cause a service by standing for improvement or a disservice by choosing the minimalist approach and dividing advocates into factions when past experiences dictated

³⁶ Charles A. Schieren, *Report of the New York Commerce Commission*, p 88.

³⁷ Charles A. Schieren, *Report of the New York Commerce Commission*, p 90.

³⁸ Charles A. Schieren, *Report of the New York Commerce Commission*, p 90.

³⁹ Charles A. Schieren, *Report of the New York Commerce Commission*, p 88.

that unity was essential for success. What was more damaging about their minimalist pursuit was its location in the report's text. Found nowhere in the introduction or conclusion and presented only in the middle of the dense text, only the more learned and analytical peoples would have read their reasoning, while most would not, grasping only that the original 1895 plan was best and incidentally thwarting the larger scheme.

Persuasive Patriotic Plea:

A positive impact that can be attributed to the document was its association of the canal's enlargement with patriotic pride for New York State and the United States in general. Quoting the words of Governor Black in 1898, a man quickly forced aside and somewhat forgotten in the wake of 1895 fiasco, the report inspired readers that "No man can contemplate the past history of New York without feelings of pride... This [economic] transformation has been wrought through the unexampled gifts of nature, and the industry and skill of citizens protected by a wise and just government."⁴⁰ Concluding, Black declared, "If these reflections inspire pride only, without determination, their main value is lost. An inspiration that produces no results is no better than an agreeable recollection. There must be some practical test to the effort of former achievements upon our present energy."⁴¹ For the purposes of their reports, the latter mentioned test was the enlargement of the canal system to retain its empire status. Yet, exhibited in Governor Black's statements was that same progressive, civic-minded mentality espoused in the introduction. The governor was appealing to all citizens, both high and low, powerful and vulnerable, to seize the opportunity to undertake a great work as they not only have the ability to through nature and skill but the inspiration, as well. Continuing in his speech,

⁴⁰ Charles A. Schieren, *Report of the New York Commerce Commission*, p 10.

⁴¹ Charles A. Schieren, *Report of the New York Commerce Commission*, p 10.

Black reaffirmed that people with such gifts “ought to” use them.⁴² As the governor professed these words of civic duty and patriotism, it could thusly be surmised that he certainly retained the belief himself. Grandiose concepts and the councils’ contradictions aside, the two reports of the Committee on Canals and Commerce Commission combined to reinvigorate both canal supporters and opponents across New York State to the fate of its aquatic lifeline.

Commerce Conventions:

Taking a step back chronologically to examine the general sentiments and actions of canal advocates, the waterway enlargement debate again came to the forefront of public discussion following the request and approval of Roosevelt’s call for serious investigation into the future of the New York’s waterways,. The effective choosing of “personnel of the committees, together with Governor Roosevelt’s well-known reputation for straightforward dealing,” stimulated many prominent community and business leaders to more seriously consider the matter.⁴³ With a call to action by the New York Board of Trade and Transportation, a State Commerce Convention was held in Utica from October 10-12, 1899, attended by mayors and various commercial groups far too numerous to list from every corner of New York State, notably with the New York Produce Exchange, Buffalo Merchants' Exchange, and Board of Trade and Transportation in attendance. Addressing the question, “How may commerce and manufactures be increased within the State of New York?,” the convention outlined their goals to have each part of the state represented to ensure fairness, discuss what actions must be taken to improve commerce,

⁴² Charles A. Schieren, *Report of the New York Commerce Commission*, p 10.

⁴³ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 46.

and a vow to stand united in the final decision until the enactment of that decision by the Legislature.⁴⁴

Although not formed to be a pro-canal assembly, the Commerce Convention promptly adopted resolutions that “the commercial supremacy and the prosperity of the State of New York were created and preserved by the Erie, Oswego, and Champlain Canals,” and that they “ought to be materially improved to maintain” this supremacy, “thereby promoting the prosperity of its people.”⁴⁵ Further, the convention insisted that the neglect of maintenance contributed to the canal’s decline in efficiency and usefulness, subsequently calling for the “wise investment of money... to secure the greatest benefit to commerce and the public economy.”⁴⁶ Still in the wake of the alleged improprieties of the canal officials and encouraged by the general national atmosphere of the time, Civil Service rules were urged to ensure the proper management of waterways.⁴⁷

By welcoming the sharing of challenging opinions, this conference followed the same proper processes expected of any and all informative, scholarly assemblages. At this occasion, John I. Platt, a notable canal adversary who often openly admitted to his involvement with railroad firms, reminded the attendees of the falling tonnage rates and the multiple past canal policies that failed that reverse the trend.⁴⁸ Continuing to criticize the millions of tax dollars “wasted in a single year,” Platt concluded that “these figures

⁴⁴ Frank S. Gardner, “The Canal Improvement Union” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909), p 12.

⁴⁵ Frank S. Gardner, “The Canal Improvement Union” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 15.

⁴⁶ Frank S. Gardner, “The Canal Improvement Union” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 15.

⁴⁷ Frank S. Gardner, “The Canal Improvement Union” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 15.

⁴⁸ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, Vol. 12 (Buffalo, New York: Buffalo Historical Society, 1908), p 247.

tell a story of decline that though significant enough, has been so often told that it has lost the power to stir us.”⁴⁹ Overall, the central points addressed by this first convention primarily focused on the issues facing political, commercial, and popular interests of New Yorkers, the majority of which were derived from reviewing the failures of the Nine-Million Dollar “Debacle.”

Two more meetings of the State Commerce Convention would be held in Syracuse in 1900 and Buffalo in 1901, after the release of the reports by Canal Committee and Commerce Commission. Throughout both meetings, principal arguments for the construction of a modern waterway included the abuses of railroads, the diverting of commercial traffic away from New York City, and the tremendous economic benefits that would result. Most of these points had been expressed repeatedly already, and others would continue to appear in later debates. In both the 1900 and 1901 conventions, the members referred to the apparent abuses of the railroad firms against the industrial and agricultural interests of New York State and City. Underlining the ability of railroads to consolidate rival firms, thusly destroying competition, the members decried the railways as their monopolistic behavior should theoretically minimize operating costs, which, along with the presence of canals as an alternative transportation mode, should result in lower rates for New York commerce. Yet, “the produce of the western farmer is carried by rail at lower rates than are given to farmers of New York. The manufacturers of adjacent states receive like advantages over our own manufacturers.”⁵⁰ This rate discrimination subsequently diverted tonnage and trade to other cities and ports, such as

⁴⁹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 248.

⁵⁰ Frank S. Gardner, “The Canal Improvement Union” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 25.

Montreal via the St. Lawrence River, and had left New York City's piers empty and workers idle. To further justify their anti-railroad stance, the 1901 convention cited a report of the Interstate Commerce Commission from December of 1900, which held that "frequent discriminations occur and endless acts of injustice are committed in railroad service and charge."⁵¹ Accordingly, the members resolved to "enlarge and improve our State lakes, rivers, and canals, as the only safeguards for our people against such excessive railroad rates and unjust discrimination."⁵² Henceforth, an expanded and modernized waterway through the heart of New York State would ensure that railroads always had an economically-natural method of freight rate regulation.

Although the economic argument presented by the conference was a bit simplistic, the logic flowed rather well. They held that with the greater ease of transportation and cheaper rates allowed by a modernized waterway, industry would flourish within the state's borders as "the greatest centers of manufacturing prosperity are found where raw materials and manufactured articles can be moved to and from the factory at the lowest rates."⁵³ Increased manufacturing would attract a larger number of residents in order to provide factory labor, along with the development of other forms of commerce needed to satisfy the demands of a growing population. With this enlarged populace, agricultural output will need to be amplified by the region's farmers, who would experience greater prosperity as both the output and price of their produce rose, at least temporarily, until the market equilibrium adjusted to the new norm. Thus, as a result

⁵¹ Frank S. Gardner, "The Canal Improvement Union" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 27.

⁵² Frank S. Gardner, "The Canal Improvement Union" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 27.

⁵³ Frank S. Gardner, "The Canal Improvement Union" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 18.

of the recommended Barge Canal, “an increase of manufacturing industries within the borders of the State of New York will, of necessity, benefit the farmer, the wage earner and the merchant, as well as the manufacturer.”⁵⁴ Such a positive feedback loop of manufacturing and agriculture formed the cornerstone of the economic argument presented to the public by canal proponents, appealing to farmers, industrial workers, and businessmen alike.

The varying optimistic economic predictions of modernized waterways, along with the detrimental consequences of ineffective canal policies and anticipative results, inevitably led the Commerce Conventions to conclude that “an improved canal will be an effective remedy.”⁵⁵ More so, the members specified that this “improved canal” should be a thousand ton barge canal so that New York State “may obtain in the future the commercial and industrial supremacy to which its geographical position, its wealth, and the character of its population entitle it.”⁵⁶

The near unanimous support the members of the three Commerce Conventions gave to the improvement of the canal system was clearly indicative of the resilient and open attitudes of New York State’s leaders and the public at large to look past the waterway’s prior failures and indiscretions. As Whitford expressed, despite the “bewildered and distrustful” disposition following the failure of the Nine-Million Dollar Plan, “the people of the state had evinced a willingness to make whatever improvement seemed best.”⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Frank S. Gardner, “The Canal Improvement Union” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 18.

⁵⁵ Frank S. Gardner, “The Canal Improvement Union” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 18.

⁵⁶ Frank S. Gardner, “The Canal Improvement Union” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 31.

⁵⁷ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 45-46.

Inception of the Barge Canal:

The influence and potency of this resurrected canal promotion was irrefutable, prompting both political parties to include planks in their campaign platforms endorsing the infrastructural improvement.⁵⁸ Whether endorsing the progression of the 1,000 ton barge canal, the austere 1895 plan, or the grander ship canal, all parties persistently professed the enormous economic potential that would blossom from their completion. Summoning the attentions of the commercial and agrarian interests in an ever constant pursuit of their vacillating support, the reports of the Committee on Canals and Commerce Commission emphasized the prospective rise of the grain, iron, and steel trade through New York State, and the emergence of such industries within its borders. For decades, grain had been the main topic of discussion regarding canal tonnage and efficiency as it was the chief product carried upon the waterways, as well as the produce most often the target of the rate discrimination by railroads. Canal proponents argued that improvement and enlargement would dually reduce transportation costs by reducing the cost per ton-mile of goods, as well as provide adequate competition to the railroads, inducing them to reduce rates. In theory, this would advance the interests of New York State's farmers, a strong bloc that proved difficult to convince, by reducing their cost of conveyance to market and enhancing their wellbeing. Yet, the agricultural lobby accurately foresaw that an enlargement, for which they would be taxed, still would near-equally benefit farmers of the Midwest, who would continue to compete to the detriment of local agriculture. As the *New York Tribune* pointed out in 1895, standing for canal improvement in a rural area could be a costly move for politicians such as Thomas C.

⁵⁸ Frank S. Gardner, "The Canal Improvement Union" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 10.

Platt of Tioga County, who faced condemnation by farmers and “risked to lose thousands of votes in the interior of the State by an increase of taxes” for canal purposes.⁵⁹ As stated, the Committee on Canals attempted to persuade the agrarians by exempting them from canal taxation, but they remained a wary and hesitant group as “the farmers through their grange organization were steadily becoming more bitter in their opposition.”⁶⁰ Yet, proponents were rethinking the canal case, evident by the *Report of the Committee on Canals*:

The chief argument for its [the Erie Canal’s] for its construction eighty years ago was to have a cheap transportation route for grain and lumber, and this has continued to be its most important function down to the present time. But the changes which are now taking place in the iron trade give reason to believe that if an adequate waterway can be secured between Lake Erie and the Hudson River the center of the iron industry can be brought within the State of New York.⁶¹

While still expounding the potential benefits an enlarged waterway would bring to the grain trade, canal supporters sought a new angle to more effectively promote the immense commercial growth and development that would profit all citizens of New York.

Receiving increased attention in reports, speeches, and passing conversation throughout the late 1800s, the public became more conscious to the importance of enlargement projects for the increasing of annual canal tonnage. Rather than grounding the canal’s necessity in just the notion of cheaper transportation of goods, a result that indirectly benefited all, the waterway was promoted as a magnet for raw materials from the west and their manufacture into finished goods. Such was represented by the positive

⁵⁹ "The Legislature's Work. Many Measures Of Great Importance Enacted. Disappointment At The Failure Of Some," *New York Tribune*, May 17, 1895.

⁶⁰ George H. Raymond. “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 165.

⁶¹ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 15.

economic feedback loop espoused during the 1900 Commerce Convention, which entailed cheaper canal trade leading to increased manufacturing and agriculture activity within New York's borders.

Prior to this meeting, Campbell W. Adams outlined in his 1897 *State Engineer Report* that “the products manufactured [in New York City] are produced from materials often brought from long distances... and are often carried equally long distances before sold.”⁶² This distance created an imminent “manufacturing and commercial danger” for New York City as other manufacturers moved closer to the source of raw materials.⁶³ Adams remained firm that these industrial hubs could continue to attract and manufacture raw materials only “if the cost of transportation may be lowered.”⁶⁴ This would even allow for the distances between the points of extraction and production of these goods to be increased, resulting in a plethora of other economic and societal benefits. Although these economic consequences may seem inherent and obvious, they were not emphasized prior to the period of the investigative reports' publication. The amplified attention paid to this theory was evident throughout the earlier discussion of the Commerce Conventions as it dominated much of the talking points of the meeting. For New York State's canal, business, and political authorities, the greatest and most widely deliberated commercial development would be the emergence of the steel and iron industry of Buffalo.

⁶² Campbell W. Adams, *Annual Report Of The State Engineer And Surveyor On The Canals Of The State Of New York for the Year 1897* (Albany, New York: Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford, 1898), p 11.

⁶³ Campbell W. Adams, *Annual Report Of The State Engineer And Surveyor On The Canals Of The State Of New York for the Year 1897*, p 11.

⁶⁴ Campbell W. Adams, *Annual Report Of The State Engineer And Surveyor On The Canals Of The State Of New York for the Year 1897*, p 12.

The potential to make Buffalo and New York State the heart of steel manufacturing for the world soon stood as a principal case for the enlargement of the Erie Canal and formed the backbone of the new economic argument. Underlying this desire was the necessity of being the primary port to which raw materials were sent, and the expansion of the waterways needed to assure this attraction rather than simply being a conduit to transport already finished goods upon. It seemed almost too fitting that Colonel Symons was one of the first to elicit this wondrous thought of bringing steel manufacturing within New York's borders in the 1898 *Report of the Chief of Engineers*. Although skeptical of it ever occurring and believing instead that the Erie Canal's real role would be in the transportation of iron and steel to the Atlantic seaboard and abroad, Symons fuelled imaginations by declaring, "It seems absolutely certain that the great iron and steel business will always be done at such points where the ore regions and the regions... can meet and mingle with the minimum of transportation and expense."⁶⁵ This conclusion followed along the same lines as the previously cited resolution of the 1900 Commerce Convention, "The greatest centers of manufacturing prosperity are found where raw materials and manufactured articles can be moved to and from the factory at the lowest rates."⁶⁶

Challenge of the Ship Canal:

In his 1898 *Proposed Ship Canal Connecting the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean*, S.A. Thompson, the notable foe of Symons and his report, agreed with his adversary on the need to construct a larger canal in order to better exploit the country's

⁶⁵ United States. Army. Corps of Engineers, *Annual Reports of the War Department for 1897: Report of the Chief of Engineers*. 1897, p 3168.

⁶⁶ Frank S. Gardner, "The Canal Improvement Union" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 18.

iron ore resources by allowing its waterborne transportation to “the seaboard furnaces of the United States.”⁶⁷ Although not specifically mentioning Buffalo, Thompson recognized the need for an enlarged canal so that the world center of steel production and ship construction could be wrested from United Kingdom and developed on the shores of the Great Lakes, allowing the United States to build the navies of the world.⁶⁸ With their casual remarks, interest in the iron and steel market grew exponentially amongst the business-minded citizens of the state, reflecting in the reports of the Committee on Canals and Commerce Commission.

For the two investigative boards, arguing the enlarged canal system’s potential economic impact by citing the flourishing iron and steel market seemed to surprise the elderly members, who were more accustomed to discussing the increasingly irrelevant grain trade. Such was evident by the exceptionally inquisitive nature they exhibited concerning the rising industry which quickly stole the spotlight from the grain trade, particularly as a “mammoth steel and iron plant, involving an outlay of more than \$20,000,000” was under construction at Buffalo with a second being built in Tonawanda.⁶⁹ Citing the testimony of George H. Raymond in Commerce Commission’s report, the cost of transporting iron ore from Lake Superior to Buffalo, smelting it into steel, and freighting the finished product to New York City would cost \$1.72 per ton, despite the higher cost of the key material coke.⁷⁰ Applying this same analysis to steel production in Pittsburgh under ideal circumstances, the transportation cost stood at \$3.72

⁶⁷ *Proposed Ship Canal Connecting the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean Hearings before the United States House Committee on Rivers and Harbors, Fifty-Fifth Congress, Second Session, on Apr. 1, 1898* (Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1898), p 31.

⁶⁸ *Proposed Ship Canal Connecting the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean*, p 34.

⁶⁹ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 15.

⁷⁰ Charles A. Schieren, *Report of the New York Commerce Commission*, p 101.

per ton, a full two dollars more than New York City.⁷¹ With Buffalo clearly the superior in steel manufacturing, New York City, along with other cities along the canal, would undoubtedly be beneficiaries by means of crafting and assembling the steel into a wide assortment of final goods, as well as shipping the steel worldwide. Emphatically echoing S.A. Thompson, Raymond asked, “With such possibilities, is there any question that Buffalo would make the steel for the navies of the world, and that New York Bay would build them?”⁷² Although the answer was an unequivocal affirmative, some still stood in resistance.

As the Committee on Canals worked in relatively close cooperation with the Commerce Commission, and both attended several meetings with various commercial organizations across the state, particularly the Commerce Conventions, their report drew the same conclusions as its complementary report, even with wording starkly similar. Confidently stating that steel manufacturing could occur “at any point on a water route between Buffalo and New York at less cost than in Pittsburgh” as the latter’s only advantage was “its greater proximity to the coking coals,” an advantage overcome “by the saving in cost of transportation.”⁷³ With the hydroelectric output of Niagara Falls, the committee noted “the possibilities of manufacturing development along the banks of the Niagara river between the Falls and Buffalo should not be overlooked.”⁷⁴ Coupled with cheap canal and lake transportation travel, “these advantages, if properly utilized, will make Western New York the center of such a manufacturing district as the world has

⁷¹ Charles A. Schieren, *Report of the New York Commerce Commission*, p 102.

⁷² Charles A. Schieren, *Report of the New York Commerce Commission*, p 102.

⁷³ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 15.

⁷⁴ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 16.

never seen.”⁷⁵ Stressing their unsurpassed support for the promotion of the steel industry by again emphasizing the role of iron and steel as the new economic impetus for New York’s canals, the Committee on Canals concluded that “a suitable enlargement of the Erie Canal at the present time is justified by the prospect of its use in connection with manufacture of steel and iron and shipbuilding, fully as much as its original construction was justified by the prospect of transporting breadstuffs.”⁷⁶ As testimony from varying assortments of experts declared that railroads were wholly inefficient at transporting steel, iron, and other raw materials, the rising steel industry in western New York and its future prosperity hinged completely on the populace’s endorsement of the Erie Canal’s enlargement into the Barge Canal.⁷⁷

With the completion and circulation of the two documents from the Committee on Canals and Commerce Commission central to the formation of New York State’s official canal policy, a general feeling of jubilation overcame many commercial organizations, media outlets, political factions, and citizens who had eagerly sought a more concrete and substantive proposal. In gratitude, about twenty-five of New York City’s leading commercial organizations held a celebratory dinner at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel on March 10, 1900 in appreciation of Governor Roosevelt’s “friendly attitude toward the canal interests.”⁷⁸ Along with over 460 prominent businessmen, guests of honor included Roosevelt, the lieutenant-governor, prominent members of the State Legislature, and both the Committee on Canals and Commerce Commission. Roosevelt applauded the detailed and arduous work of the committee and commission in the assembly of their reports, as

⁷⁵ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 16.

⁷⁶ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 15.

⁷⁷ Charles A. Schieren, *Report of the New York Commerce Commission*, p 1316.

⁷⁸ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 251.

well as the learned experts and commercial groups who had assisted their investigations. Their efforts were never so essential as “the scheme proposed is one of tremendous and far-reaching importance... It is the only scheme which offers an adequate check on the railroads.”⁷⁹ Likely reminiscing on the grief taken at onset of his governorship regarding the 1895 fiasco, Roosevelt warned that “the very vastness of the scheme means in the first place that there should be the most careful preparation so that there shall be no possibility of repeating the mistakes which have marred feebler efforts in the past.”⁸⁰ Always eloquent with his words and a true believer in the canal cause, the governor prompted “thorough and ardent missionary work to make the people of the State feel the need of doing what is proposed,” and with this, the need for unity and elimination of party division.⁸¹ Urging the construction and management of the canal on “strictly business principles” as the proposed enlargement was purely economic, Roosevelt condemned its treatment as a “football of partisan, factional, or personal politics.”⁸² Other guests extolled their own praises, wishes, and guidance, and the banquet marked a highpoint in the cooperation and optimism of canal advocates to finally complete a modernized waterway that will “not only regain for New York her commerce, but will hold it against all competition for a century to come.”⁸³

Although the men present at this celebratory dinner, the vast majority of whom were presumed to be canal proponents, espoused praise and admiration upon the wearied waterway and the new lease on life it was to receive, there existed a crack below the thin

⁷⁹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 252.

⁸⁰ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 252.

⁸¹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 252.

⁸² Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 56.

⁸³ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 252.

surface of their unity. Split from the beginning between the diverging recommendations of the reports and with others still fancying the debunked ship canal, this disunity amongst canal factions opened too wide of a gap, allowing for the emergence of the railroad's ever-present anti-canal campaigners and their insatiable desire for waterway's destruction. Though, it must be said that the dinner proved pivotal in defeating the first oppositional attack upon the new canal policy by securing the appropriation of funds for a more accurate survey of the proposed waterway. This incident will be explained later in greater depth, but it was undoubtedly due to the temporary unity "of this large gathering of influential men" that "practically decided the fate of the survey bill then pending in the Legislature."⁸⁴ Following this notable instance, this harmony became fleeting. However, it was much to the credit of the ardent, unceasing efforts of a select few committed canal advocates and the tenacious nature of the waterway itself that the barge canal movement persisted until its ratification, miraculously managing to escape the defamatory snares and subversive legislation of its multidimensional foes.

⁸⁴ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 253.

Chapter IV

From Careful Detailing to Contentious Debate: The Evolution of New York State's Canal Policy from Inception to Formal Adoption 1900-1902

For a brief moment of time in early 1900, New York State's canal advocates found themselves seemingly united in the pursuit of an enlarged waterway that would allow for the cheaper and more efficient transportation of goods. Commercial interests of manufacturing and agriculture alike were convinced of the economic benefits that would follow the canal's expansion and all harmonized their voices. Yet, this chorus of unity and praise quickly diverged over the manner and extent of canal improvements. Clearly evident by the soon-to-be described successful passage of the canal survey bill against the best efforts of its foes, the triumph of the unitary efforts of such prominent politicians and citizens could not be denied. These divisions over strategy would greatly weaken their enlargement goals, requiring each to expend greater exertion in the reception of lesser returns. Endeavoring to formulate a unified improvement proposal while combating the injurious denunciations of adversaries, this uphill climb came to characterize the labors of canal proponents in the coming years, ultimately culminating in the fruitful enactment of the Barge Canal of 1903.

Feud Over Survey Funds:

With absolute and undeniable approval expressed by both the reports of the Committee on Canals and Commerce Commission, "a profound impression was made upon the people of the State," causing a resurgence of interest as public meetings were held on the matter and major commercial organizations appointed delegations to confer with government officials.¹ United by the newfound "enthusiasm at the magnitude of the

¹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, Vol. 12

waterways proposed” and determined not to repeat mistakes of the 1895 fiasco, canal advocates proposed a bill to secure funding of a complete and thorough route survey.² There was undoubtedly eagerness amongst canal supporters that needed to be restrained, particularly seen in the report of the Committee on Canals who impulsively believed their “estimates of cost to be adequate for submitting this proposition to the voters at the election in November.”³ Thankfully, wiser minds prevailed as a meeting between Governor Roosevelt and a committee of prominent canal figures determined to drop the more advantageous improvement legislation to prevent repeated mistakes or their potential defeat, which could prove fatal to the movement.⁴ Although already planning to request such a measure, the survey appropriation bill became fundamentally more important to the canal cause following this decision on February 20, 1900. Submitted to the State Legislature on March 6, 1900 for the approval of \$200,000, the survey was the first of several notable attempts by canal opponents to strike down the newly invigorated enlargement efforts. Further complicating matters, Assemblyman Hyatt C. Hatch of Poughkeepsie introduced a proposal the next day “substantially similar to the defeated Pavey Resolution of 1898” to allow the disposal of canal properties to the Federal government.⁵ With the press divided, the episode would prove to be a pivotal first step by learning from past mistakes and forming an economically and politically sound footing for the Barge Canal campaign.

(Buffalo, New York: Buffalo Historical Society, 1908), p 250.

² Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 250.

³ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State* (New York: [Committee on Canals of New York State], 1900), p 4.

⁴ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909), p 163.

⁵ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 251.

As the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, adversaries of the canal's improvement sought to trip up advocates before their hike even began. However, canal proponents were spirited by their celebratory dinner with Governor Roosevelt, presenting resolute arguments before the various governmental committees. Notable amongst them was the testimony of "a man who can tell us something that is to be relied upon," Major Symons, as he reiterated a ship canal to be "almost fatal to the commerce of New York," the feasibility of an inland barge canal, and the "absolute necessity" of a survey "before the work can be done intelligently."⁶ Despite the statements of numerous canal experts and "a flood of letters, resolutions, petitions and memorials from various parts of the state," the bill was not immediately reported. Fearing its loss to delay, the strong influences of United States Senator Thomas C. Platt, Assemblyman Henry W. Hill, and Senator Timothy E. Ellsworth were mobilized to secure a favorable report.

This legislative occasion was not only renowned for its status as the cornerstone for the eventual Barge Canal Act but for the ferocity that accompanied the debates. Although awoken from its brief lull, the Senate Finance Committee refused to favorably support the survey appropriation bill in a split decision as it was "quite generally opposed to any further expenditure in canal development."⁷ In a brilliant maneuver of parliamentary procedure that was "strongly opposed by several members" and created "an intensely dramatic scene", the "fearless" Senator Ellsworth evoked a rule that brought the survey bill to the Senate floor, where it passed, of 31 to 16.⁸ In the Assembly, Henry W. Hill, along with the sufficient pressure from Thomas C. Platt, brought the

⁶ "Ways and Means Committee Actions," *Buffalo Evening News*, March 15, 1900.

⁷ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 257.

