Historical Geography of NYS

Nature of Settlement
Post-Revolution to the Civil War
1780-1865

Prof. Anthony Grande

Settlement Sequence
New York State

- Revolutionary War ends in 1781.
- New York colony becomes the State of New York. Its political boundaries are firmed after negotiations with neighboring states.
- It is the 11th state to ratify the Constitution (1788).
- Congress (1791) voted to separate the northeast corner of New York to create the state of Vermont.

Changing Shape of New York

1783 Boundaries and Claims

Pre-Revolution Boundaries

1802 Boundaries as approved by Congress

Land Distribution

- NYS government takes control of all Indian land and evicts the Iroquois (British allies).
  - Newly created State of New York needs money.
  - Settlement prohibition dropped.
  - The state sells most of the land (military tracts) to give to members of the militia.
  - Land developers allowed divide the land and sell parcels to individuals.
- Excellent farmland draws people from other states and from Europe. Rapid settlement of interior NYS follows.

Land Purchases

By 1810 over 60,000 people moved into western NYS.

Settlement of Interior NYS

- This imprints the basic pattern of population distribution on the state map.
- Focal points (towns) are created and they are linked by a crude road network.
- With the influx of farmers to virgin arable land, New York becomes a major agricultural state producing grains and other essential foodstuffs. By the 1820s is known as "the nation's bread basket."
Sequential Settlement

Settlement was uneven and selective. Valleys first. Highlands last. Spread to all areas of the state except for areas with the harshest conditions. Most of settlers of the first wave were from New England; also from NJ and PA. Mohawk River served as the conduit. European immigrants did not arrive until the early 1800s.

Sequential Settlement: I

Settlement was uneven and selective. Valleys first; Highlands last. Spread to all areas of the state except for areas with the harshest conditions. Most of settlers of the first wave were from New England; also from NJ and PA. Mohawk River served as the conduit. European immigrants did not arrive until the early 1800s.

Sequential Settlement: II

Settlement was uneven and selective. Valleys first; Highlands last. Spread to all areas of the state except for areas with the harshest conditions. Most of settlers of the first wave were from New England; also from NJ and PA. Mohawk River served as the conduit. European immigrants did not arrive until the early 1800s.

Sequential Settlement: III

Settlement was uneven and selective. Valleys first; Highlands last. Spread to all areas of the state except for areas with the harshest conditions. Most of settlers of the first wave were from New England; also from NJ and PA. Mohawk River served as the conduit. European immigrants did not arrive until the early 1800s.

Sequential Settlement: IV

Settlement was uneven and selective. Valleys first; Highlands last. Spread to all areas of the state except for areas with the harshest conditions. Most of settlers of the first wave were from New England; also from NJ and PA. Mohawk River served as the conduit. European immigrants did not arrive until the early 1800s.

Sequential Settlement: V

Settlement was uneven and selective. Valleys first; Highlands last. Spread to all areas of the state except for areas with the harshest conditions. Most of settlers of the first wave were from New England; also from NJ and PA. Mohawk River served as the conduit. European immigrants did not arrive until the early 1800s.
Settlement Composite

Settlement was uneven and selective. Valleys first; highlands last. Spread to all areas of the state except for areas with the harshest conditions. Most of settlers of the first wave were from New England; also from NJ and PA. Mohawk River served as the conduit. European immigrants did not arrive until the early 1800s.

What was the lure?

Remember push-pull factors?

- Overcrowded conditions and a harsh environment in New England were push factors.
- NYS pull factors were:
  - Good soil, climate and land
  - Known resources of lumber, waterpower and minerals, especially salt.
  - Alternate river routes to the interior via the Delaware, Susquehanna and Allegheny rivers.
  - Curiosities: there was Niagara Falls, the Finger Lakes and the Genesee River (beginnings of tourism!).

War of 1812

NYS was the focus of hostilities between British Canada and the United States during the War of 1812.

Battle sites included:
1. the Niagara Frontier,
2. shore of Lake Ontario,
3. the Lake Champlain region.

Period after the War of 1812

- After the War of 1812, there was a need to get to food to market as quickly and securely.
  - New farmland provided bountiful harvests.
  - Market towns were established along the E-W turnpikes.
  - Overland travel was slow and expensive.
- Needed a faster, cheaper and safe way to get agricultural products from interior NYS to the Atlantic Coast without using the Lake Ontario or St. Lawrence River. (There was still a fear of British Canada.)

Land Routes in NYS

Wagons and boats were used to move food, coal, wood and other goods between the western frontier (Pittsburgh) and NYC, but there was NOT an all water route.