⁸ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 256.

measure out of the Rules committee and to a vote over the objections of Speaker Lewis Nixon.⁹ Along with the defeat of Hatch's new proposal, which was viewed as a clear ploy and faced predictable resistance even from canal foes, the survey appropriation bill passed with a vote of 96 to 46. All the while, Assemblyman Hill had been calling on various commercial and civil organizations, newspapers, local politicians, and citizens across New York State to press the State Legislature for the passage of the bill, and thusly "too much credit cannot be given... for that victory."¹⁰ With its approval by both houses of the State Legislature and the signature of Governor Roosevelt on April 12, 1900, the survey became law and set the Barge Canal campaign in full swing.

Such a momentous first step was "a signal triumph on the part of canal advocates over opposing forces," allowing for the vital surveys and estimates that would culminate in the publication of the Bond Report in early 1901.¹¹ Perhaps biased or embellishing in their recollection of events, Henry W. Hill remarked, "It was one of the most strenuous fights ever witness in the Assembly,"¹² while George H. Raymond went further to say, "Probably no bill was ever more bitterly fought and none was ever of greater importance to the State than that particular survey bill."¹³ Whitford best outlined the reasoning behind the antagonism:

While the sum asked in this bill was not large and the making of the survey did not of itself commit the State to any canal improvement, the opponents seemed to consider that the passage of the bill meant the beginning of a radical change in the canal policy of the State, which would probably result in an enormous

⁹ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State* (Albany: J.B. Lyon, Printers, 1922), p 57.

¹⁰ George H. Raymond, "New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 163.

¹¹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 257.

¹² Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 256.

¹³ George H. Raymond, "New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 163.

expenditure for a new canal of greatly increased size. Accordingly they fought the measure desperately.¹⁴

Thusly, this immense outpouring of hostility by anti-canal forces was justifiably warranted. With canal supporters fragmenting between differing strategies while awaiting the survey's completion, the waterway's foes would now expend greater time and energy in fermenting its demise, causing the struggle for canal improvement to only intensify in enmity and rhetoric.

Wasting no time, State Engineer Edward A. Bond began preparations for the project on April 8 before the authorization bill was even signed as "the task laid out by this law was exceedingly large and the time for accomplishing it was short."¹⁵ In accordance with the law, Bond was entrusted with compiling accurate surveys, plans, and cost estimates for the enlargement of New York State's canal system, and to present this report to the State Legislature at the beginning of the 1901 session. This specifically included the deepening and widening of the Erie Canal to a twelve-foot depth and capable of bearing one-thousand ton barges while making route divergences where necessary, as well as the deepening of the Oswego Canal to nine feet and the Champlain Canal to seven feet. Bond assembled a superb team of engineers who had worked on various projects and surveys, including the Deep Waterways survey a few years earlier.¹⁶ As reported by the *New York Times*, Bond's ambition quickly favored expanding the scope of the project by adding a branch from Lockport to Lake Ontario.¹⁷ For the sake of

¹⁴ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 54.

¹⁵ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 58.

¹⁶ "Barge Canal Survey Plans: State Engineer Appoints a Consulting Board of Experts," *New York Times*, April 27, 1900.

¹⁷ "To Extend the Barge Canal: State Engineer Bond Wishes to Survey from Lockport to Olcott," *New York Times*, June 4, 1900.

the Barge Canal and its advocates, it was a blessing to have Edward Bond commanding the study and report as he was a competent, civic-minded official. Expressing his appreciation for being given the responsibility, Bond stated that “the report upon this survey will be exhaustive... and shall command the confidence of the public and will enable the Legislature and the people of the State to form a full and unbiased judgment as to the desirability of building this great canal.”¹⁸ Although extreme resistance would be levied against the barge canal project, none questioned the accuracy or integrity of the State Engineer’s report, the Bond Report.

Fighting Between Foes:

The period of time bookended by the onset and completion of the Bond Report, roughly April 1900 to January 1901, was ripe with pro and anti-canal activity with each coalition seeking to educate New Yorkers on the respective “truths” of the enlargement project. Through the New York State Grange, farmers expressed their discontent with proposed canal measures, while railroad firms never ceased their condemnations, hiring John I. Platt as their ever-present lobbyist. Although often disparaged, canal advocates were never few in number, finding their interests represented in commercial bodies throughout the state, including the discussion, the Commerce Conventions.

Riding in the wake of the reports of the Committee on Canals and Commerce Commission and resurgent following the successful appropriation of survey funds, a second Commerce Convention was held in Syracuse on June 6 and 7, 1900. With a greater number of delegates than the year prior, the canal movement was clearly gaining momentum, yet the meeting would reveal a division over the extent of the improvement.

¹⁸ Edward A. Bond, *Report on the Barge Canal from the Hudson River to the Great Lakes, February 12, 1901* (Albany, New York: J.B. Lyon, 1901), p 11.

Looking back at the report of the Committee on Canals, the panel had highly endorsed the expending of \$60,000,000 on the larger barge canal project, but still mentioned the possibility of completing the lesser 1895 plan at an expense of roughly \$10,000,000, which came to be known as the Seymour Plan. The route changes and relatively immense cost of the one-thousand ton barge canal plan had caught many canal men off-guard, with one delegate, Howard J. Smith of Buffalo, remarking that “it literally took our breath away.”¹⁹ Meanwhile, the notion of completing the old Seymour Plan attracted the attentions of upstate New Yorkers as “a very substantial increase in carrying capacity could be obtained at a moderate cost,” and it followed the old route.²⁰ New York City delegates stood nearly alone in their support of the larger barge canal, with George Clinton and the rest of the Buffalo delegation resisting such an endorsement.

In the Commerce Convention’s official resolution, rather than taking a resolute stand, the members presented as Whitford described it, “merely a spineless declaration ‘that the future prosperity of the entire State requires the improvement and enlargement of its canals in a manner commensurate with the demands of commerce and to a capacity sufficient to compete with all rival routes.’”²¹ Noble Whitford decried that “the majority of delegates lacked the courage to take an equally bold stand,” an apparent cowardice that likely caused “the building of the Barge canal [to be] delayed one and possibly two years by the failure.”²² Relenting slightly, he supposed that it was simply a lack of faith on their part “to believe that the people of the state were ready to solve their transportation

¹⁹ Howard J. Smith. “Reminiscences of the Barge Canal Campaign” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909), p 182.

²⁰ Howard J. Smith. “Reminiscences of the Barge Canal Campaign” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 182.

²¹ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 61.

²² Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 61.

problem by building an adequate rather than a make-shift canal.”²³ Affirming the historian’s disappointment at the convention’s seizure of a “half loaf, lest otherwise they might get nothing,”²⁴ Buffalo delegate Howard Smith noted that the substantial details of the barge canal plan caused many “to doubt the possibility of getting the people to favor such a radical step.”²⁵ But the Commerce Convention may have been wise to delay their decision until the publication of Bond’s report so as to not repeat their previous mistakes. After all, the convention proved effective in stimulating interest and publicity in canal matters, “keeping it a live issue in the state” with organizations and politicians taking astute notice.²⁶

Holding true to Roosevelt’s appeal for “thorough and ardent missionary work to make the people of the State feel the need of doing what is proposed,” several commercial organizations interested in the future progress of canal improvement set about to educate the public on the issue.²⁷ Touted by many as one of, if not *the*, key group in the dissemination of canal information to the general public, the Buffalo Merchants’ Exchange intensified their “Campaign of Education” following the close of the 1900 Commerce Convention. Forming an executive committee under the leadership of notable canal advocates George Clinton, Alfred Haines, and George Raymond, the group determined “that the people of the State should thoroughly understand just what this 1000-ton barge canal really means to the commercial interests of the State, to show the farmer and the inhabitants of the counties away from the canal that their interest in also

²³ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 61.

²⁴ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 61.

²⁵ Howard J. Smith. “Reminiscences of the Barge Canal Campaign” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 182.

²⁶ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 62.

²⁷ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 252.

very great.”²⁸ By their efforts, “enormous quantities of letters, circulars, and printed matter of various kinds were sent all over the State,”²⁹ eventually supplying “about 200 country weeklies with ‘plate’ containing facts and opinions on the waterway with a clear pro-canal slant.”³⁰ Of course, “bringing to the front all of the canal sentiment in every county” was quite costly and fundraising was necessary for their press operations.³¹ The Merchants’ Exchange own report noted the donation of \$1000 from the Carnegie Steel Company, citing this as prime evidence of the canal campaign’s importance to commercial interests.³² With the anti-canal wolves persistently growling at their door, the Merchants’ Exchange took a more forceful approach than prior groups by “carrying the campaign into the enemy’s country.”³³ Addressing the Farmers’ Congress in Albany, a group notable for their canal disdain, George Raymond preached “the dependence of farm communities upon manufacturing centers,” remarking upon the immense potential of the iron and steel industry along the canal and its economic repercussions for farmers.³⁴ The Buffalo Merchants’ Exchange remained extremely active and influential throughout the coming years, particularly during the heated political and public debates of 1903, while working in close association with the New York Produce Exchange, a longstanding canal proponent.

²⁸ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 164.

²⁹ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 165.

³⁰ Howard J. Smith. “Reminiscences of the Barge Canal Campaign” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 183.

³¹ Charles A. Keep, *Annual Report of the Buffalo Merchants' Exchange* (Buffalo, New York: Buffalo Historical Society, 1900), p 45.

³² Charles A. Keep, *Annual Report of the Buffalo Merchants' Exchange*, p 45.

³³ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 165.

³⁴ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 268.

Representing the more prominent, downstate complement to the Buffalo Merchants' Exchange, the New York Produce Exchange had been active in nearly every aspect of canal enlargement projects for at least the prior two decades. Other than financing a good deal of the education campaign of the Merchants' Exchange, the Produce Exchange took it upon themselves to inform New York's citizens of the importance of canal enlargement as a means of generating economic prosperity, both by drawing commercial activity and rectifying the injustices of the railroads. The Produce Exchange had seen earlier triumphs with the litigation victory against railway rate discrimination, which was agreed upon by the Interstate Commerce Commission, and the successful enactment of the Nine-Million Dollar Plan, but the apparent lack of results from both required further exertion in the way of the one-thousand ton barge canal.³⁵ From their long history of canal agitation, the Produce Exchange understood better than most that solidarity amongst canal parties was essential to advancing the movement. Expressing this sentiment at the 1899 Commerce Convention, "it was the earnest hope of the New York Produce Exchange that all commercial organizations of this State will fully recognize the necessity of a modern waterway," stressing that "this conviction be impressed with an unanimous sentiment on the part of our commercial organizations upon the People."³⁶ Thusly, their central strategy was to unite all canal proponents under a single, activist organization. A body like this had previously existed in the form of the Canal Improvement Union, but its new incarnation was found in the union of numerous commercial and canal advocacy groups of New York City, establishing the Canal

³⁵ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 241.

³⁶ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 249.

Association of Greater New York on April 12, 1900.³⁷ It was through this new consortium that all canal-based literature and activism would be channeled, utilizing their influence to sway the hearts and minds of the public, but more importantly, secure the allegiances of the Empire State's politicians.

Inspecting the various canal advocacy organizations, one would quickly realize their leadership, not to mention the general members, was composed of politicians from every level of government who were undoubtedly familiar with the politicking methods of the era. Whether basing their success in business aptitude, oratory skill, and/or general intellectual talent, these men had managed to gain and retain their relative influence by understanding and exploiting the political sphere, which in turn allowed them to more greatly sway the public. With the upcoming election in November, 1900, advocates sought to further advance their cause by installing canal improvement planks in both party's convention. This policy aligned with Teddy Roosevelt's wishes that the answering of the canal question rise above party politics, and subsequently, the president of the 1900 Commerce Convention appointed a committee "to urge upon... the adoption of declarations in their platforms in favor of the improvement of the canal system."³⁸ Following their formation and a meeting with other canal advocates in August of 1900, the Canal Association of Greater New York also determined to call upon the leaders of the two political parties "to urge upon them the importance of securing a plank in the platforms of both parties favoring the enlargement and improvement of the canals of the

³⁷ Henry B. Hebert. "Action of the New York Produce Exchange" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909), p 97.

³⁸ Frank S. Gardner. "The State Commerce Conventions of 1899, 1900, and 1901" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909), p 19.

State.”³⁹ The efforts of the canal agitators paid off as both parties adopted resolutions in favor of continued canal improvements, but the character of their support was notable in its contrast.

Political Pragmatism:

Although both parties supported canal improvement, the Democratic Party utilized a dogmatic tactic as old as politics itself, lampooning the Republican Party for the weak, indecisive nature in which they supported the same notion. This middling support on the part of the Republican Party can be explained by the geographic division of their constituency. The Democratic Party based much of its support in the pro-canal region of New York City, while the Republican Party’s stronghold was upstate New York, where the population consisted of rural farmers and communities situated on or near the canal’s original course, and thus were ambivalent toward or against any radical changes in canal policy. The delicate, halfhearted stance of the Republicans was illustrated in the press, with the *New York Times* describing their “very ticklish position” as the Republicans could not “pledge itself to continue its old line of canal development without making itself a laughing stock.”⁴⁰ Despite being “big enough and strong enough to declare a policy to the people of this State,” the Republican Party was ridiculed for their lack of courage, particularly with the recent “memory of the squandered millions still fresh in the public mind.”⁴¹ The Democratic platform fiercely attacked the Republican stance on canals, first by reiterating their supposed role in the 1895 Fiasco,

³⁹ Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909), p 47-48.

⁴⁰ “Woodruff Agrees to Take Second Place: Convention Plans Complete,” *New York Times*, September 4, 1900.

⁴¹ “Mr. Odell and His Party,” *New York Times*, September 6, 1900.

particularly their “failure to punish those implicated... meriting the rebuke of a plundered and betrayed people.”⁴² Republicans were accused of collusion and corrupted by trying to abandon the canals as a “surrender of the commercial interests of the State to the unrestricted exactions of the railroads.”⁴³ Differentiating their stance, the Democratic policy called for “economical and honest administration of canal affairs,” along with expenditure for the maintenance and enlargement of the waterway for the encouragement of economic growth and “limiting of freight rates” in the “prevention of unjust discriminations.”⁴⁴ Such rhetoric appealed to many New York State citizens, portraying Democrats as more progressive and leading many Republicans to take a firmer stance on canal affairs.

Still, despite the poor image painted of Republicans by their Democratic opposition, the Republican Party swept the 1900 election. However, for the staunchest, most ardent canal proponents, there was no inherent party loyalty as its members, William H. Tennant in this case, believed the waterway’s enlargement transcended all political opinion and “should be free from every prejudice- sectional and otherwise.”⁴⁵

Following the election of Republican Governor Benjamin B. Odell, Jr. in the fall of 1900, the Canal Association of Greater New York determined to court his approval for the enlargement of the waterway in line with the one-thousand ton barge canal proposal. Gaining the new governor’s support was imperative due to his unmistakably influence and membership as a Republican, “the dominant party [which] was not friendly to canals

⁴² "Platform of New York State Democrats," *New York Times*, September 13, 1900.

⁴³ "Platform of New York State Democrats," *New York Times*, September 13, 1900.

⁴⁴ "Platform of New York State Democrats," *New York Times*, September 13, 1900.

⁴⁵ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 266.

by reason of its strength lying among the rural or anti-canal sections of the State.”⁴⁶ The Canal Association and the governor-elect met at the Fifth Avenue Hotel to discuss “their views on the subject of the improvement and enlargement of the Erie Canal,” with an exchange of ideas taking place.⁴⁷ Odell was undoubtedly impressed with the proposition, but still did not fully commit himself to any specific plan, instead waiting for the release of the Bond Report at the start of 1901. Based upon his first Governor’s Address in January of 1901, it could be argued that Odell was not overly familiar with the general canal issues as “glaring errors were made” with the citing of incorrect figures from the report of the Committee on Canals.⁴⁸ This incident caused “considerable amusement as well as serious criticism,” and led canal advocates to be wary of employing the governor as a supporter due to his seemingly complete lack of resolute opinion on the waterway’s future.⁴⁹ This decision proved to be sensible as, just like New York State’s citizens, Governor Odell’s canal opinions blew in the direction of the strongest wind, particularly exhibited with the release of the Bond Report on February 12, 1901.

Canal Plans Considered:

The publishing of the Bond Report marked a watershed moment for the canal enlargement movement. Canal proponents and opponents alike were already dumbfounded by the suggestions and cost estimates presented by the earlier reports, but the announcement of an even higher price tag left them absolutely stunned. The report by

⁴⁶ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 166.

⁴⁷ Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 48.

⁴⁸ Howard J. Smith. “Reminiscences of the Barge Canal Campaign” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 184.

⁴⁹ Howard J. Smith. “Reminiscences of the Barge Canal Campaign” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 184.

State Engineer Edward Bond and his expert team focused on canal enlargement by determining possible routes, their estimated costs, and the benefits and detriments associated with each. Four possible routes were surveyed, labeled A, B, C, and D. Route A consisted of canalizing the natural waterways that paralleled much of the canal's preexisting course, principally the Mohawk River, Wood Creek, Oneida Lake, Oneida River and Seneca River, and enlarging the canal west toward Buffalo. Route B utilized the same course as Route A, but instead entered Lake Ontario at the Oswego River and reentered at Olcott, near Buffalo, which would leave most of the western portion of the canal unimproved. Route C followed the same course as Route B, but instead linked with Buffalo via the Niagara River and recommended the further deepening of the Oswego Canal. Route D involved simply enlarging the then-present Erie Canal with only minor alterations to the original path. The estimated costs involved were \$70.5 million, \$54.7 million, \$56 million, and \$87.3 million for routes A, B, C, and D, respectively. As the conversation of canal improvement centered on the one-thousand ton barge plan, the increase in its price tag from roughly \$60,000,000 to \$70,000,000 sent another tremor through the enlargement discussion, with Bond attributing the cost increase to a time shortage on the part of the Committee on Canals.⁵⁰

Although Bond did not actively prefer one route over another, he appeared to support the canalization of natural waterways and improvement of the western portion of canal, Route A, over the other options that only included the improvement of the preexisting waterway and/or utilizing Lake Ontario. In supporting the canalization of the aforementioned waterways, Bond noted common problems that could be avoided, such as

⁵⁰ Edward A. Bond, *Report on the Barge Canal from the Hudson River to the Great Lakes*, p 43.

reduced leakage, removal of costly aqueducts, and reduction in number of locks.⁵¹

Canalizing the natural waterways would dramatically limit these problems, and would thusly greatly reduce maintenance costs. The utilization of these waterways would also increase transportation speed through deeper waterways and straightening its course overall.⁵² Bond noted the tremendous advantage that would be gained by the cities along the canalized waterways as they would have a greater area to establish businesses along the route, could utilize the subsequently abandoned canal properties, and would have a more accessible canal running through the center of their city.⁵³ Regarding the use of Lake Ontario in place of improving the western portion of the canal, Bond cited the advantages of increased speed and reduced canal mileage, which translated into greater traffic and reduced construction costs.⁵⁴ However, it was noted that barges would have to be built stronger to withstand lake travel, resulting in more expensive barges which could negate the benefits of cheap barge shipping.⁵⁵ Also, failure to enlarge the western portion of the canal could result in decreased industrial activity in the region, and the significant amount of commerce already present would necessitate its enlargement anyway.⁵⁶ Thusly, while Bond did not endorse any one project over another, the pros and cons listed would point any reader toward the necessity of a one-thousand ton barge canal via canalized natural waterways and an enlarged western route.

In the midst of the report, Bond made a remark that offers a noteworthy aside. It was stated that the rerouting of the canal, which would bypass Syracuse and instead offer

⁵¹ Edward A. Bond, *Report on the Barge Canal from the Hudson River to the Great Lakes*, p 30.

⁵² Edward A. Bond, *Report on the Barge Canal from the Hudson River to the Great Lakes*, p 30.

⁵³ Edward A. Bond, *Report on the Barge Canal from the Hudson River to the Great Lakes*, p 30.

⁵⁴ Edward A. Bond, *Report on the Barge Canal from the Hudson River to the Great Lakes*, p 21.

⁵⁵ Edward A. Bond, *Report on the Barge Canal from the Hudson River to the Great Lakes*, p 34.

⁵⁶ Edward A. Bond, *Report on the Barge Canal from the Hudson River to the Great Lakes*, p 34.

a connection through Onondaga Lake, would benefit the city. Not only would this reroute create “an excellent location for the erection of manufactories,” but also “would solve the vexed question of the railroads crossing at grade, which has so long disturbed Syracuse.”⁵⁷ During this time, Syracuse’s rail lines crisscrossed the city and presented a hazard with their presence in the streets. Although Bond wished to “refrain from details,” he suggested that the railroads could construct their routes in the subsequently abandoned canal beds, “thus doing away forever with the menace.”⁵⁸ What made this statement particularly interesting was the possible attempt to placate or woo the virulently anti-canal railroad parties in supporting the canal proposition. Although it did not succeed, this attitude of cooperation advanced by canal advocates was not uncommon as they tried to argue the symbiotic relationship between the differing forms of transportation. With each means of transport having its own unique role in commercial cycle, canal and railroad advocates alike embraced the notion of a “trinity of transportation” constituted by railroads, canals, and highways.⁵⁹ Still, animosity between each group would persist if for no other reason than pure competitive spirit. Expressing his wish to stay as neutral and unbiased as possible, Bond concluded his report stating, “It has been my aim to formulate the facts and present them without argument, leaving the discussion of the subject to the Legislature and the people of the State.”⁶⁰ In the execution and presentation of the details of the potential barge canal, Bond conducted his duty diligently, leaving the

⁵⁷ Edward A. Bond, *Report on the Barge Canal from the Hudson River to the Great Lakes*, p 32.

⁵⁸ Edward A. Bond, *Report on the Barge Canal from the Hudson River to the Great Lakes*, p 32.

⁵⁹ John D. Kernan. “The Function of New York’s Barge Canals in Controlling Freight Rates” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909), p 142.

⁶⁰ Edward A. Bond, *Report on the Barge Canal from the Hudson River to the Great Lakes*, p 45.

dirty work of hashing out a canal enlargement plan to the politicians and press of New York State.

Objections of Odell and Others:

The release of the Bond Report reverberated throughout the state, causing those who were already wary of the cost and extent of the radical canal enlargement suggested by the Committee on Canals to substantially resist this newer, more expensive appraisal. To the displeasure of canal advocates, Governor Odell was among this doubtful bloc as he quickly withdrew his support of the larger project in place of “the obsolete Seymour plan,” requesting an updated cost estimate from State Engineer Bond.⁶¹ Odell’s dismissal of the larger plan was readily apparent by his accompanying message that was transmitted to the State Legislature with the Bond Report, where he “argued the subject at considerable length.”⁶² Concluding that the supposed advantages of the one-thousand ton barge canal were not worth the expense, and that the only reason “the canals should be maintained were more for protection against unfair rate discrimination than for actual use,” the governor endorsed the 1895 plan for use by 450-ton barges.⁶³ The governor’s proposition stood in direct contrast to the Committee on Canal’s belief that “the larger project will permanently secure the commercial supremacy of New York,” and that it would be “unwise to spend large sums of money in a mere betterment of the existing canal.”⁶⁴ With Bond reporting that completion of the 1895 enlargement project would cost an estimated \$19,000,000, Odell requested that the lesser improvement plan be

⁶¹ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 166.

⁶² Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 68.

⁶³ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 68.

⁶⁴ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State*, p 4.

placed before the people to be voted upon as it will be met “with greater approval... the expenditure could be more easily met, and that it will serve all the purposes for which the canal was originally designed.”⁶⁵ Embodied in the introduction of an appropriation bill of \$26,000,000 for completion of the 1895 improvement, canal advocates vehemently resisted the proposal, fearing that “the herculean struggle and brilliant victory of canal legislators in the preceding session had all been vain.”⁶⁶ Yet, this event would again exemplify the rift that existed between the factions of canal proponents as, despite their recent cooperation, they found each other sparring for precisely the same reasons present in the Commerce Convention of 1900.

Perhaps epitomizing the most polarizing moment in the history of barge canal agitation was the mammoth division between canal advocates over the proposed completion of the 1895 Nine-Million Dollar Plan, also known as the Seymour Plan. Its consideration nearly resulted in the disintegration of any grander canal enlargement plans, but ultimately proved to be its saving grace. Following Governor Odell’s endorsement of the lesser 1895 project, harmony was strong between the upstate and downstate canal proponents at first, as a general objectionable feelings persisted against the proposal. Along with similarly focused conferences, a meeting of the executive board of the 1900 State Commerce Convention convened on March 26, 1901 to release resolutions rebutting the governor’s canal claims and reject his proposition. Countering Odell’s claims that the canal’s role was merely regulative, the committee espoused the waterway as “the first great factor in the growth of the State,” citing its role in building

⁶⁵ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 68.

⁶⁶ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 68.

the upstate cities and cementing New York City as “one of the greatest seaports.”⁶⁷ While garnering broad-based support by appealing to the “great benefits to all classes of citizens: to the laboring man, to the farmer and to the merchants in all lines of commercial industry,” the intrastate council ultimately declared “that the commercial interests of the State will be best fostered, promoted and protected by the construction of the one thousand ton barge canal.”⁶⁸ But Benjamin Odell refused to waver in his sponsorship of the smaller, antiquated, and minimalist canal project. Had only the canal men of upstate New York maintained an equally staunch determination as the governor or their downstate counterparts, this could have proved to be another speed bump easily cleared by the perseverant canal movement. Alas, their quivering, irresolute stance transformed the speed bump into a roadblock, only surmountable by the steadfast fortitude of the Canal Association of Greater New York.

Half Measure Halves Canal Men:

Hungry for canal improvement and fearful that it may never come, canal advocates from upstate New York chose again to take the half loaf of the smaller Seymour Plan, forcing the New York City faction to paradoxically side with anti-canal parties. Following the failed attempts to persuade Governor Odell away from his proposal, “Buffalo interests feared... the 1000-ton barge canal must be dropped.”⁶⁹ Buffalo canal advocates, along with other upstate groups, fell in line with the 450-ton, \$26,000,000 proposition. This vacillation against the larger project was understandable to

⁶⁷ Frank S. Gardner. “The State Commerce Conventions of 1899, 1900, and 1901” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 21.

⁶⁸ Frank S. Gardner. “The State Commerce Conventions of 1899, 1900, and 1901 in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 21.

⁶⁹ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 168.

a degree as upstate groups and politicians faced “strong protests”⁷⁰ from their constituents, a sizeable percentage of whom were farmers, who detested the high cost and route alteration.⁷¹ The smaller, 450-ton plan did indeed have support in many upstate communities as a *New York Times* article described the arguments in support of the former project by using simple numerals and statistics, which was perhaps in propaganda-style as it failed to present any counterevidence.⁷² Yet, based upon their refusals to support the one-thousand ton barge canal proposal during the 1900 Commerce Convention and March, 1901 executive committee meeting, it was readily apparent that the Buffalo canal men were in no significant way loyal to the project. Had the enlargement endeavors eventually failed and the waterway remained as it was in 1901, historians could undoubtedly point the fickle finger of fate upon the Buffalo canal men for their hypocrisy and lack of faith. With the reporting of the \$26,000,000 appropriation bill for the completion of the 1895 enlargement plan on April 4, 1901, various factions and parties aligned themselves in unlikely affiliations, ultimately representing the last major hurdle the one-thousand ton barge canal would have to face prior to 1903.

Although the legislative contest was relatively short, the future of the Erie Canal was at stake and demanded the utmost attention of all involved parties. Supporting the austere canal plan was Governor Odell and the prominent upstate canal advocates, some of whom had until very recently emphatically professed the necessity of a radical canal enlargement. Almost on command, the New York State Grange, the State Farmers'

⁷⁰ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 168.

⁷¹ Howard J. Smith. “Reminiscences of the Barge Canal Campaign” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 182.

⁷² “The Canal Men's Plan,” *New York Times*, April 1, 1901.

Congress and the State Tax and Transfer Tax Reform Association responded in vehement opposition on the grounds that canal enlargement was both damaging to agricultural interests and wasteful spending.⁷³ Joining them in an unlikely alliance were the various commercial and canal associations of New York City, principally the Produce Exchange and Canal Association of Greater New York, “who would have the 1000-ton barge canal or nothing.”⁷⁴ With the latter group posting a resolution demanding nothing less than a one-thousand ton barge canal, and joined by the signatures of “seventeen of the most influential commercial organizations of New York city,” the possibility of passing the bill was near impossible.⁷⁵ With the withdrawal of support by the Tammany Assemblymen, and thus the remainder of any support from New York City, the canal bill was dead, proving that proponents of serious canal enlargement “exerted a political power that had to be reckoned with.”⁷⁶ A fair personification of when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object, the immense cost of the one-thousand ton barge project caused “conservative canal men” to doubt the possibility of its construction and instead were “ready and willing to accept an improvement far less expensive and much less capacious.”⁷⁷ The stubbornness of the commercial and canal bodies of New York City toward any project less than a thousand ton barge canal “was such that there was little or no hope of accomplishing anything.”⁷⁸ With the sharp division, there was a need for unity amongst the canal improvement ranks, especially as the anti-canal forces knew their opportunity to finally crush the enlargement movement was within their grasps.

⁷³ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 268.

⁷⁴ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 168.

⁷⁵ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 71.

⁷⁶ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 70.

⁷⁷ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 270.

⁷⁸ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 270.

With the defeat of smaller enlargement proposal, canal proponents understood that their recent infighting nearly destroyed their progress entirely as “this lack of harmony... roused the canal enemies to renewed efforts to defeat all canal legislation.”⁷⁹ Anti-canal parties recognized this division as “the most hopeful outlook for defeating canal improvement entirely in this State,”⁸⁰ acting on the opportunity by introducing an “appropriation bill for good roads... knowing that by passing it no bill for canals could be voted upon at the same time, according to the Constitution.”⁸¹ Notably absent in the debate were the official opinions of the political parties, as they appeared “reluctant to endorse the Odell referendum on account of the opposition from Greater New York,” as well as the rural farmers.⁸² It would be through the combined efforts of upstate and downstate New Yorkers that the courting of the Republicans and Democrats to more firmly support the larger enlargement cause would be possible. Addressing the hesitation of the political parties to add their two cents, the disunity of the canal proponents, and the ceaseless hostility of anti-canal groups, Senator George E. Green of Binghamton delivered a noteworthy speech rebuking the apparent naivety prominent citizens have of their impact on canal thought. Being from the anti-canal region of the Southern Tier and standing opposed to waterway improvement prior to his involvement on the board of the Committee on Canals, State Senator Green’s speech was wholly indicative of a circulating sentiment of that day, marking a seeming transition of thought regarding the enlargement movement. The core of his 1901 statement was as such:

⁷⁹ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 168.

⁸⁰ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 269.

⁸¹ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 168.

⁸² Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 269.

We need the canals. I come from an anti-canal Senate district. I want to say that we legislators are to blame for this anti-canal sentiment. We go around our districts inveighing against the canals for political effect and our statements have their effect upon the people. Hereafter let us go about telling the way canals will improve the commerce of the entire State. The people will get an improved canal some time. I hope before next year's session of this body that the divided canal interests of this State will come together on the canal improvement question.⁸³

Based upon Senator Green's rationalization of anti-canal sentiment, securing the loyalty and cooperation of these political and commercial parties, along with Governor Odell's Executive Chamber, was fundamental to the realization of the one-thousand ton barge canal.

House Divided Reunited:

Harmony and solidarity would again return to the temporarily estranged pro-canal factions as representatives from Buffalo and other upstate locales met in New York City in June of 1901, at the insistence of the Buffalo Merchants' Exchange.⁸⁴ Along with a continuance of collaboration in the "Campaign of Education," this renewed unity and vigor to support a one-thousand ton barge canal prompted the call for a third Commerce Convention to be held in Buffalo on October 16, 1901. A central focus of this assembly fell in line with the aforementioned education campaign by calling upon all regions of New York State to send delegates to hear and represent "such subjects of State and local importance as interest them."⁸⁵ While presenting various resolutions that attempted to curtail the supposed wrongdoings of railroads, the most significant result of the Commerce Convention was the formal adoption and acceptance by all canal advocates

⁸³ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 270.

⁸⁴ George H. Raymond, "New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 169.

⁸⁵ Frank S. Gardner. "The State Commerce Conventions of 1899, 1900, and 1901" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 22.

and parties present of “the importance and necessity of providing for a thousand ton barge canal in the shortest possible time, in order that the State may retain its present commercial and industrial interests.”⁸⁶ Unlike the hesitant, toothless resolutions of the prior meeting, the third Commerce Convention firmly planted its banner in the larger enlargement scheme, ensuring a steadfast promotion of the barge canal until its formal adoption.

With the strong unity of canal proponents in the pursuit of the one-thousand ton barge canal, a contingent of promotional organizations headed by the Canal Association moved to convince Governor Odell of the worthiness of their cause. The governor, along with prominent governmental, commercial, and canal figures, were invited to a dinner hosted by Gardiner K. Clark, Jr., “a prominent and public-spirited member of the Canal Association” of Greater New York, at his New York City residence on December 6, 1901. The dinner was filled with “frank interchange of opinion” on commerce and nautical improvement in New York State, marked by the usual canal arguments of rate regulation and economic revitalization.⁸⁷ During this conversation, Lewis Nixon, a member of the Canal Association, suggested that the canal locks be enlarged enough to accommodate one-thousand ton barges so that if the State later determined to pursue the waterway’s overall expansion, then much of the cost would already be settled.⁸⁸ This proposal was “favorably received” by Governor Odell so long as it was not “too expensive,” and thusly was included in his annual address to the State Legislature in

⁸⁶ Frank S. Gardner. “The State Commerce Conventions of 1899, 1900, and 1901” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 31.

⁸⁷ Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 53.

⁸⁸ Henry B. Hebert. “Action of the New York Produce Exchange” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 98.

1902.⁸⁹ Although the Canal Association was reluctant to settle for this half measure, they conceded that its status as a positive step toward their overall enlargement goal, and set about “the printing and mailing of documents to a large number of voters.”⁹⁰ Although the bill, known as the Davis Canal Bill, would later be rejected in the State Legislature, the persuasion of Governor Odell marked an undeniably encouraging note in the evolving sentiments toward the Erie Canal’s ambitious expansion.

Among the guests at this dinner in late 1901 was a prominent businessman who had revolutionized the modern world with his steel production and was seamlessly intertwined with the fate of New York State’s famed waterway, Andrew Carnegie. The influence that this industrialist had on the progression of the Erie Canal’s enlargement was immense and undoubtedly worth a digression. At this aforementioned dinner, Carnegie made a statement that touched on every dispute pressing upon proponents of a one-thousand ton barge canal. The steel tycoon remarked on the potential of upstate cities to become “the principal seats of manufacture,” the efficiency of a barge canal over a ship canal, and the role New York State would play in the production of goods and their shipment across the globe.⁹¹ Regarding enlarging the canal, Carnegie had purchased land in Conneaut, Ohio for the purpose of producing pig iron and shipping it to New York foundries for assembly, with “the implicit confidence that New York State would never fail to enlarge that waterway as needed.”⁹² Summarizing his statements best, Carnegie

⁸⁹ Henry B. Hebert. “Action of the New York Produce Exchange” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 98.

⁹⁰ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 53.

⁹¹ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 52-53.

⁹² George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 52.

proclaimed, “I am certain that the Empire State can maintain her position as the Empire State only by developing her manufacturing facilities through the Erie Canal.”⁹³ Although addressed to Governor Roosevelt and read aloud during the previously mentioned celebratory dinner in early 1900, Carnegie readily rejected any qualms that Governor Odell had about canal enlargement. He unabashedly declared that “To spend money upon the present plans for a canal would be a mere waste, while to spend the sum you name for a thousand-ton barge canal, is, in my opinion, essential if New York is to maintain her relative position.”⁹⁴ Included in his remarks was the need for New York to overcome the competition of neighboring cities and states, and later repeated his beliefs in 1903, saying, “Believe me, gentlemen, New York State has only to provide a waterway capable of taking one-thousand ton barges through to meet successfully the threatened triumph of Pennsylvania.”⁹⁵ The continued and unrivalled support of the extremely successful tycoon, Andrew Carnegie, for a canal enlargement with dimensions allowing one-thousand ton barges certainly played a pivotal role in convincing politicians, businessmen, and citizens alike of its valuable worth.

Renewed Drive Sparks New Defiance:

The arrival of a new year welcomed an optimistic rejuvenation amid the ranks of canal proponents as their objectives were again aligned, presenting a powerful front for the enlargement of New York State’s waterways. Although still expressing reluctance and retaining his prior beliefs regarding the role of canals, Governor Odell declared his

⁹³ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 52.

⁹⁴ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 45.

⁹⁵ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 343.

support for the new enlargement bill, which represented a compromise between the previously warring canal factions. The governor's outlook did evidently change to a degree as he conveyed that "New York itself must act... It must make it possible for the canal boat owner to have equal consideration [as railroads] in the matter of dockage and other essentials."⁹⁶ Introduced on January 20, 1902 by Senator George A. Davis of Buffalo, hence named the Davis Canal Bill, the legislation, as first reported, called for an appropriation of \$28.8 million for the completion of the nine foot deepening, enlargement of canal locks to fit one-thousand ton barges, and reduction of number of locks from seventy-two to forty-four.

Nonetheless, the usual canal advocates appeared in Albany to voice their support, while the core opposition was represented by railroad promoter John I. Platt and E. B. Norris of the State Grange. Known for his forthright oratory, Platt leveled an accusation of collusion and conflict of interest against Buffalo canal men. As noted by the *New York Times*, Platt charged "that the steel combination was endeavoring to secure from the State of New York what would virtually amount to a subsidy," citing Carnegie's letter as a prime example of the industrial collaboration.⁹⁷ While stating the certain economic gains western New York would achieve, he decried the enormous expense as "unfair to the rest of the people of the State... to tax them to build up industries in Buffalo."⁹⁸ Platt continued to attempt to divide and diminish public support by noting the sacrifice of causes, such as education, as "the City of New York would be compelled to pay twice as much as it would cost to build all the new schoolhouses which the city needs."⁹⁹ Yet, it

⁹⁶ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 76.

⁹⁷ "Arguments Heard on \$28,000,000 Canal Bill." *New York Times*, February 12, 1902.

⁹⁸ "Arguments Heard on \$28,000,000 Canal Bill." *New York Times*, February 12, 1902.

⁹⁹ "Arguments Heard on \$28,000,000 Canal Bill," *New York Times*, February 12, 1902.

was not the canal opponents that presented the greatest threat to the bill's passage but the division between Oswego and Champlain canal interests that "offered the anti-canal forces the opportunity to defeat canal legislation for the session."¹⁰⁰

However, a fundamental flaw existed in the bill as it only comprised the Erie Canal, not the Champlain or Oswego canals, leading to dissent and resistance among affected parties. Soon, the Senate increased the appropriation to \$31.8 million by including the Champlain Canal, and the Assembly acted similarly by increasing the expenditure to \$37.2 million to include both the Champlain and Oswego canals.¹⁰¹

However, the disagreement over the cost and scope of the proposed project proved to be a lethal detriment to the bill. The deathblow for the canal enlargement bill came with the Senate's adoption of the Champlain Canal into the improvement plan, while excluding the Oswego Canal. Meanwhile, the Assembly had included both canals in their version at the behest of the Oswego Canal interests, as they had become "very bitter."¹⁰² While simultaneously battling a plot by canal enemies to sell the canal lands and possibly construct a railroad in its drained bed, the differing canal bills went to committee.¹⁰³ Canal advocates pleaded with Governor Odell to assist in saving the proposal, but the effort was in vain as "the Governor was opposed to the Oswego Amendment and this opposition was doubtless the cause of its defeat."¹⁰⁴ The governor's opposition may have been due to a number of potential factors, including the perceived possibility of canal

¹⁰⁰ George H. Raymond, "New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 171.

¹⁰¹ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 77.

¹⁰² George H. Raymond, "New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 171.

¹⁰³ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 77.

¹⁰⁴ Henry B. Hebert. "Action of the New York Produce Exchange" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 98.

traffic diversion through the St. Lawrence River, canal tonnage figures that misrepresented the waterway's usage, or perhaps an undeclared support of the "inland route," which an improved Oswego Canal threatened.¹⁰⁵ Regardless of his possible rationales or those of others, the canal improvement bill was dead in the water.

Concerning public sentiment at this time, it must be noted that the failure to pass the 1902 Davis Canal bill "was not attributable so much to the indisposition of the people to go forward with canal improvement as it was to the differences of opinion that obtained among canal advocates as to the character and extent of the improvement."¹⁰⁶ Insinuating corruption and backroom dealing, George Raymond lamented that "Once more was it made plain that in ways that are dark but effective the railroads had again killed canal improvement."¹⁰⁷ Yet, for canal advocates, particularly hardline supporters of the one-thousand ton barge canal, the bill's defeat freed them from the chains of compromise held by the more averse canal parties.

Transforming the legislative defeat into an emboldened victory, canal advocates believed that "the defeat of this canal bill cleared the legislative atmosphere and renewed efforts were made for canal improvement upon the one thousand ton barge plan."¹⁰⁸ A conference held between prominent upstate and downstate canal advocates unanimously decided to continue until successful completion the fight for nothing less than the larger improvement project. The legislative defeats of 1901 and 1902 unquestionably instilled invaluable lessons in the minds of the canal men, lessons they would wisely recognize

¹⁰⁵ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 278.

¹⁰⁶ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 276-277.

¹⁰⁷ George H. Raymond, "New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 171.

¹⁰⁸ Henry B. Hebert. "Action of the New York Produce Exchange" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 99.

and act upon. Through several meetings in the summer of 1902, it was determined that the one-thousand ton barge canal would be the minimum improvement accepted in any future legislation as it gave “the best results to the manufacturing and commercial interests of the State.”¹⁰⁹ Along with this improvement proposal, the Champlain and Oswego canals were included so that a consolidated, all-encompassing strategy could be achieved to prevent the conflict that had recently occurred. However, although it was decided at this time to improve the Oswego Canal, the “Ontario route” was rejected and the “inland route” was recommended.¹¹⁰ With the upcoming 1902 election, it was deemed absolutely essential that the education campaign be accelerated, along with the supportive recruitment of politicians and the press.¹¹¹ Above all, it was established that absolute cooperation amongst all canal interests of New York State was necessary for the most effective execution of waterway improvements. Although anti-canal forces were elated at their apparent victories, as Whitford put it, “Their pleasure, however, might have been chilled, had they perceived the real service they were rendering to the canals in bringing all advocates to a united effort for the large canal project.”¹¹² Such seemed to be an unavoidable recurring theme for the canal foes, yet the unexpected backfires did not slow or weaken their resolve to not just decisively defeat the waterway’s enlargement progress but to drain it entirely. With the election season of 1902 approaching and the canal improvement movement in full stride, the conclusive enactment of the substantial canal enlargement was finally coming into view over the horizon.

¹⁰⁹ Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 54.

¹¹⁰ Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 55.

¹¹¹ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 172.

¹¹² Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 78.

With the tremendous defeats of canal enlargement legislation and objectives throughout 1901 and 1902, one could feel that, other than the lessons learned by canal advocates, the two years had been a waste and an irreplaceable loss of time. This was not so, however, as two legislative successes had been gained almost unnoticeably amid the more controversial, attention-grabbing scenes. The first was the repeal of the \$50,000 capital restriction upon corporations operating on the canal, an action recommended by both the Committee on Canals and the Commerce Commission. As previously discussed, the exact motives for the law's passage were not entirely clear, with Whitford offering theories ranging from supporting smaller canal operators to a plot by railroad firms to limit the canal's competitiveness.¹¹³ The revised law sought to promote canal commerce while protecting it against the potential abuses of its competitor by removing all capital restrictions, but inserting the clause, "No railroad corporation shall have, own, or hold any stock in any such corporation." Passed in 1902, the second piece of canal related legislation was an amendment to the State Constitution that provided for the use of surplus treasury funds to pay the interest or principal of State debt bonds. The amendment stated that if a surplus existed, then a direct tax would not be levied that year to pay for the various projects that these bonds were created to construct. Passed and approved by popular vote in spite of the State "being in the midst of canal and other large public works construction," this law was later amended and played a notable role in the financial aspect of the 1903 legislative battle for the ratification of the Barge Canal Act.¹¹⁴ Although the overall canal progress appeared to be moving slowly, meaningful gains were being made.

¹¹³ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 72.

¹¹⁴ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 78.

The political contest surrounding the upcoming election of 1902 proved to be one of the fiercest in recent history and another crucial moment for canal advocates, as their powerful influence had been proven, forcing the battling political parties to vie for their support. With serious talk of forming a separate canal party, “politicians who had heretofore thought it the proper thing to ignore the canal question soon recognized its importance.”¹¹⁵ Each respective canal association formed delegations to attend the conventions of both political parties “for the purpose of urging the adoption by both parties of planks in their platforms” advocating for the one-thousand ton barge canal.¹¹⁶ Prior to these conventions, the Canal Association and Produce Exchange hosted a dinner at Delmonico’s Restaurant for the press of New York City in order to enlist their support in their enlargement endeavors, thusly fortifying their cause by magnifying their impact upon the common voter.¹¹⁷ In addition to the media, a concerted effort was made to gain the support of the various labor unions and organizations across the state, providing them with pro-canal literature to distribute to its members and other local citizens.¹¹⁸ Consistent with their “Campaign of Education,” canal proponents understood that a wide range of support from every possible group in every possible district would further secure the general acceptance and eventual approval of their one-thousand ton barge canal dream.

¹¹⁵ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 172.

¹¹⁶ Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 56.

¹¹⁷ Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 55.

¹¹⁸ Howard J. Smith. “Reminiscences of the Barge Canal Campaign” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 184-185.

Pursuit of Political Patronage:

With the aim of impressing their waterway enlargement viewpoints upon the highest echelons of power in New York State, the various canal advocacy organizations assembled delegations to articulate their wishes at each party's convention. Attended by a delegation of the usual prominent canal men, the Republican Convention was held in Saratoga on September 22, 1902, where Governor Odell was renominated and a canal plank was adopted. However, due to continued opposition from "country districts," the assembly approved a relatively spineless plank similar to the one two years prior, consisting of "a mere meaningless jumble of generalities."¹¹⁹ Adding to the oppositional noise was the familiar voice of John Platt, who pronounced his usual anti-canal rhetoric on behalf of his employers, the New York Central Railroad.¹²⁰ Although Platt was unsuccessful in preventing the adoption of a canal plank, his words were "vociferously cheered" and undoubtedly influenced the weak language of the canal plank.¹²¹ In his nomination acceptance speech,¹²² Governor Odell attempted to counteract the failure of the Republican Convention "to take an advanced position in the matter" by declaring his full support for the one-thousand ton barge canal.¹²³ Although not receiving an ideal level of support from the Republican Party, the canal delegation determined their mission successful and prepared for the Democratic Convention.

¹¹⁹ Howard J. Smith. "Reminiscences of the Barge Canal Campaign" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 184.

¹²⁰ George H. Raymond, "New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 173.

¹²¹ "Gov Odell Renominated in State Convention," *New York Times*, September 25, 1902.

¹²² "Gov Odell Renominated in State Convention," *New York Times*, September 25, 1902.

¹²³ Howard J. Smith. "Reminiscences of the Barge Canal Campaign" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 184.

Employing similar tactics as before, the pro-canal representatives attended the Democratic Convention also held in Saratoga a week later on October 1, 1902, receiving a much more welcome reception. Eager to defeat the Republicans, the Democratic Party latched onto the delegation's proposal and "adopted a real canal improvement plank."¹²⁴ In an appeal to voters, the Democrats declared themselves the "Canal Party,"¹²⁵ vowing "to save and build up and improve the canals."¹²⁶ The Democratic Party's staunch commitment to the progression of the canal cause could not be denied, particularly declaring their unequivocal pledge:

We covenant with the people to prepare and submit to them immediately for their sanction a plan of canal improvement providing for a barge capacity of 1,000 tons for the Erie and Oswego Canals, and adequate and necessary improvement for the other canals of the State.¹²⁷

Yet, as New York City was the major center of patronage for the Democratic Party and widely known to support the Erie Canal's enlargement, their ardent support for the waterway's improvement should have come as no surprise. Nevertheless, their fervent promotion proved to citizens and those still-hesitant canal advocates that the barge canal project was firmly within their grasp, all that remained was one last relentless campaign to see their dream come to life.

As the November, 1902 election neared, "a strong minority" of canal advocates favored committing all canal men to the Democratic Party due to their canal plank and the considerable amount of support the party gave to the barge canal movement.¹²⁸ An

¹²⁴ Howard J. Smith. "Reminiscences of the Barge Canal Campaign" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 184.

¹²⁵ Howard J. Smith. "Reminiscences of the Barge Canal Campaign" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 184.

¹²⁶ Gustav H. Schwab, "New York City's Part in the Reconstruction of the State's Waterways" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 56.

¹²⁷ "Proceedings of the Convention in Detail," *New York Times*, October 2, 1902.

¹²⁸ George H. Raymond, "New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903" in *Canal Enlargement in New York*

obvious gamble, this decision could have proved to be a poison pill for the canal movement as the Democratic Party narrowly lost the 1902 gubernatorial election. Had the canal forces formally aligned themselves with the Democrats, then the victorious Republicans may “have given a long check to canal improvement, if not for all time.”¹²⁹ Fortunately, more moderate opinions prevailed, and the canal parties wisely chose to stay neutral throughout the election campaigns.¹³⁰ Instead, they focused on promoting their education campaign by again “supplying the country weeklies with ‘plate’ and the city papers with special articles and interviews” in an effort to reach every potential citizen in the hope of persuading them to accept the worth of an enlarged canal.¹³¹

New Design Drafted:

In preparation for the coming storm of legislative and popular debates, the adept canal supporters, Abel Blackmar and Thomas Symons, along with the assistance of George Clinton, undertook the immensely important duty of drafting the barge canal bill. The soon-to-be Barge Canal Act, also known as the \$101,000,000 Act, contained the culmination of all the elements insisted upon by the vast alliance of canal advocates over the recent years. Yet, following his election, Governor Odell, for no apparent reason, again differed from the proposals of the canal advocates by suggesting the pursuance of the “Ontario route” rather than the “inland route.”¹³² This brief episode in December of 1902 caused “the enemies of the canals [to be] filled with joy that a new complication

State, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 173.

¹²⁹ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 173.

¹³⁰ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 174.

¹³¹ Howard J. Smith. “Reminiscences of the Barge Canal Campaign” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 184.

¹³² George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 174.

had arisen,” but the arousal of the waterway’s advocates proved greater and more decisive.¹³³ This dithering in canal contemplation certainly baffled and irritated the waterway’s advocates, particularly as he had already announced his support for the “inland route” to a pro-canal conference as recently as November 24th, according to the *New York Times*.¹³⁴ After several meetings between canal associates and the governor, involving his review of the proposed canal bill, Odell remained non-committal. Still, the governor vowed himself, for the time being, to the barge canal plan with an “inland route,” recommending that its proposal at the start of the 1903 Legislative session.¹³⁵ Due to the frequency with which Governor Odell changed his mind concerning canal matters, it would difficult to obtain an accurate summary of his overall vision for the waterway, only a day-by-day assessment. For the moment, the barge canal’s enactment seemed certain and its supporters could already taste the sweetness of their ultimate triumph.

Although having been battered and bruised over the previous two years from oppositional forces and bitter infighting that threatened to extinguish entirely the flame of the canal enlargement cause, the waterway’s steadfast advocates stood resolute. The construction of the one thousand ton barge canal was their objective, and canal men of New York State swore to see it through to ratification and completion. After all the sweat, blood, and tears, as well as time and money, expended by the tireless champions of the canal crusade to achieve the creation of a modern, long-lasting waterway through

¹³³ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 174.

¹³⁴ “Barge Canal Conference,” *New York Times*, November 25, 1902.

¹³⁵ Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 61.

the heart of the Empire State, their greatest battle was yet to come. Marking the climatic capstone to years of perseverance, the clash of 1903 had arrived.

Chapter V

Converting Tumultuous Discord into Legislative Triumph: Cataloguing the Colossal Legislative Campaign Culminating in the Lawmakers' Confirmation of the Barge Canal Act of 1903

With the notable exception of the Erie Canal's enactment in 1817, 1903 proved to be the greatest year in the canal history of New York State. After years of superfluous success and pernicious pitfalls, the plan for the Erie Canal's enlargement experienced disparate incarnations. Evolving in size and scope from a simple deepening and widening of the preexisting waterway to a grand but audacious ship canal, the strategy found its final manifestation as a one-thousand ton barge canal. Most remarkable was how the project's route had come full circle from the earlier failed undertakings in the early 1800s of the Western Inland Lock Navigation Company to canalize the natural waterways of upstate New York to a readoption of this tactic in light of the improved technologies of the advanced industrial age. Even more thought-provoking, it was undeniably the Erie Canal that helped foster this industrial growth, which allowed later mechanization to permit such a scheme of enlargement. Through the dedicated and determined work of canal advocates over the previous decade or more, the waterway improvement was persistently kept in the minds of New York's politicians, press, and public. Whether or not one agreed with their cause, the movers and shakers of this endeavor certainly deserve recognition for their ceaseless devotion to an impassioned conviction.

Governor's Testimony and Tangent:

The first cannon shot of that fateful year of 1903 came with Governor Benjamin Odell's annual message to the State Legislature on January 7, 1903. In his typical fashion concerning canal improvement, the governor broadcast words of encouragement for the project while steering the ship toward the rocks with ruinous addendums. Declaring, "I

now reaffirm my belief in the thousand ton barge plan,” Odell continued his support by urging “strongly upon the Legislature the necessity for immediate attention. . . and that the people may be put in possession of every detail that is necessary to enable them to speedily vote” upon the referendum.¹ Referencing the failed legislation of the previous year, both lawmakers and canal men were pressed to be inclusive by ensuring that “every consideration shall be given to the various interests involved,” while still remembering that “the prosperity and upbuilding of our State are foremost.”² Notably, Odell rejected the compromissory 1902 proposition, officially known as the Davis Canal Bill, as its failure convinced him that there was “an honest belief upon the part of many members of the Legislature that the plan proposed was inadequate to meet the requirements of commerce.”³ Thusly, the longstanding minimalist proposal of merely completing the nine foot depth of the 1895 Law was also rejected, essentially reducing the question of canal improvement to either adopting the thousand ton barge or nothing. Additionally, the governor endorsed the “inland route” over the “Ontario route” as he correctly acknowledged that use of the latter path “would be impossible because of adverse winds and dangers of navigation.”⁴

At this point in his speech, Odell began to deviate from the confirmed resolutions and stances of the canal groups. Beginning his discussion on the cost of the waterway enlargement, the governor defended the rather lofty price tag, asserting that New Yorkers “should not be deterred from any expenditure that will hold the supremacy of which we

¹ New York State, *Journal of the Assembly of the State of New York* (Albany, NY: James. B. Lyon, State Printer, 1903), p 3016-3017.

² New York State, *Journal of the Assembly of the State of New York*, p 3016-3017.

³ New York State, *Journal of the Assembly of the State of New York*, p 3016-3017.

⁴ New York State, *Journal of the Assembly of the State of New York*, p 3018.

are all justly proud.”⁵ Continuing, he further endorsed the estimated budget, which was “supported by data and figures that there shall be no dissent from the deductions which are thus arrived at.”⁶ However, Odell framed the proposed expenditure in an unappealing and downright damaging manner by adding to the total the cost of the fifty year, three percent interest bonds. With these figures, the governor “threw cold water again on canal proponents,”⁷ as the reported construction cost skyrocketed from Bond’s 1901 estimate of \$81,000,000 to over \$193,000,000, or \$215,000,000 if the Champlain Canal was also deepened to twelve feet.⁸ It could be said that presenting the project’s ultimate cost in such a forthright manner should be lauded for its honesty; however, it was a horrendously poor political tactic if the governor was sincerely seeking to achieve the barge canal project’s approval. Anti-canal forces still stood poised to denounce the undertaking as a colossal waste of public tax dollars.

Governor Odell suggested several other considerations, which roused both sides and stirred further debate. With the rising interest in and use of electricity, a system of mechanical haulage using electric motors for the rapid propulsion of vessels was suggested as a topic of further inquiry.⁹ This idea had been pondered in recent years as numerous tests took place across the state, with one member of the Committee on Canals studying its potential intensively. Concerning the barge canal project, this proposition was dangerous as its possible success and overall efficiency would require only a minor

⁵ New York State, *Journal of the Assembly of the State of New York*, p 3016-3017.

⁶ New York State, *Journal of the Assembly of the State of New York*, p 3016-3017.

⁷ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903,” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909), p 174.

⁸ New York State, *Journal of the Assembly of the State of New York* (Albany, NY: James. B. Lyon, State Printer), p 3018.

⁹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, Vol. 12 (Buffalo, New York: Buffalo Historical Society, 1908), p 281.

improvement to the preexisting waterway, effectively eliminating the need for a greater enlargement.¹⁰ Prior experiments had proven it ineffective, but still, more trials would be carried out in the coming year and canal foes would utilize its accompanying curiosity to try to delay the waterway's enactment and distract the public.

With the proposed reversal of a thirty-year-old law, Odell's last significant statement recommended the "reimposition of limited tolls" on canal traffic if the barge canal received approval.¹¹ The governor's reasoning for reviving tolls was to generate enough revenue to provide for the maintenance of the canal.¹² It was contended that "the lowering of the freight rates would be so great" that a toll could be applied "without interfering with the results which it hoped to accomplish under this plan."¹³ This was a confident claim coming from a man who was previously dismissive of the waterway's supposed economic effectiveness, yet it was consistent with his position voiced in 1901 that the canal's primary role was "protection against unfair rate discrimination [by railroads] than for actual use."¹⁴

Canal advocates and commercial organizations were distressed at even the mentioning of tolls, having authored a document a month earlier against the scheme. Penned by subcommittees of the New York Produce Exchange and Canal Association of Greater New York on December 18, 1902, the report expressed that New York City's business interests were apprehensive that tolls would "impair the efficiency of the canals

¹⁰ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 281.

¹¹ New York State, *Journal of the Assembly of the State of New York*, p 3019.

¹² Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 282.

¹³ New York State, *Journal of the Assembly of the State of New York* (Albany, NY: James. B. Lyon, State Printer), p 3019.

¹⁴ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State* (Albany: J.B. Lyon, Printers, 1922), p 68.

as competitors of the railroads.”¹⁵ Citing the previously discussed 1882 letter of ex-Governor Horatio Seymour, the authors used his sharp words in place of their own to argue the possible detrimental consequences of reinstalling tolls. It was as clear to Seymour in 1882 as it was to barge canal advocates in 1903 that free canals were necessary to protect against the “evils of combinations or unjust discriminations against our State” by railroads and promote the economy as “tolls are taxes of the most hurtful kind to the whole community... they fall oppressively upon labor, industry, and commerce.”¹⁶ While acknowledging the fact that “all foreign canals are operated under the toll system,” it was argued that the Erie Canal “occupies a position radically different from that of any other canal,”¹⁷ due to its status as “the sole possible competitor of numerous powerful and allied railroad lines.”¹⁸ The canal men deemed the reimposition of tolls to be a “backward step, and a regrettable reversion of the enlightened policy adopted by the people of the State.”¹⁹ Yet, the report conceded that the proposal could be entertained at a later date, but “should be deferred until experience has demonstrated what toll may be safely imposed without impairing the efficiency of the canals.”²⁰

In evaluating his annual address, some could commend Governor Odell for welcoming inquisitive suggestions in his speech so that all ideas may be heard before

¹⁵ Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909), p 59.

¹⁶ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 195.

¹⁷ Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 60.

¹⁸ Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 60.

¹⁹ Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 58.

²⁰ Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 60.

making a final decision. However, his recommendations were mainly detrimental and only proved to muddy the debate with proposals that both sides knew were impractical and foolhardy. These needless considerations played right into the hands of the anti-canal forces as they eagerly pursued any attempt that would postpone its enactment or divide public and pro-canal sentiments as per the best course of action regarding improvements. Furthermore, his added suggestions overwhelmed the common voter with unnecessary information and considerations when they only needed to understand the core facts and details of the project. Although the governor would eventually come around to the thousand ton barge project as the canal men presented it and fully promoted its approval to the citizens throughout the latter half of the year, Odell ultimately did more harm to the enlargement movement than good, only adding fuel to the fire of conflict with each passing comment.

Barge Canal Act Introduced:

Rather than being discouraged by Governor Odell's recommendations, canal proponents energized by seizing the occasion as a call to arms while canal enemies laid in wait to ambush the project at every opportunity, the Barge Canal Act was introduced in the Assembly by Charles F. Bostwick on January 15, 1903.²¹ With an appropriation of \$81,000,000, the bill called for the enlargement of the Erie and Oswego canals to a depth of twelve feet and the Champlain Canal to a depth of seven feet with the ability to accommodate one thousand-ton barges. This proposal would include a course diversion through the canalization of the natural waterways east of the Clyde River and an enlargement of the preexisting waterway westward.²² Later that month, a secret

²¹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 282.

²² New York State, *Journal of the Assembly of the State of New York*, p 36-37.

conference was held in Albany between the prominent canal men representing the various regional interests and business organizations to confirm their legislative course of action.²³ As a result of this meeting, a slightly modified canal bill was introduced by Senator George A. Davis two days later on January 28, 1903 requesting \$82,000,000.²⁴ These bills soon came to be known by several names, among them were the Barge Canal Act, the Bostwick-Davis Act, and later the \$101,000,000 Act. Naturally, the two pieces of legislation encountered immediate hostility upon their introduction, facing the usual proposition of laws to undermine or simply postpone its passage.²⁵ However, just like their portrayal of the waterways as worn out and antiquated, the canal foes sought to employ their own overused and outdated maneuvers to defeat the improvement bills, but many lawmakers could now see through the guise and canal advocates were thoroughly prepared to counter them.

Hearings and Harassment:

To discuss the massive public works project, both in cost and scope, joint hearings were held to offer an open forum for canal advocates and adversaries. Held on February 3rd, the first hearing of canal question proved to be one of the most active of the entire legislative campaign, marked by notable accusations and mudslinging. The usual prominent canal men were in attendance to present their opinions, while the opposition was mainly represented by the State Grange and railroad lobbyist John I. Platt. In defense of the canal, George Clinton argued against Governor Odell's numerous

²³ George H. Raymond, "New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903," in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 175.

²⁴ New York State, *Journal of the Senate of the State of New York* (Albany, NY: James. B. Lyon, State Printer, 1903), p 66.

²⁵ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 284.

recommendations, declaring that an electric propulsion system would not be feasible as it would confine its prosperity to a few people who held patents on the machinery.²⁶ Espousing the necessity of the waterways, he argued that the regulation of railroad freight rates was enough to warrant its construction, furthering the position of rejecting the reinstating tolls as “canals should be free to all.”²⁷ Thusly, it was concluded that it was “the duty of New York State” to provide commerce with the cheapest “lines of resistance,” and identified the steel and iron plants in Buffalo as an example of the industrial growth that would occur along the waterway.²⁸ Gustav H. Schwab, “one of the most aggressive, intelligent, and persuasive speakers,” took the opportunity to articulate a long forceful speech in the canal’s defense.²⁹ Citing the opinions of the Committee on Canals, Schwab eloquently rejected the proposals of an electric propulsion system, a ship canal, and the “Ontario route,” hoping to effectively quash the subjects for good.³⁰ As one could expect, the opposition continued to hammer at these points during and after the legislative debate.

Before delving into some of the early obstructive schemes of the anti-canal forces, there occurred an extraordinary instance of political drama during the first joint committee hearing on February 3rd when John I. Platt accused Governor Odell of reneging on their prior agreement. While holding “protest against any person pledging the Republican Party to canal legislation,” Platt asserted that the governor and the Republican Party’s Platform Committee, of which he was a member, declared in a secret

26 "Canal Hearing Abstract," *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, February 4, 1903.

27 "Canal Hearing Abstract," *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, February 4, 1903.

28 "Canal Hearing Abstract," *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, February 4, 1903.

29 Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 289.

30 Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 289.

meeting not to support canal improvement, and instead “distinctly pledged the party not to pass such a bill.”³¹ More specifically, Platt stated that “the Governor was forced by canal men to take a position which he did not want to take,” and that the governor had promised him in a private meeting that he would “certainly not” resist the efforts of anti-canal forces.³² He would later modify his statement to say that Odell simply affirmed that he would not use “either his personal or political influence to advance any canal bill.”³³ Platt then went on to chide the other Republican members for their betrayal of their agricultural constituency by supporting any sort of canal bill, proclaiming that their actions could ruin the party.³⁴ When questioned by the Democratic members of the committee, the lobbyist would not divulge whether the Republican politicians and newspapers of the state intentionally duped citizens into believing their endorsement of canal improvement, but simply stated, “I never so represented the actions taken at Saratoga. I can only speak for myself.”³⁵ Amazement swept over the entire hearing, the committee members “seemed completely nonplused by Mr. Platt’s startling revelations, and the crowd of spectators in the room hung eagerly upon every word.”³⁶ Although John Platt was an ardent Republican and known for his fiery oratory, no one had foreseen his actions and the repercussions were enormous.

Platt’s testimony proved to be detriment to the anti-canal efforts as Governor Odell and other Republicans were forced to deny the allegations and declare their utmost support for the project so as not to appear duplicitous. Perhaps Platt was under the

³¹ "Republicans Charge Jugglery on Canals," *New York Times*, February 4, 1903.

³² "Canal Hearing Abstract," *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, February 4, 1903.

³³ "Republicans Charge Jugglery on Canals," *New York Times*, February 4, 1903.

³⁴ "Republicans Charge Jugglery on Canals," *New York Times*, February 4, 1903.

³⁵ "Canal Hearing Abstract," *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, February 4, 1903.

³⁶ "Republicans Charge Jugglery on Canals," *New York Times*, February 4, 1903.

impression that his disclosure would prompt Republican lawmakers to fight the proposed legislation in accordance with their constituents' wishes, or maybe he was simply upset with the alleged unfaithfulness of his fellow Republicans to stand with him against canal improvement and wished to expose them regardless of the consequences. Regardless, Odell and fellow Republicans vehemently denied the allegations, and Platt was forced to retract and amend his statements. Platt backpedaled by first saying that the Republican canal plank did not specifically support a one-thousand ton barge canal, and also that components of the canal bill were incompatible with the Republican platform relating to taxation.³⁷ Thusly, Republicans were not against the canals, they just should not support the version proposed.³⁸ Still, seemingly no one was fooled, and other Republicans refused to jump on the grenade, choosing instead to defect to the pro-canal ranks to save face.

Governor Odell quickly denied such statements as "absurd," saying that "the Saratoga platform absolutely pledged the Republican Party to canal legislation."³⁹ The governor admitted that he likely stated to Platt that he would not interfere with legislative members concerning the canal, but such was his "position with regard to all legislation" as he was "not in the habit of taking members of the Legislature by the throat and telling them how they should vote."⁴⁰ To reinforce the governor's claims, John A. Sleicher, a member of the Resolutions Committee to which Platt was referring, denied all allegations while touting Odell's insistence on adopting the canal plank and rightfully censuring Platt.⁴¹ Although his claim was unlikely due to the typically indifferent or objectionable

³⁷ "John I. Platt Explains," *New York Times*, February 5, 1903.

³⁸ "John I. Platt Explains," *New York Times*, February 5, 1903.

³⁹ "Republicans Charge Jugglery on Canals," *New York Times*, February 4, 1903.

⁴⁰ "Republicans Charge Jugglery on Canals," *New York Times*, February 4, 1903.

⁴¹ "John I. Platt Explains," *New York Times*, February 5, 1903.

stance of Republicans toward canal improvement, Sleicher identified Platt as “standing alone in his opposition” to the canal plank.⁴² Governor Odell and the Republican Party managed to adequately clean up after John Platt’s mess, but the stains remained to blemish any anti-canal endeavors.

This incident infused new blood into the pro-canal movement, which finally gave them something into which they could sink their teeth. In lampooning the episode and promoting the waterway project, the *New York Times* applauded the typically despised lobbyist for his “fearless and outspoken nature” in approaching matters so as to give greater credence to the allegations of Republican deception.⁴³ The article cited another instance when Odell had acted in an unscrupulous manner, and the proof of their wrongdoing was present in “the policy and behavior of the party” filled with “hypocrites and double dealers.”⁴⁴ Along with severely damaging his reputation, John Platt certainly learned that the point of backroom deals was that the words spoken were behind closed doors for a reason and their revelation would be hurtful to all parties involved. Yet, the most painful outcome for the railroad lobbyist was most likely not his shame, but the eventual passage of the Barge Canal Act.

Returning to the impeding efforts of anti-canal forces, there were some noted legislative attempts to undermine and defeat the Barge Canal Act in the time prior to the March 2nd release of Bond’s updated cost estimates, each simple reincarnations of prior subversions. These should be referred to as minor attempts of the anti-canal movement due to the minimal waves they caused. The first attempt came at the hands of Senator

⁴² "John I. Platt Explains," *New York Times*, February 5, 1903.

⁴³ "Mr. Platt's Disclosures," *New York Times*, February 5, 1903.

⁴⁴ "Mr. Platt's Disclosures," *New York Times*, February 5, 1903.

Henry S. Ambler as soon as January 23rd with the reintroduction of the Ambler Resolution, which called for the repeal of the constitutional amendment forbidding the sale, lease, or other disposal of the State canals.⁴⁵ Like its predecessor, the resolution entered committee hearings and quickly died. The next piece of legislation was introduced on February 2nd to amend the Constitution to allow for the draining of the canals in order to build a railroad in its bed and lease it “upon certain terms.”⁴⁶ Like the previous bill, this was again a reintroduction of an earlier failed bill that soon entered committee discussion and would remain there.⁴⁷ A more detailed discussion of these proposed and failed pieces of anti-canal legislation would not be warranted as they were merely rehashes of older bills and the arguments used to defeat them a second time had already been firmly established.

The only minor bill that gained some significant attention was the call for \$50,000,000 for the construction of “good roads” immediately following the introduction of the barge canal acts.⁴⁸ In a move that mirrored their prior 1901 attempt, the “still active and persistent canal adversaries” sought to complicate the legislation by demanding that canal improvement could only occur with the accompaniment of road improvement.^{49, 50} However, the approach differed in that canal foes wished to combine the two projects into one appropriation bill for \$132,000,000 rather than strive for the enactment of the road improvement bill first, referring to a constitutional provision disallowing the passage

⁴⁵ New York State, *Journal of the Senate of the State of New York*, p 56.

⁴⁶ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 92.

⁴⁷ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 92.

⁴⁸ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903,” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 175.

⁴⁹ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 87.

⁵⁰ George H. Raymond, “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903,” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 168.

of two major public works projects in one legislative session.^{51, 52} Instead of taking the former constitutional approach, anti-forces wished to frighten and dissuade lawmakers and voters from approving the plan due to the enormous price tag. Despite making some headway, the diversion technique would fail, particularly due to the fallout of Platt's statements as Governor Odell was forced to comment on and reject the matter. Regarding the combined proposition, the governor stated, "I told them [road improvement delegation] plainly that I was opposed to it... I do not see any reason why they should be coupled in legislation. I believe each proposition should be considered on its own merits."⁵³ The repeated introduction of previously defeated bills highlighted the increasing inability of anti-canal forces to present effective resistance to the intensifying desire for the construction of the one-thousand ton barge canal.

Epitomizing their silver bullet, anti-canal forces launched an attack to discredit the trustworthiness of the engineers' conclusions, an interesting and blatant maneuver to deflect attention away from their very recent exposure. On February 10th, canal adversaries managed to pass an Assembly resolution demanding that State Engineer Bond reanalyze his cost estimates of the thousand ton barge canal by March 1st.⁵⁴ Such represented a commonly used tactic to delay the legislation, but more so "the idea of the canal enemies being not to get accurate figures but by some means to make the estimates so high that the people would be frightened and demoralized at their magnitude."⁵⁵ In response, the expert engineers Major Thomas Symons, Professor William H. Burr,

⁵¹ "Republicans Charge Jugglery on Canals," *New York Times*, February 4, 1903.

⁵² George H. Raymond, "New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903," in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 168.

⁵³ "Republicans Charge Jugglery on Canals," *New York Times*, February 4, 1903.

⁵⁴ New York State, *Journal of the Assembly of the State of New York*, p 217.

⁵⁵ George H. Raymond, "New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903," in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 176.

George S. Morrison, and Alfred Noble expressed their “emphatic opinion” in defense of the investigative study of the canal.⁵⁶ At the second hearing, Professor Burr described the operations as being characterized “by a degree of thoroughness and technical preparation which has never been excelled in the consideration of any similar engineering question.”⁵⁷ The canal supporters had made their case, but both parties would have to wait until the release of Bond’s updated estimate to secure the legislation’s success or failure.

Hampered by more disruptive activity from canal adversaries, the three week period between the call for and release of Bond’s revised report witnessed pivotal endorsements both for and against the Barge Canal Act. Present at the second hearing of the joint committee on February 17th were statewide representatives of the anti-canal movement, and naturally John Platt and the State Grange articulated the loudest outcries.⁵⁸ Platt continued his usual rhetoric by refuting the claim that canals had any effect on freight rates, but made an interesting note in pointing out that the construction cost of the barge canal should be included in the assessment of its freight rate.⁵⁹ Signifying a resurging trend principally begun at this hearing, Master of the State Grange E. B. Norris of Sodus expressed his support of a Federal ship canal and noted in support the fact that “farm property in Central New York had depreciated 75%.”⁶⁰ In responding to both Platt’s and Norris’s claims, ex-president of the Society of American Civil Engineers George S. Morrison stated firstly that the Erie Canal needed to be improved to

⁵⁶ Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 63.

⁵⁷ “Abstract of Third Joint Committee on Canals,” *Buffalo Express*, February 25, 1903.

⁵⁸ “Anti-Canal Men Heard,” *New York Times*, February 18, 1903.

⁵⁹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 289.

⁶⁰ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 289.

effectively “regulate and compete with the railroads.”⁶¹ In opposing the ship canal proposal, he appealed to agrarians by noting that a ship canal “would be much more expensive and would be of greater interference to the country through which it would pass,” requiring a “draw-bridge at every farm crossing.”⁶² Additionally, Morrison identified that the Federal government had abandoned the ship canal proposal as “it was decided that such a canal would benefit New York State only,” leaving New Yorkers to pay for the colossal project.⁶³ Proponents of the barge canal had hoped the ship canal matter had died, but anti-canal and pro-ship canal forces gave a renewed interest in the subject, despite each holding different end goals.

Representing a sizeable portion of the antagonism at the hearing were representatives of the communities which would subsequently have canal traffic diverted from or into their respective areas, such as Oneida, Cortland, and Jefferson counties. One such person and concern was Daniel Spraker, Jr. of the Mohawk Valley, who had been a longtime supporter of the canals, but feared the impact of the proposed Barge Canal upon the canalized Mohawk River. Addressing his fears to the committee and others around the state via circular letters, Spraker noted the disuse of expensive masonry work, the damage to property owners along the soon-to-be abandoned canal, and the necessity of the state to purchase new rights of way, an expensive proposition.⁶⁴ Though raising legitimate points, Spraker reduced the potency of his argument by conveying some misconceptions, such as the greater cost of canalizing the Mohawk River over enlarging

⁶¹ "Abstract of Second Joint Committee on Canals," *Buffalo News*, February 18, 1903.

⁶² "Abstract of Second Joint Committee on Canals," *Buffalo News*, February 18, 1903.

⁶³ "Abstract of Second Joint Committee on Canals," *Buffalo News*, February 18, 1903.

⁶⁴ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, pp 311-312.

the paralleling canal and the threat of flooding.⁶⁵ While his previous eight concerns were common amongst anti-canal forces and could be debated, the last two points were noteworthy, speaking to the intangibles of rerouting the canal through the Mohawk River. Spraker explicitly stated he was “in favor of canal improvement and not of canal abandonment” and noted its importance “to check the monopoly of the railroads,” but noted that the proposal needed to be approved at the polls and that the rerouting of the canal through the river, or the major rerouting of waterway’s course in general, “would prove too intangible to win their approval.”⁶⁶ The final point was one of aesthetics and local pride as he noted “the idea of canalizing the historic Mohawk sounds well and may be captivating to the minds of many,” but the loss of the river’s romance would be unbearable.⁶⁷ Wishing to preserve “this beautiful river from the taint of pollution,” Spraker would “invoke the muses in its behalf” by citing the poetry of Thomas Moore when he travelled upon the river:

‘From rise of morn till set of sun
I’ve seen the mighty Mohawk run.’⁶⁸

Although most delegates from regions effected by the canal’s rerouting were not as poetic and candid as Daniel Spraker, they would present a heavy resistance against barge canal, but ultimately their displeasures were rejected as sectional prejudice, an issue that had long plagued canal causes.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, pp 311-312.

⁶⁶ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 312.

⁶⁷ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 312.

⁶⁸ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 312.

⁶⁹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 313.

Operations Outside of Legislative Litigation:

Outside of the hearings and legislative battle, the barge canal effort received endorsements and denouncements from numerous commercial and political organizations and newspapers. At a meeting on February 19th, the Chamber of Commerce of the State of New York unanimously approved of the thousand-ton barge canal proposal, sending copies of their favoring resolution to the governor and members of the Legislature.⁷⁰ Buffalo represented the most significant canal support with their *Buffalo Courier* and *Buffalo News*, while the newspapers in New York City were more evenly split regarding the matter, with the *New York Times* and *New York Sun* standing for and against the proposal, respectively.⁷¹ The contest to gain popular and political support for the Barge Canal Act was a constant tug of war as advocates combed the state with speeches and dinner while the oppositional newspapers espoused their own interpretations.

With the exception of Buffalo, the upstate communities stood in perpetual resistance to the Barge Canal Act, conveying their resentment through their numerous newspapers. Most discouraging for canal proponents was the appearance of “fierce opposition” exhibited by towns along the canal’s path due to numerous multifaceted reasons.⁷² Cities such as Syracuse and Utica, which had once been ardently in support of the movement, soon turned against it, with Rochester representing the “chief center of defection.”⁷³ The dominant newspapers in these respective regions held anti-canal stances, such as the *Elmira Advertiser* and *Binghamton Republican* in the Southern Tier,

⁷⁰ Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 65.

⁷¹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 294.

⁷² M. M. Wilner. “The New York State Press in the Campaign for Enlargement of the Canals” (Albany, NY: James. B. Lyon, State Printer, 1903), p 190.

⁷³ M. M. Wilner. “The New York State Press in the Campaign for Enlargement of the Canals” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 191.

Watertown Times in the North Country, the *Post-Standard* in Syracuse, and the *Post Express* and *Democrat and Chronicle* in Rochester.⁷⁴ In some places “railroad influence was most effective” that these papers were often brazen in their publicizing of anti-canal articles, refuting widely accepted facts regarding economics and history, such as the *Binghamton Republican* asserting, “It is a fact easily demonstrated that the canals do not control railroad freight rates and they cannot compete with the railroads.”⁷⁵ Others were more straightforward in their opposition, notably the *Binghamton Leader*, which very gleefully stated in a specialized report, “Slowly but surely the scheme for strangling the plan for improving the State system of waterways progresses.”⁷⁶ Regardless of the ebb and flow of popular opinion, the current struggle was in passing the Barge Canal Act through the State Legislature.

In response to their request a month earlier, the Assembly received the revised cost estimates for the proposed barge canal from State Engineer Edward Bond on March 2nd. With a new estimate of \$100,562,993, the reasoning for the roughly \$18,000,000 increase in canal costs was twofold: First, the price of labor and of certain construction materials, particularly concrete, had increased since the original 1900 assessment. In explaining this first cause, Bond revealed a larger national trend that the recent “prosperity of our country has resulted in an increase in the construction of public works of all descriptions,” leading to a steady rise in labor and material prices.⁷⁷ The second principal reason for the augmented price was due to the costs of the constructing the

⁷⁴ M. M. Wilner. “The New York State Press in the Campaign for Enlargement of the Canals” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 190.

⁷⁵ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 294.

⁷⁶ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 310.

⁷⁷ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 90.

Champlain Canal to uniform dimensions with the rest of the canal, adding a further \$10,000,000.⁷⁸ The Champlain Canal was added due to the ceaseless contention of canal advocates of the region, who cited its enormous economic potential in the form of “extensive iron ore deposits in Essex County, paper mills in Glens Falls, and the immense amount of tonnage that passed through the waterway.”⁷⁹ Regarding tonnage figures, Champlain Canal endorsers noted the waterway’s average of 800,000 to 1,000,000 tons annually over the past decade, while the already included Oswego Canal averaged merely 31,000 to 184,000 tons annually.⁸⁰ Whether or not other canal proponents agreed with the economic reasoning for constructing the Champlain Canal to same dimensions as the rest of the waterway, they understood the necessity of retaining solidarity amongst the varying parties so as to best secure the passage of the Barge Canal Act and repeating the mistakes of the past disharmony.⁸¹ Due to newer estimates, the legislation’s framers, Symons, Blackmar, Davis, and Bostwick, along with Bond and several other prominent canal men met and revised the bill. Feeling confident and satisfied with their work, the proposition was reintroduced into both the Senate and Assembly on March 10th as the Davis-Bostwick Act, also known as the \$101,000,000 Act, specifically detailed:

An Act making provision for issuing bonds to the amount of not to exceed one hundred and one million dollars for the improvement of the Erie Canal, the Oswego Canal, and the Champlain Canal, and providing for a submission of the same to the people to be voted upon at the general election to be held in the year nineteen hundred and three.

⁷⁸ New York State, *Journal of the Assembly of the State of New York*, pp 592, 598-600.

⁷⁹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 301.

⁸⁰ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 302.

⁸¹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 303.

Believing that “their wish had come true,”⁸² anti-canal forces were elated due to the “alarm” citizens would feel at the increased cost, which served as their “only hope for defeating canal legislation.”⁸³ However, this was not the case as Senator Bostwick reported to the *New York Times* that “the total is rather less than we expected,” causing anti-canal forces to feel great disappointment.⁸⁴ Instead of being dismayed, “the friends of the project changed their plans to fit the new situation and pressed on with greater zeal.”⁸⁵

Attempts at Usurpation:

While some were preoccupied with the restructuring of the Barge Canal Act in light of the new cost estimates, canal adversaries did not miss a beat as they introduced several propositions which incorporated technologically advanced components that succeeded in attracting the curiosity of the public. Introduced on March 11th by the International Towing and Power Company, the project called for the construction of an “elevated traction-way outside the towpath,” so as not to interfere with animal haulage, which would use motorized cables to propel vessels along the canal.⁸⁶ Endorsed by F.O. Blockwell, Chief Engineer of General Electric, and John Clark, the engineer of the Rapid Transit Commission of New York, the system claimed that the venture could transport freight from Albany to Buffalo at a cost of 50 cents per ton, and the equipment would cost \$7,500,000, excluding construction costs.⁸⁷ Known as the Hawley System, the scheme argued that one of its greatest advantages over other options was “that no railroad

⁸² Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 91.

⁸³ "Millions Added to Canal Estimates," *New York Times*, March 3, 1903.

⁸⁴ "Millions Added to Canal Estimates," *New York Times*, March 3, 1903.

⁸⁵ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 91.

⁸⁶ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 307.

⁸⁷ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 307.

or transportation company would be able to buy or absorb the system or control its operation.”⁸⁸ The notion of utilizing some form of land based motorized propulsion had been present in one or another since the 1890s, but had always faced stern opposition from canal men. They argued that the claimed increase in speed and cheaper ton-mile cost were minute and had identified as early as 1894 that the idea would “be used to cover up their greatest need, the deepening of the canal.”⁸⁹ The fears of canal men were dissuaded as Senator Davis refuted the plan’s hallmark claim of low haulage cost by noting “that already boats were being towed by steam canal boats for 50 cents a ton from Buffalo to New York, 150 miles farther for the same amount of money.”⁹⁰ Although it piqued public interest, the proposition was not favorably endorsed by either the Assembly or Senate and died in committee, being identified by canal proponents as another attempt “to circumvent the passage of the referendum measure.”⁹¹

Days later, another “strange proposition” meant to subvert the barge canal movement was introduced by former State Senator Charles A. Stalder to form a corporation to build a railroad in the bed of the drained canal.⁹² Claiming to be able to transport freight from Buffalo to Albany in 24 hours, roughly one-half to one-third that of canal boats, at an “expense positively no greater than the ‘present antiquated system.’”⁹³ Such a scheme was “so visionary as not to receive serious consideration,” especially as the new railway would assumedly not hold any distinct advantages over other established railroads.⁹⁴ Taking this assumption to be correct and citing the 1900 railroad average of

⁸⁸ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 307.

⁸⁹ "Feeling of the Canal Boatmen," *New York Tribune*, January 12, 1894.

⁹⁰ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 93.

⁹¹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 307.

⁹² Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 307.

⁹³ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 92.

⁹⁴ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 307.

5.9 mills per ton-mile, the proposed barge canal would still be ten times cheaper than the railroad.⁹⁵ Stadler's plan was rejected not only for its economic fallacies but also for New Yorkers' disdain for relinquishing authority of its waterways. Obviously, this idea caused considerable déjà vu for anyone closely following canal matters as it was merely a more detailed and better articulated version of the rejected proposal a month earlier. If there was any indication of the growing desperation of anti-canal forces, this instance was the red flag.

While the Hawley System was deliberated by the joint commission, a more serious threat to the Barge Canal Act was presented by Assemblyman Charles S. Plank of St. Lawrence County proposing to amend the Constitution, reintroducing canal tolls.⁹⁶ The resolution was reported out of the Assembly Judiciary Committee on April 3rd and was passed on April 8th by a vote of 76-50, receiving a bare constitutional majority.⁹⁷ Transmitted to the Senate, the amendment was referred to the Senate Judiciary Committee, but was never reported out. Although its passage by the Assembly and transmission to the Senate succeeded the passage of the Barge Canal Act, it proved to be a significant hazard as the Constitution forbade the submission of a bonding referendum to the people at the same time as a constitutional amendment.⁹⁸ Hill noted how it "required much attention in the Legislature to hold in check proposed amendments to the Constitution" as there were typically many "and some very urgent" presented annually.⁹⁹ Thankfully for canal advocates, Senator Henry Hill exercised his tactful political skill and

⁹⁵ Francis V. Greene, *Report of the Committee on Canals of New York State* (New York: [Committee on Canals of New York State], 1900), p 3.

⁹⁶ New York State, *Journal of the Assembly of the State of New York*, p 630.

⁹⁷ New York State, *Journal of the Assembly of the State of New York*, p 1711.

⁹⁸ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 308.

⁹⁹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 309.

clout to amend that particular constitutional clause in 1903, and finalized this maneuver in 1905. Here again, one should realize the immense importance of supportive and devoted canal advocates to protect the movement against the ploys of its equally capable foes, and the waterway enthusiasts owe an enormous debt of gratitude for their efforts.

As barge canal advocates succeeded sufficiently in deflecting and defeating the incessant propositions and amendments launched by anti-canal forces, they were greeted by a sleeping giant in the form renewed efforts of ship canal proponents. Despite their best efforts to refute the feasibility and practicality of a ship canal before it even reemerged, canal foes managed to bring the proposal back to the forefront of public and political debate. Those supportive of the project were comprised of two factions, those who were true believers in the superiority of a ship canal over a barge canal, and anti-canal forces who knew that the larger, more expensive ship canal could steal away support from the barge canal movement, but knew its enormous cost would subsequently deter its referendum passage. The ship canal campaign came to fruition on February 19th with the introduction of a measure calling for “the construction of a deep waterway from Lake Erie to the Hudson River.”¹⁰⁰ Proposed by Senator Merton E. Lewis of the anti-canal area of Rochester, the bill would cause the Barge Canal Act tremendous difficulty upon its reporting out from the Senate Committee on Finance on March 17th.¹⁰¹

The ship canal project again gained considerable traction, exemplified in the calling of a meeting on March 13th in New York City for the discussion of a continental system of deep waterways.¹⁰² Attended by “several prominent New York gentlemen,” an

¹⁰⁰ New York State, *Journal of the Senate of the State of New York*, p 223.

¹⁰¹ New York State, *Journal of the Senate of the State of New York*, p 2523.

¹⁰² Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 304.

international convention “including all the peoples of North America” was proposed to establish deep waterways for the purposes of transportation and “irrigating the arid and arable lands of the continent.”¹⁰³ Consequently, this new self-declared ship canal committee pressed the Federal government to reopen investigations into the waterway’s construction. This scheme received wide publicity “without due consideration” from the press as the *New York Mail* and *New York Express* highly endorsed it,¹⁰⁴ and the *New York Tribune* espousing that “the system would give American vessels absolute control for all time to come of the foreign commerce of this continent.”¹⁰⁵ Senator Hill later stated that the proposal’s advocates “had little hope of its final passage,” believing instead that they would be able to alienate supporters away from the barge canal referendum “by proposing the alternative proposition” of a ship canal.¹⁰⁶ Yet, M. M. Wilner described the general sentiment best, stating that “it is always hard to convince the American public that the biggest thing is not necessarily the best.”¹⁰⁷ Due to the efforts of ship canal supporters and the inability of barge canal men to persuade some citizens otherwise, “the ship-canal delusion undoubtedly cost the barge canal project many votes.”¹⁰⁸

Pressing Closer to Passage:

Nearing mid to late March, the intense Legislative debates surrounding the enactment of the Barge Canal Act finally ensued with the shadow of the ship canal

¹⁰³ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 304.

¹⁰⁴ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 305.

¹⁰⁵ "Deepwater Ship-Canal: Ethan Allen Presents Memorial," *New York Tribune*, March 14, 1903.

¹⁰⁶ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 305.

¹⁰⁷ M. M. Wilner. “The New York State Press in the Campaign for Enlargement of the Canals” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 191.

¹⁰⁸ M. M. Wilner. “The New York State Press in the Campaign for Enlargement of the Canals” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 191.

proposal hanging in the background. Though canal foes attempted to delay the addressing of the canal improvement bill as long as possible, advocates made a tactful parliamentary move by threatening to delay debate and voting upon important tax legislation until the waterway matter was heard.¹⁰⁹ The move succeeded, and the Senate was the first to begin deliberations as the bill reached the floor on March 24th, and almost on command Senator Lewis attempted to delay action by recommending the referral of the bill back to committee to include his ship canal proposition.¹¹⁰ However, his attempts would be dismissed as obstructionist, and his ship canal plan was further scoffed at as he attempted to cite the names of prominent New Yorkers who were supposedly opposed to the barge canal referendum. Upon further inquiry and reception of telegrams from some of the named parties, some stated that they agreed “under a misapprehension of the purport of the resolutions,” and were in fact “in favor of the barge canal referendum.”¹¹¹ No doubt an embarrassing blunder, it would not slow Lewis’s thunderous roll.

Despite being caught in a lie, or simply misrepresenting information, Lewis continued to support the ship canal and criticize the barge canal proposal by claiming the latter project was centered on information that was poorly gathered “in too hurried of a manner to be satisfactory as to the details.”¹¹² Seeking to illuminate reprehensible sectional and business interests in the construction of a barge canal, Lewis and other anti-canal legislators questioned the possible ulterior motives of the Buffalo canal men, specifically referencing the grain trade and steel manufacturing.¹¹³ Defending his and his

¹⁰⁹ "Canal Bill First The Tax Measures Must Await Action," *Troy Times*, March 24, 1903.

¹¹⁰ New York State, *Journal of the Senate of the State of New York*, p 631.

¹¹¹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 319.

¹¹² "Abstract of the Speech Delivered by Senator Lewis," *Rochester Union and Advertiser*, April 2, 1903.

¹¹³ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 319.

fellow Buffalonians' integrity against this allegation, Senator Davis avowed, "Nothing could be farther from the truth, or from the real reason why Buffalo especially demands the thousand ton barge canal."¹¹⁴ Admitting that Buffalo once "enjoyed a very large and profitable business" in grain, Davis expressed how those days had passed and that a barge canal was necessary to usher in a new age of industry for Buffalo and the rest of New York State.¹¹⁵ Rebuking Lewis and his ship canal proposal as simply a stall tactic, Davis aggressively remarked, "We are now met with the most remarkable schemes to solve this problem, submitted by men who have suddenly concluded that everyone is wrong but themselves as to what should be done!"¹¹⁶ Clearly, the tension throughout the debate was at heightened level with each side trading blows. Still, Lewis and his colleagues appeared to be on the defensive as the former emphatically declared at least twice in his speech that his ship canal plan was not initiated "for the purpose of sidetracking the barge canal proposition."¹¹⁷

Retorting the statements of Senator Lewis and other barge canal adversaries, Senator Henry Hill acknowledged that the ship canal subject had been debunked so many times in the past that an extensive conversation on its merits was not necessary. Hill pointed out its economic inefficiencies, the absence of firm Federal support, the refusal of New Yorkers to relinquish authority over the waterways, and other applicable and repetitious reasons.¹¹⁸ Ultimately, Hill simply concluded that "the ship canal scheme is so impractical and visionary as not to deserve serious consideration," and rejected Senator

¹¹⁴ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 328.

¹¹⁵ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 328.

¹¹⁶ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 329.

¹¹⁷ "Abstract of the Speech Delivered by Senator Lewis," *Rochester Union and Advertiser*, April 2, 1903.

¹¹⁸ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 323.

Lewis's attempts as having "no effect other than the delay or possibly the defeat of canal improvement in this State."¹¹⁹ Although Senator Hill effectively contested Senator Lewis's claims, more help would be needed to secure the Barge Canal Act's passage.

Presenting a formidable force in the Senate, Senator Thomas F. Grady exerted his powerful influence as leader of the Democratic Party to keep members in line with the canal cause. He appealed to Democratic members to hold to their party platform of canal improvement while severely criticizing Republicans for their reversal and "recreancy to their platform."¹²⁰ In an avowal to Republicans regarding their disowning of their barge canal resolution, Grady warned that "the people will never again give you an opportunity to betray them again on this subject," and instead called for cooperation so as to prevent "the basest betrayal of public confidence in the history of the Commonwealth."¹²¹

Further, Grady accused ship canal supporter Andrew Green of only harboring such beliefs due to his railroad affiliations, a bold but unsubstantiated claim.¹²² Senator Grady would be praised by canal supporters and later historians for the immense degree of passion in all canal measures and credited him with the act's passage.

In response to Grady's demands that Republicans stand by their canal platform, Republican senators rejected this as they claimed to only support canal improvement if not funded by direct taxation. However, canal advocates held a solid basis for this method of funding as the aforementioned amendment concerning funding of public works projects was passed and approved by referendum in 1902 with little opposition.¹²³ If

¹¹⁹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 324.

¹²⁰ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 331.

¹²¹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 332.

¹²² Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 332.

¹²³ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 276.

Republicans had been observant the year prior, then they would have noticed and prevented such an impactful law from being enacted. Despite their apparent lack of focus concerning the canal funding amendment, Republicans argued that pursuing the barge canal project would be “saddling the State with this great [financial] burden.”¹²⁴ Subsequently, Senator John Raines denied allegations that “any Republican who voted against the bill would be a traitor,” arguing instead that they would be doing the will of New Yorkers.¹²⁵ Some Republicans were so adamant with their resistance toward canal improvement that declared the successful passage of the Barge Canal Act “would mean the election of the Democratic candidates at the next gubernatorial election.”¹²⁶ The senator went further to say that had the Democratic Party not pledged to canal improvement, Democratic candidate for governor, Bird S. Coler, “would have been elected Governor by 50,000 majority.”¹²⁷ Yet, the Republicans would not retain solidarity in their resistance toward the act’s approval, noted by Senator George E. Green’s insistence that his fellow Republicans’ rejection of their party platform was “weak and false.”¹²⁸ Regardless of their claims of serving their constituents and the best interests of New York State, it was clear that the Republicans were primarily seeking to retain their own power in a dynamic political atmosphere.

With debate winding to a close and the Senate galleries thronged with inquisitive onlookers, supporting and opposing forces had given their opinion and a final vote was called on the measure. In its entirety, the Barge Canal Act represented the largest public

¹²⁴ New York State, *Journal of the Senate of the State of New York*, p 2817.

¹²⁵ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 334.

¹²⁶ New York State, *Journal of the Senate of the State of New York*, p 642.

¹²⁷ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 334.

¹²⁸ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 335.

works appropriation ever submitted in any state of the Union, and “involved many questions of engineering, of economics and finance, as well as questions of constitutional law.”¹²⁹ Advocates of the barge canal improvement were fearful that those in their ranks would waver if the bill appeared it would fail, but their anxiety would be relieved as the Barge Canal Act received favorable passage of 32 to 14.¹³⁰ One the greatest, most strenuous sessions of the Senate had passed, and with it went the dreams of hardworking canal advocates and the fate of the immense waterway project to be decided by the Assembly.

Having received the Senate’s approving vote, the Barge Canal Act was transmitted to the Assembly on March 25th, and the bill was immediately bombarded with amendments. Notable canal opponent George M. Palmer attempted to delay the debate until March 31st, but was denied his request. The canal improvement measure was brought to the Assembly floor on March 26th where Palmer and Bostwick, the measure’s sponsor, had a spirited debate very similar to those in the Senate.¹³¹ What was notable about Palmer’s speeches was his commenting principally upon his own proposed amendments while shying away from discussing the canal measure at hand.¹³² Though Palmer and other anti-canal assemblymen argued in vain until minutes before the Barge Canal Act was voted upon, their efforts would be undone by their fellow Republicans, just as had occurred in the Senate. Yet, as the *Troy Times* observed, those legislators resistant toward the barge canal improvement were “undismayed by the fact that they

¹²⁹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 335.

¹³⁰ New York State, *Journal of the Senate of the State of New York*, p 634.

¹³¹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 338.

¹³² Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 102.

have been deserted by many of their followers,” and such was “evident by their present attitude” of fervent antipathy.¹³³

Majority Leader Assemblyman James T. Rogers of Broome County withdrew his opposition, stating that he “considered that the canal advocates were entitled to have a referendum measure submitted to the people in the form in which they had framed it.”¹³⁴ Rogers encouraged his fellow Republicans to withdraw their amendments and most followed suit, voting down the remaining amendments against Palmer’s futile objections.¹³⁵ Overall, the Assembly debates were heated and numerous, but not as momentous as those presented in the Senate. Some historians speculated that, based upon the retraction of their amendments, Republicans had accepted that the Barge Canal Act would inevitably succeed and wished to take the winning side.¹³⁶ Due to this abandonment of resistance, the anti-canal forces seemingly accepted the canal bill’s passage and already began preparing their tactics for defeating the referendum later that year. With debate having lasted until the late evening, the Barge Canal Act was put to a vote and received an affirmative reception of 87 to 55 votes.¹³⁷ Such was an astounding success for the canal movement, only rivalled by DeWitt Clinton’s jubilation in 1817.

Canal Plan Passed with Popular Plan Ahead:

Yet, the debates in the Senate and Assembly were not as clear-cut and partitioned as they may appear in historical accounts. Despite the immense degree of partisanship portrayed in the records of the barge canal debates, support for and objection to the

¹³³ "Telegraphic. State Barge Canal. May Be Defeated by Tactics of Anti-Canal Men," *Troy Times*, February 17, 1903.

¹³⁴ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 338.

¹³⁵ New York State, *Journal of the Assembly of the State of New York* (Albany, NY: James. B. Lyon, State Printer), p 615.

¹³⁶ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 338.

¹³⁷ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 103.

waterway blurred the political lines. Politicized arguments were levelled against both parties throughout the hearings as the Democratic Party painted the Republican Party as anti-canal while the latter described the former as reckless and foolhardy. Democrats frequently accused Republicans of betraying their platform and the trust of the constituents while Republicans claimed their support for the waterway's improvement but not for the manner of funding, saying the Democrats' approach would bankrupt the state.¹³⁸ However, as the *Troy Times* pointed out, this black and white perception was "an absolutely mistaken idea, for the reason that there are numerous and active anti-canal men of both Republican and Democratic persuasion, who openly state that they will not be bound by party pledges or partisanship."¹³⁹ The exemplar of the nonpartisan approach toward the Barge Canal Act was Senator George E. Green, a Republican from the vehemently anti-canal area of Broome County whose supportive testimony was recorded earlier. Enlisted for Roosevelt's Committee on Canals as a member "representative of the anti-canal sentiment," Green was converted and became a strong canal advocate, "despite the bitter hostility of his constituency."¹⁴⁰ While Green's stance was evidence of the nonaligned nature of barge canal support, he proved to be an exception to the true divisive factor, geography.¹⁴¹

Reviewing the districts of each politician that cast a ballot on the Barge Canal Act would reveal that those from Buffalo, New York City, Oswego, and other pro-canal regions principally voted in favor while those representatives from Rochester, rural

¹³⁸ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 334.

¹³⁹ "Telegraphic. State Barge Canal. May Be Defeated by Tactics of Anti-Canal Men," *Troy Times*, February 17, 1903.

¹⁴⁰ M. M. Wilner. "The New York State Press in the Campaign for Enlargement of the Canals" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 191.

¹⁴¹ M. M. Wilner. "The New York State Press in the Campaign for Enlargement of the Canals" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 190.

counties, and others located off of the canal's course mainly voted against the bill.¹⁴² Previously explained, the motivations these groups had for championing or objecting to the barge canal proposal were multifaceted, and it would be these rationales that pro and anti-canal forces would focus upon in their upcoming popular campaign. Although political affiliation did play a significant role in the decision-making process of legislators, it would be pertinent for observers to understand the true nature of the opposition toward the Barge Canal as distinctly geographic rather than strictly political. Still, also important to note was that some people, such as Senator George E. Green, simply did not fit into either mold, instead they truly led by their convictions and acted in the manner they believed to be most beneficial to their district's citizens and all citizens of New York State.

Approved by both the Senate and Assembly, the bill was presented to Governor Benjamin Odell on April 7th and signed in the presence of several prominent canal men who had laid their political lives on the line for a project that many derided as an epic folly. However, so many before had said that same very thing about Clinton's great ditch. In the end, George H. Raymond perhaps summarized the moment best, saying, "Today has witnessed the culmination of eight years of labor on the part of the business interests of the State to secure for all time to our people the enjoyment of a free waterway between the Great Lakes and the sea. ... We are now to undertake the greatest public work ever proposed in this country, and the results will be beyond the wildest dreams of its friends."¹⁴³ But before wild infrastructural dream could come to fruition, a long and arduous campaign would be waged to win the hearts and minds of New York State's

¹⁴² New York State, *Journal of the Senate of the State of New York*, p 634.

¹⁴³ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 339.

citizens to support the massive undertaking, and anti-forces would give the entirety of their efforts to turn the canal men's dreams into nightmares.

Chapter VI

Parliamentary Progress Produces Plebiscite Proclamation: Recording the Route from Legislative Ratification to Popular Referendum of the Barge Canal Act in 1903

With the ink of Governor Odell's signature on the Barge Canal Act not yet dried and a popular referendum just officially called for the people's approval in November 1903, canal advocates and opponents prepared themselves for what would prove to be one of the fiercest campaigns in New York State history. In reality, this mobilization began in the midst of the prior legislative battle as both sides understood the necessity of readiness, knowing that only acute vigilance over their rival's tactics and arguments would prevent their cause from being blindsided and ensure that it would achieve popular approval. For clarity, the current labelling of these groups as "anti-canal forces" or "canal enemies" does not necessarily denote them as persons against waterway improvement entirely but simply as those who did not support the construction of the proposed one-thousand ton barge canal. In fact, the anti-canal forces were a multifaceted coalition that included parties in favor of a ship canal, a smaller improvement plan, draining and selling canal lands, or simply doing nothing to the waterway. Canal advocates found themselves successfully navigating one storm, but as it cleared, another came over the horizon to greet them, and the weary canal men equipped themselves for the long haul ahead.

Detailing the Barge Canal Act:

Before delving into the intense popular campaign, the specificities of new Barge Canal Act need to be fleshed out. Regarding the funding of the improvement project, the first noteworthy feature of the new law was that the cost would be borne by the entire state, rather than just counties bordering the waterway as suggested by the Committee on Canals. An apparent reversal of an earlier compromise meant to garner support from non-

canal counties, some could identify this as a political betrayal, but in reality, the proposal faced a constitutional challenge and had to be discarded.¹ Further preventing an uproar amongst citizens in non-canal counties and those canal counties that disapproved of the measure was the fact that Buffalo and New York City paid approximately 90% of “all State expenditures, every public improvement as well as the proposed canal,” leaving an insignificant remainder for the rest to pay.² In his account, Committee on Canals Chairman Francis V. Greene, a Buffalonian and canal advocate, stated his wish to have Buffalo and New York City directly bear 90% of the waterway’s cost as to “disarm the opposition,” and even went as far as to recommend that the two cities “bear the entire expense so as to remove every ground of alleged injustice in taxing the counties which claimed to derive no benefit.”³ However, due to the noted constitutional dilemma, his recommendation would be not be heard, with Greene disparagingly remarking that “it was evidently thought not worthwhile to introduce a new method of taxation for State improvements.”⁴

Another important element of the new Barge Canal Act was its explicit description of the route the waterway would follow, differing greatly from the original path and even altering the course debated upon during the early months of the legislative contest. The route deviations proved to be controversial throughout the waterway’s construction, particularly the rerouting away from Rochester and Syracuse, and the bill

¹ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, (Albany: J.B. Lyon, Printers, 1922), p 116.

² Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 116.

³ Francis V. Greene, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909), p 115.

⁴ Francis V. Greene, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 115.

was too rigid in its description as to require amendments every time an alteration was made, incidentally reigniting debate.⁵ Moving forward through the popular campaign, this issue of the barge canal's course would be frequently raised, and the animosity of affected upstate cities would reflect itself in the press and ultimately in the November referendum.

Addressing one of the most significant grievances that plagued the waterway throughout its history was the Barge Canal Act's reorganization of the structure of canal management, enacting more oversight to protect against corruption and extravagant overspending. The Canal Board, the governing body since the canal's creation in 1826, became the "supreme governing body for the construction of the new canal," but was reorganized to include six elected State officials, the Lieutenant-Governor, the Secretary of State, the Comptroller, the Treasurer, the Attorney-General and the State Engineer and Surveyor, and one appointed official, the Superintendent of Public Works.⁶ This revision was done to ensure the canal officials would be "directly answerable to the people for their actions" so as to not repeat past abuses, and it addressed Teddy Roosevelt's request at the 1900 celebratory dinner to manage the canal in a more "businesslike manner."⁷ The governor was granted greater authority over the waterway, with the Canal Board required to report directly to him, and a special team of five engineers under the governor's authority, known as the Advisory Board of Consulting Engineers, was tasked with monitoring the actions of the State Engineer and Superintendent of Public Works. As a result, the letting of contracts and expending of funds was more tightly regulated, which

⁵ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 117.

⁶ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 118.

⁷ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 118.

created red tape and numerous delays in construction.⁸ However, as Whitford noted, such bureaucratic restrictions allowed for “no suspicion” on the part of citizens and politicians that canal construction had been carried out in an illegal or dishonest manner.

Referendum Agitation Gets an Early Start:

The “Nine-Million Dollar Debacle” in the execution of the new Barge Canal Act.⁹ Although the official passage and approval of Barge Canal Act on April 7th represented a seminal moment for the canal improvement movement, it was simply the façade embodying the much larger war of words and opinions taking place in the background. Pro and anti-canal forces had been printing and disseminating “educational” materials to the public, as well as influencing the press aligned with each’s respective movement to speak favorably of their actions. On March 11th, the Canal Association of Greater New York’s Committee of Agitation began the publication of a “canal primer,” an extensive packet that contained educational materials regarding the then-pending legislative vote on the Barge Canal Act.¹⁰ Paraphrasing the canal primer’s lengthy title as “The Canal System of New York State; What it was; What it is; What it has done; and What it will do,” it contained the answers to frequently asked questions, along with “an exhaustive study of the origin, development, and influence of the canal system of the State.”¹¹ Meanwhile, railroad firms feverishly took up charge by “distributing at various railway stations in the State circulars, pamphlets and other anti-canal propaganda of various kinds, including editorials and addresses” of various canal opponents, such as George H.

⁸ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 119.

⁹ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 119.

¹⁰ Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909), p 67.

¹¹ Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 67.

Daniels.¹² Hill noted that, although it was clearly from a biased source, the dissemination of anti-canal literature at these locations gave railroads a solid advantage over canal advocates in influencing the public.¹³ Still, it would be fair to say that competition to sway the collective opinions of New Yorkers was moving at full steam before a public referendum was even declared.

With the Barge Canal Act signed and awaiting the governor's signature, it was apparent to all parties that the battle would only intensify. This was particularly noticeable to the *New York Times* as they observed that it would be "incumbent upon the Greater New York canal interests to inaugurate a campaign of education without delay."¹⁴ The newspaper arrogantly recommended the specific targeting of the "fanatical" farming faction as "the agricultural mind was unable to grasp apparently" the economic prosperity that would result from an improved canal. The article also alluded to the "trinity of transportation," as it pressed for the education of voters on the ability of roads, canals, and railroads to cooperate and "flourish together."¹⁵ The *New York Times* article concluded by pressing the Buffalo and New York City canal men to collaborate and consolidate their advocacy efforts as "in the ranks of the anti-canal men are some of the ablest and most resourceful politicians in the State" and a "vigorous campaign" was necessary to stifle their strength.¹⁶ Canal proponents took heed of the newspaper's advice

¹² Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, Vol. 12 (Buffalo, New York: Buffalo Historical Society, 1908), p 313.

¹³ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 313.

¹⁴ "State Capital Politics: Canal Men Must Make a Determined Campaign." *New York Times*, March 29, 1903.

¹⁵ "State Capital Politics: Canal Men Must Make a Determined Campaign." *New York Times*, March 29, 1903.

¹⁶ "State Capital Politics: Canal Men Must Make a Determined Campaign." *New York Times*, March 29, 1903.

and forewarning and prepared their men, money, and material for the long campaign of education.

Popular Campaign Officially Begins:

The popular canal campaign was marked by historians and contemporary figures as beginning with a banquet hosted by the Buffalo Merchants' Exchange on May 9th. Held to thank and commend supporters of the Barge Canal Act, the event was attended by "a number of prominent Buffalonians and distinguished citizens" and noteworthy speeches were presented.¹⁷ While thanking the "press of the senate and assembly, who steadfastly supported the legislation," Leonard Dodge, president of the Merchants' Exchange, rejoiced "in giving to the people of this State the opportunity of exercising their sentiment on so vital a project."¹⁸ Dodge implored the canal friends "who have labored so zealously in the past [to] continue to exert every effort during the coming months" to reverse the opposition to canal improvement, which was believed to be "due in a large measure to a lack of knowledge of the subject."¹⁹ Speaking on a similar note, General Francis V. Greene, chairman of the Committee on Canals, exulted the enormous economic potential of the barge canal and his confidence that the referendum would receive approval, but acknowledged that the project would be "vigorously opposed in certain quarters, and to counteract this an active campaign in its favor must be carried on."²⁰

Moving quickly, the various canal advocacy groups and committees throughout New York State were reorganized in order to ensure a more cooperative and efficient

¹⁷ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 341.

¹⁸ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 341.

¹⁹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 342.

²⁰ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 342.

campaign throughout the month of May. The Western New York Canal Enlargement Association and the Canal Enlargement Association of Greater New York were formed to consolidate the promotional efforts of their respective regions and subsequently placed under the supervision of the umbrella organization, the Canal Improvement State Committee.²¹ Composed of representatives from Buffalo, New York City, Oswego, and Champlain, the new union categorically benefitted from the selection some of the most influential and devoted canal men for their leadership.²² The organization established its headquarters in New York City, and George H. Raymond “took active charge of the literary part of the work for canal improvement,” despite being “badly handicapped for funds” with less than \$15,000 for “this great fight.”²³ In carrying out their campaign of education, four principal features were implemented:

1. The publication of canal literature through the newspapers.
2. The distribution of canal literature through letters, pamphlets, leaflets, posters; also agitation of the subject of canal improvement through speakers.
3. Public interviews with persons of importance advocating canal improvement.
4. Mass meetings.²⁴

Although canal proponents were already performing these tasks, the Canal Improvement State Committee wished to achieve uniformity in its operations and message to ensure effectiveness and prevent any division in opinion. To further guarantee consistency in message and present the most applicable, impactful information to each respective audience, a “canal textbook” was assembled for the use of speakers and

²¹ George H. Raymond. “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909), p 176.

²² Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 68.

²³ George H. Raymond. “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, pp 177-178.

²⁴ Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, pp 67-68.

editors.²⁵ The book's contents included the gist of the Barge Canal Act, relevant portions of official reports, details on construction costs and expert assessments, consensus of opinion of commercial organizations and "leading men of the State," as well as justification for the route chosen.²⁶ While formulating their strategy, the canal men understood that in order to best conduct a timesaving, laborsaving, and cost-effective campaign, they would have to concentrate their efforts in key regions of New York State.²⁷ Consequently, focused its education and agitation work on the cities along the canal route and at its termini while "conceding to the enemy" the counties off of the canal where it was "considered useless to attempt any organized work of enlightenment or education."²⁸

As the canal advocacy groups mobilized their campaign, the barge canal foes established offices throughout New York State to conduct the campaign and distribute their own literature. While the pro-canal movement was reportedly lacking adequate funds, "there seemed to be no lack of money for the opposition, and this opposition soon made itself felt in no uncertain way."²⁹ As Whitford noted, this plentiful money supply gave the canal foes "a decided advantage" in the campaign, and it was alleged that the railroads were backing "most of the anti-canal activity and were paying the greater part if not all of the expenses."³⁰ To combat the barge canal advocates' grip on New York City,

²⁵ Gustav H. Schwab, "New York City's Part in the Reconstruction of the State's Waterways" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 68.

²⁶ Gustav H. Schwab, "New York City's Part in the Reconstruction of the State's Waterways" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 68.

²⁷ Gustav H. Schwab, "New York City's Part in the Reconstruction of the State's Waterways" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 68.

²⁸ Gustav H. Schwab, "New York City's Part in the Reconstruction of the State's Waterways" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, pp 68-69.

²⁹ George H. Raymond. "New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 177.

³⁰ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 124.

an anti-canal bureau was established in Brooklyn to distribute literature, while the *New York Sun* “kept up a daily attack on the project.”³¹ However, the “real hotbed” and heart of the anti-canal campaign was centered in the upstate city of Rochester.³²

Representing the home district of the well-known barge canal foes Senator Merton E. Lewis and Senator William W. Armstrong, Rochester maintained the largest and most active anti-canal literary bureau with the city’s Chamber of Commerce leading the charge.³³ Under the direction of John A. C. Wright and John M. Ives, two “very persistent and energetic” officials, “all sorts of schemes were evolved to defeat the plan,” including the usual distribution of “a large amount of circulars, papers, pamphlets, and speeches in opposition to the measure.”³⁴ One of these pamphlets, entitled “Twenty Good Reasons Why You Should Vote No,” was particularly influential as its contents appeared in the editorials of anti-canal newspapers across New York State.³⁵ While some historians accused Rochester of wanting to “turn the commerce of the State over to the railroad monopoly,” this was presumably a rash oversimplification of the city’s displeasure with the barge canal proposal.³⁶ Though they may have been influenced by anti-canal propaganda disseminated by the railroad corporations and some speeches directly supported railroads, the area’s citizens had some justification for their resentment. Rochesterians were likely upset due to the rerouting of canal south of the city, the high construction cost and subsequent taxation, and the animosity of their large agricultural

³¹ George H. Raymond. “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 177.

³² George H. Raymond. “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 177.

³³ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 373.

³⁴ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 373.

³⁵ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 373.

³⁶ George H. Raymond. “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 177.

population, as well as the preference for a ship canal. It was the ship canal that garnered the greatest contention in Rochester, proving that the proposed larger waterway would never cease to be a thorn in the paw of the barge canal.

The intense degree to which the Chamber of Commerce, along with the politicians and citizens of Rochester, promoted and participated in the anti-canal campaign was certainly noteworthy, leading the *New York Times* and other newspapers to brand the dissention as “The Rochester Idea.”³⁷ Senator Thomas B. Dun, president of the Rochester Chamber of Commerce, reportedly stated his belief that “there would be no possible opposition to a deep waterway constructed by the Federal Government.”³⁸ As New Yorkers had decisively rejected such a proposal in the past, it would be difficult to ascertain whether the Rochester barge canal adversaries were simply endorsing the ship canal to undermine the barge canal movement or truly believed in the ship canal so wholeheartedly that they became blind to the facts.³⁹ Based upon the actions and speeches of Rochester officials, one is tempted to lean toward the latter possibility as neither of the city’s two leading engineers, George W. Rafter and J. Y. McClintock, supported the barge canal but instead recommended a ship canal via the “Ontario route” and “inland route,” respectively.⁴⁰ Though the opinions of these two engineers would be documented in the various anti-canal materials circulating the state, they were perceived as being “based on lay rather than on expert engineering opinion, and accordingly had little weight with voters.”⁴¹ With their respective operations established, the pro and anti-

³⁷ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 374.

³⁸ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 374.

³⁹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 326.

⁴⁰ George W. Rafter, *Hydrology of the State of New York* (Albany, New York: New York State Education Dept., 1905), p 820.

⁴¹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 375.

canal forces proceeded to trade blows, each amplifying their rhetoric as the November referendum neared.

Building the Bases of Support:

As the two assemblages squared off against each other in May of 1903, they immediately sought the full support of their strongest, most loyal factions while attempting to steal away members from the other's camp. For the canal men, they found their greatest source of patronage from the various labor unions of New York State.⁴² Labor unions are one of the first groups courted by the barge canal movement, nearly every labor organization received and "generally approved" of the barge canal enlargement proposal.⁴³ It should come as no surprise that labor unions fully endorsed the waterway's improvement plan as canal supporters played up the immense economic gains that would "follow cheap transportation over the improved waterways."⁴⁴ As Senator George E. Green claimed in Binghamton's *Sunday Star*, canal improvement "will inure to the benefit of the State by the upbuilding of old and the establishment of new commercial and industrial labor-employing interests."⁴⁵

Despite the best efforts of anti-canal forces, labor unions stood firmly with the canal cause as even those groups from the Rochester area would vote in favor of the referendum. The presence and stance of organized labor "did much to counteract the anti-canal sentiment in the interior counties of the State"⁴⁶ as an analysis of the referendum

⁴² Gustav H. Schwab, "New York City's Part in the Reconstruction of the State's Waterways" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 69.

⁴³ Howard J. Smith, "Reminiscences of the Barge Canal Campaign" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909), p 185.

⁴⁴ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 340.

⁴⁵ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 273.

⁴⁶ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 386.

vote in these districts revealed a strong minority turnout wherever they were present.⁴⁷ However, the collective faith of labor unions in the barge canal project was nearly put to the test by the subversive attempts of canal foes during the legislative campaign. Either attempting to acquire their support, alienate them from canal men, or both, anti-canal legislators targeted the labor factions by using one of their usual parliamentary tricks. In the midst of the legislative battle in February of 1903, Assemblyman Jean L. Burnett, “one of the most rabid anti-canal men in the lower house,” proposed a constitutional amendment that would grant and secure further rights for workers.⁴⁸ However, due to the constitutional restriction disallowing the simultaneous consideration of a referendum and a constitutional amendment, if canal men supported the amendment, the Barge Canal Act could not be voted upon, but if they opposed the amendment, they risked being “placed on the blacklist of the labor bodies for such action” and losing the referendum vote anyway.⁴⁹ Truly finding themselves between a rock and hard place by “one of the shrewdest pieces of legislative tactics,” canal advocates were freed from this “embarrassing position” by the previously mentioned call of Majority Leader and Assemblyman James T. Rogers to his fellow Republicans to withdraw their amendments.⁵⁰ Although nearly landing a deathblow to the barge canal plan, project proponents enjoyed the extensive and enthusiastic support of labor organizations throughout New York City.

⁴⁷ Howard J. Smith. “Reminiscences of the Barge Canal Campaign” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 185.

⁴⁸ "Telegraphic. State Barge Canal. May Be Defeated by Tactics of Anti-Canal Men." Troy Times, February 17, 1903.

⁴⁹ "Telegraphic. State Barge Canal. May Be Defeated by Tactics of Anti-Canal Men." Troy Times, February 17, 1903.

⁵⁰ "Telegraphic. State Barge Canal. May Be Defeated by Tactics of Anti-Canal Men." Troy Times, February 17, 1903.

For their part, barge canal proponents had attempted to wrestle farmers away from the anti-canal camp, but the latter group managed to retain a firm grip on their loyalty. The New York State Grange was the central advocacy group for agrarians, representing their general interests at the major political and commercial meetings, such as the State Commerce Conventions and throughout the legislative hearings on the barge canal proposal. Despite the immense role that the Erie Canal played in the expansion of agriculture in New York State, farmers were significantly against any form of waterway improvement.⁵¹ At large, the hostility of the farming communities toward the proposal was derived from their fear of burdensome taxation and the greater influx of competing agricultural goods from the Midwest.⁵² These beliefs were perpetuated by anti-canal literature and the local newspapers that, “half consciously, have been subsidized or made friendly to the railroad interests.”⁵³ However, there was dissent within the agricultural ranks as State Commissioner of Agriculture Charles A. Weitling expressed support for the barge canal project, as well as the Marcey Grange in Oneida County and Scriba Grange in Oswego County.⁵⁴ Such disagreements were “unsparingly denounced” by the overarching State Grange, and the nonconformists endured the suspension of financial assistance and harsh retaliation in the local press.⁵⁵ Overall, though, grange organizations “were steadily becoming more bitter in their opposition” toward the barge canal project.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Henry B. Hebert. “Action of the New York Produce Exchange” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909), p 101.

⁵² “Abstract of Second Joint Committee on Canals,” *Buffalo News*, February 18, 1903.

⁵³ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 274.

⁵⁴ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 390.

⁵⁵ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 390.

⁵⁶ George H. Raymond. “New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 165.

Pro-canal representatives would not be dismayed in their conversion attempts, frequently noting in speeches and literature the immense economic gains that would be bestowed upon the agricultural sector by the construction of a thousand-ton barge canal, or simply any canal enlargement, while anti-canal spokespersons maintained the opposite result would occur. Described at the 1900 State Commerce Convention and countless espoused by canal men, the reciprocal cycle of economic prosperity that would result from the Barge Canal stood as the principal argument utilized to persuade farmers.⁵⁷ Comprised of many factors yet so simple in its design, the barge canal's construction would lower transportation costs, thus increasing New York State's attractiveness for industry, spurring commercial and population growth, and creating a larger market for the state's agricultural produce.⁵⁸ Though grounded in statistics and scholarly opinion, this positive feedback loop theory was widely challenged by opponents on numerous fronts, including the project's cost, method of payment, rate regulation ability, and possibility of drawing commerce.⁵⁹ Directing their message toward farmers and New Yorkers in general, barge canal foes transcribed these objections and challenges in a circular letter, spawning terrific debates across the state and provided canal men with more material on which to critique the stances of the latter group.

Circular Exchanges:

On May 25th sixteen senators, "who came from the farming districts of the state," issued a "long circular" in opposition to the barge canal referendum.⁶⁰ The letter begins

⁵⁷ Frank H. Severance, *Canal Enlargement in New York State*. 1909. p 18.

⁵⁸ Henry B. Hebert. "Action of the New York Produce Exchange" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 101.

⁵⁹ "Canal Banquet Held: Largest Ever Seen," *Utica Observer*, July 30 1903.

⁶⁰ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 125.

with a bold slight at true canal believers by saying, “While much of the State’s earlier prosperity is doubtless attributable to the canals, their history for many years reveals a record of inconsiderable importance in the vast commercial development of the times.”⁶¹ Taking direct shots at the leading centers of barge canal advocacy, it was claimed that the commercial and population growth of Buffalo and New York City “has not been dependent upon and has not been checked by the decadence of the canal.”⁶² Rejecting the barge canal plan as a waste of money, the senators called for the construction of a four-track railroad in the drained bed of the canal, another resurrection of the failed Stadler Proposition.⁶³

Drawing on the varying fears of all citizens, a nativist argument was put forth, alleging that the Barge Canal would require an influx of “tens of thousands of foreign laborers of the lowest type” for its construction, causing “a drag on our own civilization and a menace to our native workers.”⁶⁴ Not surprising, the same case was made during the 1817 debates surrounding the original Erie Canal regarding Irish workers, and both were meant to deter labor unions and the general populace from supporting the Barge Canal. To dissuade agricultural, commercial, governmental, and public support, it was inaccurately claimed that the Barge Canal would drain from “lakes and streams a supply of water sorely needed for manufacturing and municipal uses,” threatening that “growth and development may be retarded if not destroyed.”⁶⁵ Adding the public’s anxiety, there was claimed “the highest degree of probability that the estimates are too low” due to

⁶¹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 346.

⁶² Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 346.

⁶³ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 346.

⁶⁴ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 347.

⁶⁵ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 347.

unforeseen contingencies, and would draw funds away from good roads, the acquisition of the State's forest parks, charities, and the educational system.⁶⁶ Despite warning against the threat of cheaper agricultural and manufactured goods from the Midwest, water depletion, and wasteful spending, the letter concluded with the illogical call for a federally funded ship canal.⁶⁷ Based upon the arguments posed and familiarity with previous efforts of anti-canal forces, it could be justifiably determined that this circular letter was mainly an obstructionist maneuver and that its authors likely held no genuine interest in constructing a railroad or ship canal.

The manifesto received harsh criticism by barge canal supporters and neutral parties alike for its presentation of weak arguments that "had often been refuted" and containing "little that was justified by the facts," and the anti-canal movement and message were certainly weakened as a result.⁶⁸ Yet, the senators' circular was effective as it was reprinted in newspapers throughout New York State, perpetuating animosity toward the barge canal proposal in anti-canal regions with the aid of slanted reporting by the local press.⁶⁹ The *New York Sun*, exemplar of the anti-canal media, revealed the influence of the railroads, stating that "a four-track railroad could be constructed and equipped in the most modern fashion for less than twenty million dollars."⁷⁰ Denouncing the barge canal plan and its supporters, the article continued, "If the transportation question were one of reason rather than tradition, of business rather reckless extravagance, these contrasts of figures might appeal to the sane minds of the voters."⁷¹

⁶⁶ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 347.

⁶⁷ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 347.

⁶⁸ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 347.

⁶⁹ George H. Raymond. "New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 177.

⁷⁰ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 350.

⁷¹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 350.

Countering the anti-canal letter with a circular of their own on June 10th, the Canal Improvement State Committee systematically rejected the former's claims and espoused their own pro-canal arguments.⁷² While denouncing the "grossly misleading estimations" of the barge canal's cost purported by adversaries and correctly recognizing their attempt at fearmongering, a provocative tactic was employed to firmly deface the complaints of the supposed unfair tax burden. While clearly retaliating for the previous claim that New York City and Buffalo were of "very moderate relative importance to the rest of the State," the hypocrisy of anti-canal senators was exposed by including a list comparing the amount of taxes paid and state aid received by their respective districts.⁷³ No doubt an embarrassing revelation for the lawmakers and their constituents as the anti-canal regions received over \$4,000,000 from the state coffers and contributed less than \$930,000 while Buffalo and New York City combined for roughly 85% of tax payment, "thus relieving them from paying the enormous sums which they would otherwise have to pay."⁷⁴ Regarding proposals for the four-track railroad and ship canal, the canal men more or less refused to dignify these with a real response as they were "made solely for the purpose of opposing canal improvement," and "any thinking person must acknowledge their utter impracticability and economical impossibility."⁷⁵ The language of the circular was noticeably stark and belittling toward the recommendations, marking a transition in the pro-canal movement from one of guarded advancement to ruthless offensive.

⁷² Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 348.

⁷³ "An Answer to the Anti-Canal Senators," *New York Times*, June 12, 1903.

⁷⁴ "An Answer to the Anti-Canal Senators," *New York Times*, June 12, 1903.

⁷⁵ "For Canal Improvement: State Committee Again Answers Anti-Canal Senators," *New York Times*, June 22, 1903.

The letter wisely concluded by citing the more authoritative and unbiased opinion of the committee of interstate commerce of the United States Senate, the same general institution that some anti-canal forces wished to employ in defeating the enlargement movement.⁷⁶ Referencing the committee's 1885 report, water routes were "the most efficient cheapeners and regulators of railroad charges," and their influence was not confined to the region adjacent to such waterways.⁷⁷ Further, the cities of upstate New York "would eventually become one of the principal sites of manufacturing... and would have cheaper pig iron than ever before;" a transformation that was already taking place in 1903.⁷⁸ Having reviewed the frequent testimonies put forth over the years by economists and transportation experts of water travel's irrefutable cheapness and regulatory ability, it must have been mind-numbing for canal advocates that the opposition continued to challenge this fait accompli, and more so that some citizens continued to believe it.

Convention Called for Anti-Canal Men with Coalition Showing Cracks:

In the midst of the canal men's admonishments of the points made by improvement adversaries, the latter group determined to hold an anti-canal convention in an effort to further promote their arguments against the thousand-ton barge canal project. Speaking in Utica about the upcoming meeting, E. B. Norris of Sodus, President of the State Grange, appeared discreet in his language, remarking that "grangers did not want to considered obstructionists," but still did not favor "big expenditures."⁷⁹ Norris took the opportunity at this occasion to again present the notion that the canal proposal was merely a scheme for "big corporations alone to profit" and the smaller boatmen would be

⁷⁶ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 348.

⁷⁷ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 348.

⁷⁸ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 349.

⁷⁹ "Farmers Are Against \$101,000,000 Plan," *Utica Observer*, July 17, 1903.

unable to compete.⁸⁰ Such would be rather humorous to a mindful listener as, pretending Norris's prediction to be true, the failure of the canal referendum would mean that smaller boatmen would not be subjugated by "big barge corporations" but by the railroad corporations instead, keeping the status quo.⁸¹ Still, whether or not one saw through Norris's duplicity, granges "all over the State are being lined up in opposition to the improvement, and they will exert every influence to vote it down."⁸²

Held in Rochester, the home of the anti-canal movement, and hosted by the city's Chamber of Commerce on July 21st, the convention was meant to unite barge canal opposition and reaffirm their core conflicts with the proposal.⁸³ Moreover, the gathering could also be interpreted as a show of force by the recently humbled oppositionists. Attended by roughly 250 delegates, the typical anti-canal reasons and rhetoric were espoused, with Senator John Raines standing as "the star speaker of the afternoon" with his assertion that Buffalo and New York City were the sole benefactors of such a scheme.⁸⁴ Longtime canal opponent John Platt dominated the meeting, arguing the barge canal's cost would be much higher than reported, the funds could be better used for improving public schools, and the transportation costs of railroads were indeed cheaper than the canals.⁸⁵ The vastness and intricacy of the railroads' web of influence was obvious throughout the convention. While they claimed that they had no official stance against the waterway, all the while they worked behind the scenes to persuade people to

⁸⁰ "Farmers Are Against \$101,000,000 Plan," *Utica Observer*, July 17, 1903.

⁸¹ "Farmers Are Against \$101,000,000 Plan," *Utica Observer*, July 17, 1903.

⁸² "Farmers Are Against \$101,000,000 Plan," *Utica Observer*, July 17, 1903.

⁸³ George H. Raymond. "New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 177.

⁸⁴ "Grangers Convene to Oppose Canal," *New York Times*, July 22, 1903.

⁸⁵ "Grangers Convene to Oppose Canal," *New York Times*, July 22, 1903.

oppose the referendum measure and carry similar sentiments back to their communities.⁸⁶ Most of the delegates arrived via the New York Central Railroad where “ran a half-rate excursion to Rochester for the day.”⁸⁷ Though the Rochester Chamber of Commerce “indignantly denied that the railroads of the State had anything to do with the calling of the convention,” some of the city’s leading officials were closely tied to the railroad, Senator John Raines’s as Chairman of the Senate Railroads Committee and local Republican party boss George W. Aldridge as Secretary of the State Railroad Commission.⁸⁸

While Platt called for a unity of message, disharmony amongst the members of the loose anti-canal confederation was readily apparent as three diverging factions vied to have their proposal adopted. The first party called for the construction of a ship canal across New York State that would be funded and controlled by the federal government. Oddly, this proposal was not spearheaded by a New York citizen but rather by Lewis M. Haupt of Philadelphia, who noted the waterway could be built “for the trifling sum of \$700,000,000,” a dubious proposition at best.⁸⁹ The second faction, represented by Senator John Raines, called for no action on the present canal system except for its continued maintenance. The third bloc, headed by John Platt, favored the four-track railroad proposal as the lobbyist “was against almost everything in the canal line,” even refusing to endorse the unlikely chance of constructing a ship canal, “which, throughout the proceedings, seemed to be the favored side track on which most of the speakers

⁸⁶ "Grangers Convene to Oppose Canal" *New York Times*, July 22, 1903.

⁸⁷ "Grangers Convene to Oppose Canal" *New York Times*, July 22, 1903.

⁸⁸ "Grangers Convene to Oppose Canal" *New York Times*, July 22, 1903.

⁸⁹ "Grangers Convene to Oppose Canal" *New York Times*, July 22, 1903.

wanted to run the barge canal proposition.”⁹⁰ This stance would later be lampooned by pro-canal speakers, such as Col. Charles E. Watson of Clinton who said that “Platt is the avowed foe, not merely of canal improvement, but of canals... If a canal could be dug straight across the State from the Hudson to lake for a dollar and a quarter, he would sturdily oppose the project.”⁹¹

Although these three groups differed, they were still united against the barge canal project, but a real danger would emerge here as some openly questioned claims of their fellow antagonists. Senator Walter L. Brown, representing the Otsego County Grange, whose opposition to the barge canal project “was a little shaky.”⁹² Admitting to only attending the convention at the behest of Monroe County leaders, Brown stated that so long as the waterway’s construction did not exceed its appropriation he would have no objections, especially as Buffalo and New York City paid 85% of state taxes.⁹³

Canal Men on the Offensive:

In an effort to combat the “general apathy throughout the State” and “active hostility of the railroads to the measure,” barge canal advocates toured upstate New York espousing their cause to whoever would listen.⁹⁴ Speaking at banquets, fairs, and conventions on the benefits gained from the barge canal’s construction, as well as the falsehoods and supposed ulterior motives of anti-canal forces, some audiences were welcomingly receptive while others were virulently unfriendly. Canal improvement advocates attempted to curtail the negative thinking that threatened the referendum’s

⁹⁰ "Grangers Convene to Oppose Canal" *New York Times*, July 22, 1903.

⁹¹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 356.

⁹² "Grangers Convene to Oppose Canal" *New York Times*, July 22, 1903.

⁹³ "Grangers Convene to Oppose Canal" *New York Times*, July 22, 1903.

⁹⁴ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 352.

approval, beginning with the Republican county convention in Wyoming County, a strong anti-canal area. At the July 27th meeting, one party leader encouraged the self-centered position that the waterway would “be a sacrifice of the interests of the rest of the State in behalf of the interests of the few,” urging all other Republicans to work toward its defeat.⁹⁵ Countering this animosity, Greenleaf S. Van Gorder appealed to his fellow residents to not approach the subject pessimistically, and to proudly remember that they were not just residents of Wyoming County but of the entire “great State of New York, the Empire State of the Union.”⁹⁶ This occasion was notable not only for its call to abandon local prejudices and selfishness, but exhibited how the barge canal’s activism could be fostered in an area by its prominent residents without the direct assistance or consultation of the Canal Improvement State Committee. It would be through the combined efforts of organized advocacy events and local independent sponsorship that their message would be carried to most New Yorkers, bypassing the filter of some anti-canal newspapers.

Gaining momentum in the wake of their foes’ disharmonized steps, the Canal Improvement State Committee hosted “the largest banquet ever held in that vicinity” in Utica on July 28th to further pronounce their cause for the barge canal project and hopefully enlist attendees’ support.⁹⁷ With many prominent political and commercial leaders in attendance, as well as editors of local papers and other municipal officials, several noteworthy speeches systematically refuted the claims of the three factions from the anti-canal convention. Speaking first, Senator William Townsend of Utica drew on

⁹⁵ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 352.

⁹⁶ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 353.

⁹⁷ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 353.

regional pride, declaring that “the first gun of the campaign for canal enlargement should be fired in Utica” as DeWitt Clinton had “turned the first sod in the construction of the Erie Canal” not far from their location.⁹⁸ While acknowledging that “no great public improvement was ever suggested that did not meet with opposition,” Townsend warned that there were “two classes of men, the optimist and the pessimist; men who believe in progress, in advancement, and men who are content to live in the conservatism of the past.”⁹⁹ Choosing the latter options would “allow a narrow, selfish policy to wrest” New York State’s commercial supremacy from its citizens.¹⁰⁰ Concluding that New York’s topography and “natural highways of commerce” demanded a thousand-ton barge canal be built, the senator was followed by several other eloquent speakers denouncing the rash and erroneous proposals of the anti-canal men.¹⁰¹ Attracted by the “meritorious character of the campaign for canal improvement,” the Utica banquet “made a profound impression on the voters in that territory, and its influence was felt throughout the State”¹⁰²

Continuing to ride this wave of success, canal men entertained a large crowd on August 1st at the Three River Point in Onondaga County, which would be a pivotal traffic junction pending the barge canal’s approval. Proclaiming the immense impact the canal system played in history of not just New York State but the entire country, Benjamin S. Dean of Jamestown called on the people to repay the waterway as “it deserves some grace of memory at the hands of those who have been prospered by reason of its existence.”¹⁰³ Continuing, Dean denounced the state-owned four-track railroad proposal

⁹⁸ "Canal Banquet Held: Largest Ever Seen," *Utica Observer*, July 30, 1903.

⁹⁹ "Canal Banquet Held: Largest Ever Seen," *Utica Observer*, July 30, 1903.

¹⁰⁰ "Canal Banquet Held: Largest Ever Seen," *Utica Observer*, July 30, 1903.

¹⁰¹ "Canal Banquet Held: Largest Ever Seen," *Utica Observer*, July 30, 1903.

¹⁰² Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, pp 357-8.

¹⁰³ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 358.

not only for its false claims of cheaper transportation costs that had been disproven by “actual scientific tests,” but also for the hypocrisy of its supporters, stating:

This suggestion comes largely from those who would be the first to denounce such a scheme as socialistic and revolutionary, and is echoed by those who believe in State ownership and those who are ignorant of the economic elements which enter into the problem.¹⁰⁴

The gathering and its accompanying speeches were so successful that several others were held throughout the state, targeting regions that were previously thought as unswayable.

Kernan’s Canal Doctrine:

Imparting what could be described as the gospel of the barge canal campaign, John D. Kernan of Utica conveyed a long address before a large meeting of the Utica Chamber of Commerce on September 16th.¹⁰⁵ If one questioned the grounds on which Kernan’s speech was so fundamental and pervasive as to be considered a sermon of the barge canal gospel, they would merely need to hear or read his words from that day. However, if such was not convincing enough, his record of canal involvement spoke for itself as Kernan was President of the New York State Commerce Conventions of 1899, 1900, and 1901, a former New York State railroad commissioner, and largely active in all elements of the canal improvement for the previous decade. Although Kernan’s espousals could not be included here in its entirety, one keen on better understanding the mindset and arguments of a true barge canal advocate should examine his discourse.

Kernan opened his oration with a summary of the immense wealth and prosperity received by New York State and the United States through the construction of the original Erie Canal, an enormous infrastructural undertaking that was not solely brought

¹⁰⁴ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 358.

¹⁰⁵ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 360.

about by the efforts of “our energetic and farsighted ancestors,” but also the natural advantages that fate gave to the Empire State.¹⁰⁶ Yet, he warned that “those who favor a barge canal must not be misled by the facts of our past history” into concluding that the new incarnation of the waterway would produce similar results.¹⁰⁷ Instead, barge canal advocates “must fairly answer those who say that the days of canals is passed,” otherwise “the people will vote against further expenditures of public money upon canals” for numerous reasons.¹⁰⁸ Documenting the well-known abuses and discriminations of the railroad firms, Kernan espoused the previously and frequently noted concept of a “trinity of transportation” between railroads, canals, and highways.¹⁰⁹ This supplementary relationship described was beneficial to all parties as it would increase overall traffic and allow each transportation method to develop its own niche, maximizing efficiency. Despite the prevalence of this economic theory for years, Kernan expressed his confusion and dismay at the failure of railroads and the general public to recognize and adopt it, and simply likened it to the railroad’s monopolistic greed and the populace’s ignorance.¹¹⁰

First, Kernan complimented the project as ambitious and argued that the federal government should rightfully cover the immense cost since New York “pays about one-sixth of all national expenditures.”¹¹¹ However, his compliments stop there as he

¹⁰⁶ John D. Kernan, “The Function of New York’s Barge Canals in Controlling Freight Rates” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909), p 136.

¹⁰⁷ John D. Kernan, “The Function of New York’s Barge Canals in Controlling Freight Rates” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 137.

¹⁰⁸ John D. Kernan, “The Function of New York’s Barge Canals in Controlling Freight Rates” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 137.

¹⁰⁹ John D. Kernan, “The Function of New York’s Barge Canals in Controlling Freight Rates” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, 1909. p 142.

¹¹⁰ John D. Kernan, “The Function of New York’s Barge Canals in Controlling Freight Rates” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 143.

¹¹¹ John D. Kernan, “The Function of New York’s Barge Canals in Controlling Freight Rates” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 140.

portrayed the deep waterway project as a fool's dream for numerous reasons, comparing it to a dog dropping "his bone in crossing a stream to dive for the shadow in the water."¹¹² Regarding the canal's transfer to the federal government, Kernan it was "not necessary to feel inhospitable to a government ship canal," but the federal government's indifference and ineptitude could mean the end of the waterway.¹¹³ On the note of governmental control of infrastructure, Kernan flatly rejected the state-owned four-track railroad proposal as a ploy by the Erie Railroad and others, exclaiming that it would be dominated by the rival railroads within ten years due to their monopolistic tendencies.¹¹⁴

Perhaps Kernan's greatest contribution to the barge canal movement was his "practical knowledge of how the farmer needs the canal" as he owned a farm as well.¹¹⁵ This greater understanding of the agricultural mindset allowed his testimony to be more readily accepted by many farmers across the state, many of whom rejected the barge canal proposal and remained loyal to railroads simply due to the latter's position as the only form of transportation in the region.¹¹⁶ Due to anti-canal newspapers and other forms of propaganda, farmers generally knew that the barge canal would lower freight rates for water and rail travel, but were alarmed by claims that competition from western farmers would be dramatically amplified.¹¹⁷ Revealing the error in that assessment, Kernan remarked that western farmers' principal competitive goods were flour and grain,

¹¹² John D. Kernan, "The Function of New York's Barge Canals in Controlling Freight Rates" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 139.

¹¹³ John D. Kernan, "The Function of New York's Barge Canals in Controlling Freight Rates" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 140.

¹¹⁴ John D. Kernan, "The Function of New York's Barge Canals in Controlling Freight Rates" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 154.

¹¹⁵ John D. Kernan, "The Function of New York's Barge Canals in Controlling Freight Rates" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 152.

¹¹⁶ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 502.

¹¹⁷ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 356.

which offered no concern as 80% of New York farmers were already consuming these goods from western states.¹¹⁸ Thusly, the lower freight rates resulting from an improved waterway in the form of a thousand-ton barge would permit farmers to import these goods at the cheapest price.¹¹⁹ Kernan, along with other prominent leaders, conveyed to agriculturalists the necessity of adapting to changing markets as the cheaper crops they once grew would naturally transition to the western states where labor, land, and overall production costs were much lower. To counter this natural economic occurrence, Kernan suggested agrarians should follow his example of “putting land to better use” by ceasing grain and flour production and pursuing other goods to sell, such as the growing fruit canning industry as it offered better pay and prospects.¹²⁰ It was further noted that if the same products were brought into competition with New York farmers from the western states, they would be hauled by railroads due to their greater speed, whether or not the canal existed.¹²¹ However, it is known that people, particularly the conservative farmers, struggle with and resist change as the transition was often difficult, leading many agrarians to stick with the devil they knew rather than find a new one.

Although the many substantial and consequential arguments articulated by John Kernan eventually came to form the cornerstone of barge canal doctrine, he failed to include an explanation that would alleviate the taxation issue. As even gospels can have imperfections, Kernan may have forgotten to discuss the matter, or perhaps he felt it

¹¹⁸ John D. Kernan, “The Function of New York’s Barge Canals in Controlling Freight Rates” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 152.

¹¹⁹ John D. Kernan, “The Function of New York’s Barge Canals in Controlling Freight Rates” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 152.

¹²⁰ John D. Kernan, “The Function of New York’s Barge Canals in Controlling Freight Rates” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 152.

¹²¹ John D. Kernan, “The Function of New York’s Barge Canals in Controlling Freight Rates” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 153.

would be redundant as many other canal men had focused on it. One such canal advocate was Senator Henry Hill, who phrased the Barge Canal's per capita annual tax rate in a manner more relatable to laborers, farmers, and the general public. Hill described the cost as "one day's wages of a common laborer, or six pounds of butter, eight or ten cans of fruit or vegetables... will pay the annual tax for the construction of the enlarged canals on a farm or house and lot assessed at \$1,000."¹²² Further downplaying the tax "burden," it was claimed that "one hen will lay eggs enough annually to pay such tax and to start a brood of chickens on the farm of the son-in-law."¹²³

Momentous Month:

As the referendum campaign approached September of 1903, both sides of the canal debate ramped up their efforts to garner voter support, but the month would ultimately belong to barge canal supporters as they scored one victory after another over their foes. The first major victory of the month did not come from within New York State, but rather in Washington, D. C. as Colonel Thomas Symons, who had accompanied Teddy Roosevelt on his rise to the White House, again defended the barge canal's cost estimation. Basing his reasoning solely upon other infrastructure projects that had gone over budget and the assumption that engineers estimating the barge canal's cost had done the same, Professor Edward P. North claimed that the actual cost of the enlargement would be \$160,000,000.¹²⁴ Symons simply retorted that the unfortunate experience of the "Nine-Million Dollar Debacle" taught the engineers to estimate the project's cost "with great liberality," allowing for leeway and cushioning in case of sudden added

¹²² Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 506.

¹²³ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 506.

¹²⁴ "The Barge Canal's Cost: Col. Symons Answers Prof. North's Criticism of Plan," *New York Times*, September 14, 1903.

expenses.¹²⁵ Although not explicitly stated by the newspaper article, it could be surmised that Professor North's challenge was induced by railroad interests as he reportedly was a contributor to *The Railroad Gazette*.¹²⁶ While the incident marked a very minimal attack on the waterway proposal, it exhibited that the anti-canal interests were willing to extend their resistance beyond the boundaries of New York State.

Indicative of the changing outlook upon the barge canal proposal, the New York Board of Trade and Transportation adopted a resolution on September 23rd declaring their unanimous support for the popular approval of the Barge Canal Act.¹²⁷ Although this governmental panel had previously been supportive of waterway enlargement projects, its chairman, Lewis Nixon, had been hesitant in his support of the various incarnations of the proposal, but chose to support it forthrightly, putting forth the motion himself.¹²⁸ The resolution made an "earnest appeal to all citizens, without regard to party affiliation," to vote for the measure and formed a committee "for the purpose of bringing this important subject to the especial attention of all the voters of Greater New York."¹²⁹ Furthermore, this soon-to-be formed committee pledged "to cooperate with similar committees (of other organizations)," thus combining their efforts with the Canal Improvement State Committee.¹³⁰ Under the direction of Frank S. Gardner and Charles A. Schieren, ex-Mayor of Brooklyn, these aligned groups "conducted a most aggressive and successful campaign for several months before the vote" upon the referendum measure, preparing

¹²⁵ "The Barge Canal's Cost: Col. Symons Answers Prof. North's Criticism of Plan," *New York Times*, September 14, 1903.

¹²⁶ "The Barge Canal's Cost: Col. Symons Answers Prof. North's Criticism of Plan," *New York Times*, September 14, 1903.

¹²⁷ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 364.

¹²⁸ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 364.

¹²⁹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 364.

¹³⁰ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 364.

and distributing thousands of circulars and pamphlets through the state.¹³¹ Such a vital endorsement would have been the perfect capstone to the very successful month of September if it had not been usurped the next day by Governor Benjamin Odell's speech at the Seneca County fair.

Although having hindered and injured the barge canal movement with his inconsistent support, stalling suggestions, and purported backroom dealings, Governor Odell proved himself invaluable to the cause on September 24th by declaring his absolute confidence in the project's merit. In language reminiscent of his 1903 annual governor's address, Odell took the stage at the Seneca County fair and espoused to the crowd, many of whom were farmers:

Already the supremacy of the port of New York is threatened upon us is placed the responsibility for the solution of the problem and for the preservation of our commerce. High and patriotic motives should control your actions. It seems almost incredible that among intelligent men there should be an entire elimination of higher motives in reaching a decision in this matter, because of the expenditure of money or the taxation which may result. I have too much faith in the common sense of the people, particularly those of the rural communities, to believe that unworthy motives may prevent public improvements that mean the advancement and progress of the State – to believe that the fear of taxes may prevent New York from taking and holding her proper place in the great future.¹³²

While Governor Odell was naturally speaking to his current audience, his oration was quite clearly directed toward agricultural interests across the state, as well as all those who protested the added taxation and did not see the larger portrait the barge canal project would paint. Buttering up his targeted agrarian audience, he asked if they had ever considered “the important relation which our rural communities bear to our vast centers of population,” listed a few negative consequences that would occur in their absence, and

¹³¹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 369.

¹³² "Farmers' Interest in Canal Improvement: Address by Gov. Odell at the Seneca County Fair," *New York Times*, September 25, 1903.

then called for their “cordial cooperation” in supporting the barge canal proposal.¹³³ Addressing the aforementioned selfish nature common amongst agrarians, the governor declared that “each one of the 370,000 farmers in this State has an interest in the growth of the city of New York” as it was the principal market for their produce, which “would be much less valuable if poorly paid workmen were their customers.”¹³⁴ Describing the canal tax as “small and insignificant,” Odell questioned the “men of the farm” if they could to pay the “small pittance” so that they could “construct the great public improvement.”¹³⁵ Silencing any possible objections that the money could and should be better spent, the governor exclaimed that “if we work together for the public interest,” the Barge Canal would be constructed, ushering in a new age of prosperity that would grant “a greater ability to meet the other problems of our State, particularly those which have to do with rural communities.”¹³⁶

Interpreting his actions cynically, one could argue that perhaps Odell did not genuinely endorse or reject the barge canal’s construction. Instead, the governor had correctly observed the tide turning in favor of the waterway proponents and wished to be on the winning team, a political maneuver similar to his actions following the release of the Bond Report and other instances. Nevertheless, his speech was met with thunderous applause from the audience and was subsequently “widely circulated and read throughout the State, and made a deep impression on the voters.”¹³⁷ The barge canal campaign was

¹³³ "Farmers' Interest in Canal Improvement: Address by Gov. Odell at the Seneca County Fair," *New York Times*, September 25, 1903.

¹³⁴ "Farmers' Interest in Canal Improvement: Address by Gov. Odell at the Seneca County Fair," *New York Times*, September 25, 1903.

¹³⁵ "Farmers' Interest in Canal Improvement: Address by Gov. Odell at the Seneca County Fair," *New York Times*, September 25, 1903.

¹³⁶ "Farmers' Interest in Canal Improvement: Address by Gov. Odell at the Seneca County Fair," *New York Times*, September 25, 1903.

¹³⁷ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 366.

on the upswing and Governor Odell's support proved to be a vital boost as the November referendum neared.

Conflict Draws Closer:

With the close of September and the referendum only a month away, pro and anti-canal forces chose to express their disagreements in a more direct and public forum with a series of debates throughout October. Representing their movements in several key debates were Senator Henry W. Hill for the first debate and Willis H. Tennant of Mayville speaking at the rest, while John Platt naturally espoused the anti-canal contentions. Held in the council chamber in Troy on October 5th and standing as the more notable and publicized of the debates due to the men's prominence in their respective movements, even being described by one news article as "titans."¹³⁸ Platt took the opportunity to proclaim his usual arguments that canal transportation was not cheaper than that of railroads, the cost of the barge canal project was understated, tolls should be reinstated upon the waterways, and railroads were the most logical transportation method.¹³⁹ Platt's words offered the best occasion for derision as when speaking on both the canal's construction and transportation costs, he exclaimed, "Canal men always claim that canal rates are cheaper than railroad rates. I do not know where in the world they get their figures from. They evidently do not figure on the amount the canals cost the State, but merely the cost to the shippers."¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 367.

¹³⁹ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 131.

¹⁴⁰ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 367.

Hill hammered Platt on that point by questioning where his data came from as economists widely agreed on the canal's cheapness, and also reversing Platt's notion of incorporating a project's cost into its freight rate.¹⁴¹ Hill countered that if the same analysis was used on the New York Central system, it would reveal that with its "existing funded debt of approximately \$230,414,845 and capital stock of \$150,000,000, the railway rate would be 6.4 mills per ton-mile, far above the current canal rate and presumably much higher than the rate of the proposed barge canal."¹⁴² On the issue of tolls, Platt barely received a response as Hill simply stated that tolls had been abolished for over twenty years and thusly have become a *fait accompli*.¹⁴³ Unfortunately for Platt and the anti-canal campaign, their tactics and arguments had become worn-out and predictable, allowing canal advocates to be readily prepared to rebuke each statement, as evident by this encounter.

Touring the state, John Platt and Willis Tennant sparred in several high profile debates. During one of these matches, Platt announced that even if the people approved the barge canal referendum, it would "be too small and out of date before they get it fairly completed."¹⁴⁴ Grippingly, Tennant agreed with Platt, responding, "I hope so. I hope the stream of commerce... will increase to such an extent that the great barge canal when completed as contemplated will be too small and need another enlargement."¹⁴⁵ Tennant countered Platt's incessant pessimism with abundant optimism, predicting that the prosperity would be so great that local canal traffic would exceed through traffic "by

¹⁴¹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 367.

¹⁴² Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 367.

¹⁴³ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 127.

¹⁴⁴ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 376.

¹⁴⁵ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 377.

millions and millions of tons,” and that the cities of Syracuse and Buffalo would soon reach populations of half a million and one million people, respectively.¹⁴⁶ These debates drew large audiences, particularly from rural communities, spurring interest amongst citizens who had previously held none. Although Platt was a learned and skilled debater, Tennant fared very well against the lifelong lobbyist as he was too resourceful and well informed, but held the additional advantage of being familiar with “the temper and conditions of rural communities.”¹⁴⁷ Although some would note these debates as pivotal in the barge canal campaign for their manifestation of canal interest, the results of the popular referendum would show that while some would support the measure, the impact was rather minimal.

While these debates were taking place, there were a series of meetings held throughout upstate New York that were either hosted or attended by prominent canal men. Notable accounts of their proceedings and speeches have been recorded, but were not significantly influential or overly pertinent in the larger scheme of the barge canal campaign. Although it was generally acknowledged that appealing to the voters of upstate New York was worthwhile, especially as some previously ardent anti-canal men were persuaded otherwise, efforts needed to be concentrated on New York City to secure their allegiance to the barge canal cause.

¹⁴⁶ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 377.

¹⁴⁷ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 377.

Big Drive for the Big Apple:

While the battle raged throughout upstate New York, a “spirited campaign” was carried out by pro-canal organizations and commercial bodies in New York City, distributing thousands of circulars to the public.¹⁴⁸ Some of these circulars were exceedingly thorough and detailed, such as one specifying the “various phases of the subject,” as a part of the campaign of education and deemed particularly necessary as the “common New Yorker lacks sufficient knowledge on the matter” of canal improvement.¹⁴⁹ This effort was followed up by the publication of “a large edition of small maps showing the old and the new canal with explanatory text on the reverse.”¹⁵⁰ However, canal proponents understood that in order to reach the largest possible audience, the newspapers needed to be aligned with the barge canal movement.

Mirroring their own actions from the year prior, the Canal Association of Greater New York invited editors and journalists from forty metropolitan newspapers to a banquet at Delmonico’s on October 6th.¹⁵¹ Naturally, speeches on canal enlargement were espoused, with Francis Greene stating that if the proposed barge canal was constructed, then “commerce will inevitably seek it, just as water runs down hill.”¹⁵² In his speech, New York Produce Exchange leader Henry Hebert read a letter from a Long Island man requesting any form of newspaper or documents pertaining to the canal project as “none of the local papers take that side of it. They all seem to be against it and unfair in that

¹⁴⁸ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 367.

¹⁴⁹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 367.

¹⁵⁰ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 367.

¹⁵¹ Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 70.

¹⁵² Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 71.

which they publish.”¹⁵³ Pulling at the heartstrings of the journalists, Hebert expressed his group’s inability to reach all inquisitive people, and implored them to assist in the “essential combatting of this ignorance.”¹⁵⁴ Although not explicitly pledging their support so as to keep their journalistic integrity, the press responded favorably for the most part as represented by the surge of canal articles following that dinner, “averaging one column in length” per day in each newspaper.¹⁵⁵ However, the *New York Sun*, *New York Herald*, and *New York Telegram* all remained indifferent, but mostly hostile, toward to canal cause. Canal Improvement State Committee Chairman Gustav Schwab even cabled *New York Herald* editor James Gordon Bennett to “urging him to support the movement, but no reply was received.”¹⁵⁶

Due to the sizeable increase in press coverage of the canal referendum, the people of New York City “began to awaken to the importance of voting favorably upon the measure.”¹⁵⁷ A “most efficient ‘cart-tail campaign’ was organized” by the Canal Improvement State Committee and proceeded to distribute literature at “over 1,000 meetings, at all ferries, and many factories.”¹⁵⁸ Pro-canal material of every kind was disseminated to the public, including red campaign buttons and badges inscribed with the phrase “VOTE YES FOR THE CANAL IMPROVEMENT,” which had become a short-lived fashion statement for New York City residents.¹⁵⁹ Such material was inspired by

¹⁵³ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 373.

¹⁵⁴ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 373.

¹⁵⁵ Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 74.

¹⁵⁶ Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 70.

¹⁵⁷ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 373.

¹⁵⁸ Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 74.

¹⁵⁹ Henry B. Hebert. “Action of the New York Produce Exchange” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 104.

that of anti-canal forces, who distributed an “aggressive and unscrupulous” pamphlet at “railroad stations and other points where people were in masses” throughout the city.¹⁶⁰ It called all citizens to “Vote But Vote No On Barge Canal Scheme,” and carried on to declare its true supporters and beneficiaries as grain speculators, the contractors, and the padrones.¹⁶¹

With the increased support from the press and populace, several commercial and political associations were approached by canal proponents aiming to secure their support. The Order of Acorns, a “good government” group, and the Citizens’ Union agreed to advocate for the barge canal at its meetings, as well as send speakers to other pro-canal events.¹⁶² Convening with the Democratic and Republican parties, canal men received support from the former group, while the latter group did not pledge outright support, but did express interest and promised not to negatively intervene with their campaign in the city.¹⁶³ Additionally, the Board of Aldermen of the City of New York passed several resolutions in favor of the thousand-ton barge canal at the solicitation of the Canal Association of Greater New York.¹⁶⁴ With voters increasingly aware and supportive, the encouragement of several newspapers, and the affirmative pledges many commercial, social, and political organizations, the pro-canal bureaus in the area had done their work well. However, the mission was not yet complete as several curves still lay ahead of them.

¹⁶⁰ Henry B. Hebert. “Action of the New York Produce Exchange” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 103.

¹⁶¹ Henry B. Hebert. “Action of the New York Produce Exchange” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 103.

¹⁶² Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 74.

¹⁶³ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 373.

¹⁶⁴ Gustav H. Schwab, “New York City’s Part in the Reconstruction of the State’s Waterways” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 69.

Pressing on to Fulfillment:

Just a week before the fateful November referendum, the barge canal proposal was nearly dealt a fatal blow as the Supreme Court of the United States handed down its decision in the case of *Perry v Haines* on October 26th.¹⁶⁵ The court held that the Erie Canal, despite lying wholly within the borders of New York State, “forms a part of a continuous highway for interstate and foreign commerce,” and thusly fell under federal admiralty jurisdiction.¹⁶⁶ Although the court decision “had little effect on either the practical operation of the canal or the navigation upon its waters,” its poor timing proved costly.¹⁶⁷ The anti-canal press quickly jumped on the opportunity to foster the latent animosity of New Yorkers toward federal control of its waterways, taking the liberty of expounding possible effects of the ruling, while barge canal advocates did not have ample time to adequately respond.¹⁶⁸

Compounding this negative publicity was the chiming in of prominent New York City resident Andrew H. Green in a letter to the metropolitan’s residents on October 29th. Although an active champion of public works projects and a central figure in the growth of New York City throughout the prior decades, Green called on his fellow residents to vote against the referendum due to the barge canal project’s high cost and the large proportion which “would fall upon them [New York City residents].”¹⁶⁹ He first contended that the funds could be better spent as there was already “pressing requirement for municipal improvement of more immediate value to our commercial and residential

¹⁶⁵ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 380.

¹⁶⁶ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 381.

¹⁶⁷ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 131.

¹⁶⁸ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 131.

¹⁶⁹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 381.

interests.”¹⁷⁰ Green continued that “the remarkable decision of the United States Supreme Court” establishing overarching federal authority over the canal system complicated the project and needed to be explored in greater depth, while also reopening the possibility of a ship canal.¹⁷¹ Though Green was a formidable and well-respected character, his message was not overly influential, as will be exhibited in the referendum results for the boroughs, which could be attributable to the populace’s awareness of his previous opposition to the legislative passage of the Barge Canal Act.¹⁷² Even more so, the tireless campaign of the canal men had managed to keep the city’s residents resolute in their advocacy for a thousand-ton barge canal.

While many pro and anti-canal advocates attempted to convince New York’s citizens of their worthiness of their cause through facts, figures, and dialogue, but in the end, talk was speech. Any good promoter understood that actions spoke louder than words and that the general public always enjoys an entertaining show. With that in mind, a demonstration of an electrical system of towage for canal travel, known as the “electric mule,” was given by the International Towing and Power Company on October 28th across the river from the General Electric Company in Schenectady.¹⁷³ One would remember that this company and their proposal had been rejected earlier in the year during the legislative debates as it was deemed impractical, uneconomical, and identified as another attempt “to circumvent the passage of the referendum measure.”¹⁷⁴ According to the *New York Times*, Secretary of the New York Board of Trade and Transportation

¹⁷⁰ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, pp 381-2.

¹⁷¹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 382.

¹⁷² Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 332.

¹⁷³ "Says Towage Exhibit Was Anti-Canal Move: Secretary Gardiner of Board of Trade on Electric Demonstration," *New York Times*, October 29, 1903.

¹⁷⁴ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 307.

Frank S. Gardner identified several instances clearly indicative of the demonstrators' anti-canal aims, such as the demonstration's coincidental timing being less than a week from the canal referendum, the sending of invitations to newspapers for view the affair, and the circulation of the "electric mule" argument to citizens.¹⁷⁵ Gardner exposed the company's ulterior motives, stating, "The object of this 'demonstration' is very obvious, it is simply an endeavor to influence votes on the eve of the election."¹⁷⁶ Further quoting the company's view that "the present canal, equipped with this system, is capable of handling economically the largest tonnage which experts have calculated will ever go through the canal," which challenged the barge canal proposal for its necessity and size.¹⁷⁷ What Gardner found most uncomfortable was the supposed collusion with General Electric, which would stand to profit tremendously if their electricity was used to power the new system of waterway conveyance, basing his thoughts on a letter sent in response to the Board of Trade and Transportation's appeal to support the canal referendum.¹⁷⁸ Gardner quoted the rather harsh, forthright letter from General Electric Secretary M. F. Westover that first refused to support the notion, then stated, "Personally, I do not understand how any unbiased voter can support the present canal improvement scheme. I feel, and those of our people with whom I have talked feel, that scarcely anything more iniquitous was ever presented to the voter of the State."¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁵ "Says Towage Exhibit Was Anti-Canal Move: Secretary Gardner of Board of Trade on Electric Demonstration," *New York Times*, October 29, 1903.

¹⁷⁶ "Says Towage Exhibit Was Anti-Canal Move: Secretary Gardner of Board of Trade on Electric Demonstration," *New York Times*, October 29, 1903.

¹⁷⁷ "Says Towage Exhibit Was Anti-Canal Move: Secretary Gardner of Board of Trade on Electric Demonstration," *New York Times*, October 29, 1903.

¹⁷⁸ "Says Towage Exhibit Was Anti-Canal Move: Secretary Gardner of Board of Trade on Electric Demonstration," *New York Times*, October 29, 1903.

¹⁷⁹ "Says Towage Exhibit Was Anti-Canal Move: Secretary Gardner of Board of Trade on Electric Demonstration," *New York Times*, October 29, 1903.

Understandably, Gardiner was infuriated by this response and chose to profess his frustration to the *New York Times*, a known pro-canal newspaper.

The demonstration was witnessed by Governor Odell, the Superintendent of Public Works, practical canal men, and other State officials, and performed notably well. However, “consent was withheld for the time being” by the Superintendent of Public Works to further pursue the project on the canal, perhaps acting prudently for the sake of the barge canal referendum’s passage.¹⁸⁰ His judgment was correct as the anti-canal press quickly exploited the opportunity, espousing the successful demonstration and reprinting the company’s previous circular letter, while canal men were unable to respond in time.¹⁸¹ Overall, the opinions of these executives and engineers on the proposed barge canal were irrelevant as the stunt served the purposes of the anti-canal men regardless of their intentions.

Barge canal advocates presented their own last-minute endeavors to sway voters. Dr. John D. Bonnar of Buffalo had an article printed in the *New York Times* on October 30th challenging the claims of the Rochester Chamber of Commerce and its numerous pamphlets. Dr. Bonnar presented “facts and gave figures in refutation of the anti-canal argument,” with his most influential statistic being that “the proposed barge canal can do for 50 cents, inclusive of interest and cost of maintenance, what is now done by railroads for three dollars, exclusive of terminal charges.”¹⁸² The exposure of such a statistic by a clearly educated figure represented a major embarrassment for the anti-canal cause, especially as they had been proclaiming the exact opposite claim.

¹⁸⁰ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 133.

¹⁸¹ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, p 133.

¹⁸² Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 383.

The same day as the publication of Dr. Bonnar's denunciations of anti-canal rhetoric, politicians from both the Republican and Democratic parties came together at the Cooper Union in a show of solidarity for the popular approval of the Barge Canal Act.¹⁸³ Wearing their red badges labelled "Vote Yes on the Canal Referendum," the bipartisan group took the stage "to a pitch of the wildest enthusiasm;" the most distinguished among them were Democratic nominee for governor Bird S. Coler, former Republican governor Stewart L. Woodford, Senate Democratic leader Thomas F. Grady, and ex-mayor of Brooklyn Charles A. Schieren.¹⁸⁴ In addition to these esteemed men, there were leaders of the various labor and commercial organizations and prominent canal advocates, as well as the sponsor of the Barge Canal Act, Charles F. Bostwick.¹⁸⁵ As one would expect, the event was chock full of speeches espousing the dominant and ever-present pro-canal arguments, such as reviving and fostering the economy, encouraging farmers of numerous benefits, similar projects in other nations, and the necessity of support from all New York State citizens.¹⁸⁶ Particularly harsh words were leveled against railroads and their supposed conniving actions, claiming that they had "never done anything for our State or made any improvement unless compelled to do so; but it has been the corporation that has controlled legislations at Albany against the interests of our city."¹⁸⁷ With all the rhetoric, the greatest takeaway from the event was that "the speakers did not talk politics to any extent," an amazing feat for some politicians, evidencing their wish to rise above pettiness in pursuit of the higher public

¹⁸³ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 364.

¹⁸⁴ "Party Lines Lost in Fight for Canal: Democrats and Republicans Join in Urging Vital Question," *New York Times*, October 30, 1903.

¹⁸⁵ "Party Lines Lost in Fight for Canal," *New York Times*, October 30, 1903.

¹⁸⁶ "Party Lines Lost in Fight for Canal," *New York Times*, October 30, 1903.

¹⁸⁷ "Party Lines Lost in Fight for Canal," *New York Times*, October 30, 1903.

and commercial needs of the people; and the citizens of New York City responded in kind, cheering the statesmen and pledging their affirmative vote for the Barge Canal referendum.¹⁸⁸

Though it was a more festive and widely publicized occasion than others, this bipartisan gathering at the Cooper Union was not an isolated event. In the fervently anti-canal region of Binghamton and Broome County a similar meeting was also held on October 30th.¹⁸⁹ Despite the attempts of Senator George E. Green and his pro-canal league of “about fifty of the leading business firms of that city” to persuade the area’s voters, the local leaders of both political parties united to block his efforts, and the assemblage soon morphed into an anti-canal rally.¹⁹⁰ Although the two congregations convened for opposing reasons, they incidentally concurred with Senator Henry Hill’s opinion that the canal referendum was “no trifling matter, which can be disposed of on the basis of mere political issue.”¹⁹¹ Whether or not the assembled politicians would agree with Hill’s assessment, these episodes of bipartite collaboration certainly demonstrated that the division on the barge canal referendum was based upon geography more than anything else. With the exception of Buffalo, the discord between downstate and upstate would continue to remain a staple of New York State economics, culture, and especially politics.

To accompany this last public pro-canal assembly at the Cooper Union and to counter recent articles and public displays of the project’s adversaries, notably the electric towage stunt in Schenectady, a final call of support was published in the morning

¹⁸⁸ "Party Lines Lost in Fight for Canal," *New York Times*, October 30, 1903.

¹⁸⁹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 385.

¹⁹⁰ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 385.

¹⁹¹ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 492.

papers on November 2nd. Declaring the “paramount importance of an overwhelming majority from this city at the polls, in favor of the 1000-ton barge canal improvement,” what perhaps carried the most weight in this Monday morning article was the presence of the names of so many prominent figures.¹⁹² The distinguished list included the members of the Canal Improvement State Committee, former members of the State Committee on Canals, the ex-Mayor of Brooklyn, the Mayor of New York City, and the leader of the State Senate.¹⁹³ The influence of these men, the enormous effort they had put forth over the previous year, and the aid of the pro-canal press ensured that the people of New York State, or at least New York City, would support the waterway’s plebiscite.

The People’s Voice Heard:

After a long, laborious six month campaign that had pitted the decades-old adversaries against each other for what was hoped to be the final sparring match, New York State’s citizens went to the ballot box to determine if they would give a new lease on life to the canals that had breathed life into the Empire State three quarters of a century earlier. This third day in November would be the deciding moment for both canal advocates and adversaries as whatever the result may be there would be an infinitesimal possibility for another attempt. If the barge canal referendum was approved, the anti-canal forces would have a very difficult task ahead of them as repealing major laws, particularly plebiscite-backed ones, was near-impossible by precedent, not to mention unpopular. While the canal men would have an even steeper, near-vertical uphill battle if the referendum were to be rejected, as the waterway’s advocates would again lose

¹⁹² Henry B. Hebert. “Action of the New York Produce Exchange” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 105.

¹⁹³ Henry B. Hebert. “Action of the New York Produce Exchange” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 105.

confidence as they had before, and be relegated back to their forlorn imaginings of an improved canal that would never be. Alas, this latter fate was not to be as the barge canal referendum was approved with an affirmative majority of 245,312 votes, receiving 61% of all ballots cast.¹⁹⁴ Out of a total of 1,100,708 votes cast, 673,010 were in favor and 427,698 were against, giving a margin of approval of 245,312, resulting in “the largest popular majority ever given to any referendum.”¹⁹⁵ With this massive outpouring of voters and the intensity with which the pro and anti-canal campaigns were conducted, “it is doubtful whether or not any great public question was ever more widely discussed and more carefully considered by the great mass of voters than the canal referendum issue of 1903.”¹⁹⁶ Having fought hard and remaining faithful and resilient to their cause, the race was won and the canal men finally had their day in the sun.

Analyzing the results of the referendum by county, evidence of the geographical divide for barge canal support was made abundantly clear. Comparing the totals and percentages with special attention paid to the two centers of barge canal advocacy in Buffalo and New York City, it would be discerned that New Yorkers would reject the proposal. With Buffalo comprising of Erie and Niagara counties and New York City comprising of Kings, Queens, New York, and Richmond counties, these regions accounted for 58% of the affirmative votes, with each voting overwhelming in favor of the measure. If these counties were excluded, the referendum would have been rejected by a margin of 79,355, while the proportion of dissenting votes increased as counties’

¹⁹⁴ M. M. Wilner, “The New York State Press in the Campaign for Enlargement of the Canals” in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909), p 193.

¹⁹⁵ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 397.

¹⁹⁶ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 397.

respective distance from the canal increased. Unfortunately, although canal men put forth their best efforts to appeal to all New Yorkers, most efforts in these stiff-necked regions fell flat. Yet several prominent enlargement advocates had already acknowledged the limited impact they would have in these regions, and citing the large support from Cayuga County, some headway was indeed made.

Hearing the news of the referendum's passage while recuperating in Europe from his exertions promoting the barge canal proposal, former-chairman of the Canal Improvement State Committee Gustav Schwab wrote a spirited, optimistic letter to his fellow canal crusaders.¹⁹⁷ In his message, Schwab espoused the core tenets of the canal cause so perfectly that they rightfully should be stated:

The farmer of the State of New York will be benefited by the growth of the capacity for consumption of his home market and by the cheapening of transportation on his products and of everything he buys. The working man will benefit through the upbuilding of manufacturing industries throughout the State and by the reduction in the price of necessities of life which the lowering of the rates of freight on the improved canal will bring about. Finally, the railroad companies will be the principal beneficiaries of the improved canal system of the State as the multiplication of industries and the growth of commerce will insure to them increased business.¹⁹⁸

Though he could have been boastful and mean-spirited toward the railroad firms, who had endeavored so long and vehemently against the canal improvement movement, Schwab instead spoke of the tremendous prosperity that all would experience, even his vanquished foes.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ Gustav H. Schwab, "New York City's Part in the Reconstruction of the State's Waterways" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 75.

¹⁹⁸ Gustav H. Schwab, "New York City's Part in the Reconstruction of the State's Waterways" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 75.

¹⁹⁹ Gustav H. Schwab, "New York City's Part in the Reconstruction of the State's Waterways" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance, p 75.

Fought the Good Fight, Finished the Race, Kept the Faith:

After years of prolonged, extensive pursuit, the governmental and popular approval of the Barge Canal proposition had been achieved, ushering in a new era of nautical transportation for the Empire State and the United States as a whole, and influencing the methods and endeavors of future infrastructural project proponents. Commerce and industrial advancement had finally fully realized the symbiotic relationship they held with the canal system. The original Erie Canal had nurtured the growth of commerce and technology upon and along its course. When the canal began to deteriorate and commerce declined, modern mechanized might came to their assistance by radically improving the waterway, allowing a further progression of industry. Of course, this tremendous victory for waterway improvement, and public works projects in general, likely would have remained nothing more than a frittering thought if it were not for the relentless efforts of canal advocates across the state working continually for many years. For if the enlargement crusade had been devoid of these men of such progressive, civic-minded character, the Barge Canal, or really any improvement project, would have been but a trifling concept occasionally entering the public conversation and evaporating just as quickly as it came. An enormous debt of gratitude ought to be owed to the outstanding exertions of the foremost canal advocates, as well as the collective wisdom of the majority of New Yorkers, who ultimately agreed with the promises and aspirations that the Barge Canal offered.

Here, at the close of 1903, the long journey of the canal men finally reached its apex as the sojourners endured a variable climate of support, experiencing both encouraging sunny days and disappointing downpours. The advocates braved jagged

rocks of anti-canal forces' incessant condemnation, suffering cuts and bruises with every trip and fall, yet learned with each slip where to position their footing. Proponents spanned wide ravines of public opinion and hesitance that required careful yet effective crossing lest a misstep drag the enlargement project down into the abyss. With passage of the Barge Canal Act, the wary travelers enjoyed a brief but welcome reprieve, resting up for laborious hike ahead, knowing that if they fell past this point, they would tumble back down the mountain and there would be no second chance. The stakes were known by all, the higher up the mountain, the more treacherous the path. The uphill climb would only grow steeper as the summit came into view, with the howling winds of adversaries escalating in intensity and frigidness as its desperation increased. But the canal sojourner would not be dissuaded, refusing to turn back and relinquish all they had attained. Rising above the clouds, the crest of the struggle was reached. Planting the triumphant banner of the Barge Canal's conquest, the canal voyager stood atop the zenith of the improvement cause, beholding the landscape below and all that had been overcome. Representing the pinnacle of canal progress, the faithful canal proponent reveled in the immense accomplishment that such a long, concerted expedition had achieved.

Concluding Considerations

From Referendum Passage to Present Requiem:

Reflecting on the Course of the Barge Canal from its 1903 Plebiscite to its Current Condition Today in Modern America

Nearly two-hundred years ago from today and over eighty years prior to the Barge Canal's approval, some of New York State's most prominent and influential politicians and citizens gathered at the State Capitol in 1817 to deliberate on war and the Erie Canal. While in the midst of the canal act's last hurdle with its necessary approval by the Council of Revision, the fear of another war with Great Britain was fostered by the measure's foes in order to divert funding for the project. Hearing the assertion, the council's chancellor declared with great animation, "If we must have war, or have a canal, I am in favor of the canal, and I vote for the bill."¹ Consequently, the Erie Canal was approved, and its supporters soon found themselves receiving both war and the canal, with the former being a war of words with those waterway opponents who retained underhanded political motives and sectional prejudice, while lacking higher patriotic sentiments. Such was a similar case for the Barge Canal in 1903 as it faced incessant assaults by its adversaries on every possible front. Yet, like its forerunner, the Barge Canal would strive through to enactment and completion and still navigates across the entire breadth of the Empire State.

Men Behind the Movement:

With the campaign for the Barge Canal's legislative and popular approval judged to be one of the, if not *the*, fiercest and laborious New York State had ever witnessed,

¹ Jonas Platt's letter in David Hosack, *Memoir of De Witt*. (New York: Printed by J. Seymour, 1829), pp 387-388.

some must wonder what drove these men on either side of battlefield to devote so much time and energy to this movement.² While some men gave their heart and soul to the progression of the canal project, Alfred Haines gave his life to the cause. Having led the Buffalo Merchants' Exchange for many years as its president, he devoted his time and wealth, both of which proved essential to carrying on the "Campaign of Education" that was so imperative in the canal agitation.³ Relishing in the joy of the barge canal's popular approval after years of "untiring efforts... that kept the fires of canal improvement continually burning," Haines's own flame would be extinguished on December 17, 1903.⁴ Haines's case was all too reminiscent of the Erie Canal's greatest champion, DeWitt Clinton, who too worked tirelessly against the antagonistic current to see the waterway pressed on to completion. Only a few years after the canal's completion and without seeing its full impact, Clinton died suddenly in 1828 from a heart attack that was likely, at least in some part, induced by the stress and exertion of promoting the waterway for so many years. Other canal men nearly succumbed to same fate, such as Gustav H. Schwab, who "was obliged to leave for Europe on the advice of his physician for a needed rest" toward the end of October, 1903.⁵ What drove these men to endure such a long struggle in the pursuit of an even bigger ditch spanning New York State? Perhaps it was a motivation that was even deeper and more expansive than the Barge Canal, patriotism.

² Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, Vol. 12 (Buffalo, New York: Buffalo Historical Society, 1908), p 468.

³ George H. Raymond, "New York State Canals from 1895 to 1903" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909), p 165.

⁴ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 396.

⁵ Gustav H. Schwab. "New York City's Part in the Reconstruction of the State's Waterways" in *Canal Enlargement in New York State*, ed. Frank H. Severance (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Historical Society, 1909), p 74.

Well it was stated in the introduction that the definition of patriotism for these men differed from our current understanding of the ideal, there still exists a common underpinning of sacrifice. Though undoubtedly applicable to military martyrdom on the battlefield, it is arguably the prolonged, persistent crusades that demand the most patriotic stamina. This interpretation fits both the past and present perception of patriotism, a principle embodied in the advocates of the Barge Canal, and espoused by Adlai Stevenson, "Patriotism is not short, frenzied outbursts of emotion, but the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime."⁶ If some men bravely face the battlefield to defend and better the wellbeing of their compatriots in times of war, then these men are the soldiers that continued that fight in times of peace. Immediately coming to mind are John Kernan and George Green, who stood to benefit in no significant way from the endorsement and construction of the Barge Canal. In fact, Green actually stood to lose quite a bit as his home district of Binghamton in Broome County was virulently anti-canal and his advocacy for the waterway drew the hostility of the powerful railroad forces. The two men worked tirelessly before, during, and after the barge canal campaign, sacrificing their time and funding their efforts "very largely at their own expense."⁷ Yet, despite their lack of any material gain and the frequent hostility they faced championing the canal cause to those who wished to drain it, Kernan and Green endeavored to see the project through to completion. But alas, these men can but hold a candle to their famed predecessor DeWitt Clinton, whose contribution to the canal cause could be catalogued in enough words.

⁶ Adlai Stevenson, BrainyQuote.

⁷ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Review of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State*, p 385.

Of course, there will always be abundant criticisms that can be leveled against those politicians and prominent citizens who pursue great infrastructural or societal projects that will stand to benefit their society. Cynics and adversaries will claim that these figures are not expending so much time and efforts simply for the betterment of people they will surely never meet. They will charge that these people must have an ulterior motive, whether it is some financial incentive or just a ploy to garner votes so as to remain in power. Is it really so hard to imagine that one would devote a significant portion of themselves in the pursuit of the greater good? It should not be as examples are found promptly in this paper.

Noble Whitford extolled the canal men and derided their opponents regarding their rationale regarding the Barge Canal:

There were, doubtless, multitudes of men with no individual interests at stake who steadfastly believed that the proposed canal was not for the highest good of the State. But at the risk of being thought prejudiced we dare to assert that at bottom most of the opposition was due to some interest of a personal nature, the railroad influence predominating. And this personal interest, working through the press, molded public sentiment in various areas of the state and thus gave to the man with no personal interest an opinion which he accepted as his own. This is not saying, however, that individual interests did not hold sway to a considerable extent also in the canal camp. But speaking by and large the canal advocates were more often actuated by altruistic motives, while the opponents were generally influenced by consideration of personal gain.⁸

Though Whitford did have a basis for his claims regarding the anti-canal forces, he too liberally generalized the Barge Canal's proponents as they too likely had ulterior motives. Notably, leading New York City canal proponent Gustav Schwab actively owned and managed the firm of Oelrichs & Co., which operated a steamship business

⁸ Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Barge Canal of New York State*, (Albany: J.B. Lyon, Printers, 1922), p 125.

that would benefit greatly from the Barge Canal's construction.⁹ With Schwab "especially devoting his attention" to this business, it was a clear conflict of interest that cannot be ignored.¹⁰ In addition, numerous advocates were Buffalo residents who owned businesses and served on the local commercial organizations, while the enlarged waterway promised to bring immense prosperity to the area. Although derision typically falls upon the losing party, especially if it was opposed to a project for the supposed public good, the barge canal advocates were just as liable as its opponents to accusations of self-service.

The campaign for the Barge Canal was not just comprised of the promotional activities conducted during its critical adoptive year of 1903, but rather spanned a whole series of campaigns over the prior decade and earlier. While evolving in message and scope, these operations ultimately coalesced into the extensive Barge Canal and canal system of New York State that is still in operation to this day and deserves to have its story told. Currently, there are numerous people interested in preserving the canal's immense importance to the historical, political, economic, and cultural development of New York State and the entire United States. In institutions such as the Erie Canal Museum in Syracuse and the New York State Archives in Albany, the waterway's significance is not only kept alive by dedicated preservationists but promoted to the public to remind them of the deep debt owed to a once-unimaginable project brought to fruition by relentless and spirited advocates.

⁹ Georg Von Skal, *History of German Immigration in the United States and Successful German-Americans and Their Descendants* (New York: F. T. & J. C. Smiley, 1908), p 57.

¹⁰ Georg Von Skal, *History of German Immigration in the United States* p 57.

Barge Canal's Importance Then and Now:

For those who, before reading this work, were unfamiliar with or had never even heard of the New York State Barge Canal and the immense campaign that preceded it, this could be due to a number of reasons. Such possibilities include it being overshadowed by either its more renowned predecessor, the Erie Canal, or its contemporary project, the Panama Canal. Going off that note, the much greater degree of attention that historians and laypeople pay its predecessor, the Erie Canal, can be attributed to the pioneering aura that surrounds it, as well as historical nostalgia.

Applicable to those interested in political science or simply wishing to better understand the pursuit of long-term goals, the canal campaign provides an acute analysis of the processes and practices involved in conducting a major lobbying campaign over a long a period of time. The canal campaign is a prime example as it contained nearly all the essential elements; missteps of achieving false victory with the “Nine-Million Dollar Debacle” and having to campaign for years to recover the trust and confidence of the public, as well as recruiting and utilizing experts in applicable fields.

Although the focus of this examination is not to determine the accuracy of these predictions, it would entuse one to know that the economic expectations were correct, at least for their foreseeable future. The Barge Canal stood as the central shipping conduit from the Midwest to the eastern seaboard until the creation of the St. Lawrence Seaway, upstate New York remained an industrial hub for the next half century, and New York City still retains the commercial crown. In our current era of growing globalization, the world economy has greatly diversified in terms of what, where, how, and by whom goods are produced. Most importantly, the method by which these goods, in every stage of

production, reach their respective destination around the globe has evolved to maximize transportation time and efficiency. Unfortunately for the New York State Barge Canal, this heightened global trade ultimately spelled the waterway's doom in several manners.

Just as there were naysayers of the waterway's expansionary project prior to and during its construction, there exists today those who would argue that the Barge Canal failed to live up to its cost and expectations. This conclusion could not be further from the truth as the canal's construction was accompanied by great prosperity until its demise following the aforementioned negative effects of the St. Lawrence Seaway's opening and the increasing globalization of the later twentieth century. Of course, correlation does not equal causation and the point of this study is not to prove the economic promises made, but the impact of the Barge Canal upon industrial and population growth across New York State clearly cannot be minimized when observing the ensuing development. Oppositionists may cite the current status of the New York State Canal System as simply a route for recreational boating and tours with nearly all commercial traffic having vanished, yet the waterway still performs several vital roles and harbors enormous potential for economic growth even in its present state.

Setting aside all the political and economics claims, whether substantiated or not, one must remember that in the very end, the goal of many pro-canal advocates was to enhance a means of transportation so as to promote the general wellbeing of the public. The enlargement of the canal system was a civic-minded labor of love dating back to the abolition of tolls in 1882 and the notion of natural waterways as a method of specifically intended to regulate freight rates and competition for the benefit of industry and people at large. Perhaps the dreamers and redeemers of our present era can obtain a valuable

attitude and lesson from the giants on whose shoulders we currently stand. Those men at the turn of the twentieth century, men such as Thomas Edison, Theodore Roosevelt, and the faithful advocates of the Barge Canal, endeavored to initiate the blossoming of a new exploratory frontier of invention, political thought, and economic renaissance where the cost of failure never outweighed the daring potential of success. They may have seen a chance to enhance their own wealth and prestige, but they were also undoubtedly driven by the desire to better society in the manner they saw best fit. Coming from a novel written at the latter end of this optimistic, progressive, and forward-thinking epoch and epitomizing its general attitude, the concluding line has come to define many peoples and movements. For our occasion, we find its words embodying the yearnings and actions of those individuals who fought and continued on earnestly against the skeptical and hesitant nature of mankind which far too often fails to look to the past so that they may see their future; “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”¹¹

¹¹ F. Scott. Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (Scribner Trade Paperback ed. New York: Scribner, 2004)

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