The Erie Canal

- Gov. DeWitt Clinton persuaded the NYS Legislature to fund (1816) the building of a canal to link the Hudson R. with Lake Erie after Federal government refused.
- The Erie Canal was constructed between 1817 and 1825 as a public works program.
  - First segment was from Rome to Seneca (easiest digging).
  - East and west ends required technology.
  - Problem: No engineering schools in the US.
- Canal diggers were mainly immigrants hired from ships arriving in NYC. Most settled in NYS along the canal and a new set of towns were established.
**CANAL ERA**
1816-1855

**Extra Credit Exercise 8:**
Looks at the site and situation of the canals built in New York during the "Canal Era."

---

**Erie Canal**

- 363 miles long with 83 locks negotiating a 573 ft change in elevation between Buffalo and Albany.
- Cost $8 million (recouped the cost within 5 years!)

---

**Dimensions of the Erie Canal**

**ORIGINAL ERIE CANAL**
- 363 mi long with 83 locks
- 40 ft wide/28 ft bottom
- 4 ft deep
- Dug by hand
- 8-10 ft wide containment berms
- Mules/horses towed the canal boats

---

**Canal Lock**

*Canal Lock Animation*

A lock is an enclosed basin (with gates at either end) that is used to raise and lower water in the canal (stair-step fashion).

Original lock operations were gravity-flow.

Now electric pumps speed the process.

---

**Canal Cross-section**

- The original canal was 40 ft wide and 4 ft deep. Boats were pulled by horses/mules walking on adjacent towpaths built on top of berms that contained the water.

---

**http://www.eriecanal.org/index.html**

---

**http://www.eriecanal.org/index.html**

---

**http://www.eriecanal.org/index.html**

---

**http://www.eriecanal.org/index.html**

---

**http://www.eriecanal.org/index.html**

---

**http://www.eriecanal.org/index.html**

---

**http://www.eriecanal.org/index.html**

---

**http://www.eriecanal.org/index.html**
Locks at Lockport

- 1825 – original locks
- 1836-1862 – enlarged locks
- 1880

Lockport Today: Only 2 locks

Scenes along the Canal Today

- Lock Keeper’s House
- Packet (passenger) boat replicas
- Dry dock

Erie Canal at Cohoes

- Old Lock 18 near Cohoes, NY

Erie Canal near Schenectady

- Locks were opened and closed by hand.

Sights along the Erie Canal

- Mules and horses pulled the boats in the canal. They followed the towpath which was located on top of the berm.
Sights along the Erie Canal

Western Terminus of the Erie Canal

• The Erie Canal was to end at Black Rock, NY, a town at the mouth of the Niagara River opposite Fort Erie, Ontario. (This was a convenient ferrying point across the river.)
• Fear of British attack (Black Rock was burned during War of 1812) moved the terminus south to Buffalo Creek in present day Buffalo.
• This proved to be a better location in the long run.

The Erie Canal

• It provided an all water link between the Atlantic Ocean and the Great Lakes when opened in 1825.
• Cut travel time from NYC to Buffalo from 20 days to 8 days.
• Cut cost of freight from $120/ton to $5/ton reducing the price of food and lumber.
• Made Rochester the largest US flour milling center. In 1820 it shipped 67,000 barrels of wheat flour; in 1826 it shipped 240,000 barrels.
• Made NYC the largest US port. By 1840 NYC saw more tonnage than all other major US ports combined.

The Legacy of the Erie Canal

• Instigated a state-wide and national canal-building mania.
• Became the focus of economic development.
  – Because of the favorable economic situation (farming, lumbering and transport) people poured into interior NYS.
  – Cities developed along its route (1850 census saw 75% of NYS population living within 10 mi of it).
  – Because of its success, it had to be enlarged several times to handle heavier cargo and larger barges.
• Speeded the development of the railroads as a year-round long-haul mover of tonnage.

Canals of NYS in 1855

The success of the Erie Canal began the Canal Era in the US but no other state had the combination of landforms and water sources as did NYS.

The Delaware and Hudson Canal was the first privately built canal in the US.

The Richelieu River was canalized to connect the St. Lawrence River with Lake Champlain.

The late 1850s saw the end of the Canal Era as the rail network grew.

Delaware & Hudson Canal System

First canal privately financed in US. Built from 1825-29.

Connected Pennsylvania coalfields with Hudson R. at Kingston, NY

Consisted of a 108 mi long canal with 108 locks + 16 mi of gravity railroad

Eventually replaced by the Erie RR which brought coal directly to NYC.
Delaware & Hudson Canal

Importance of this Phase of Settlement

- Canal Era ends prior to Civil War as railroads take over long-haul transportation.
- End of period saw the **imprint of the basic pattern** of population distribution.
- **Focal points** of higher population densities developed.
- Focal points became **links in the modern transportation system**.
  - (Colonial turnpikes >> canals >> railroads >> paved roadways >> interstate highway system)
  - **Greatly altered the natural environment.**

Altered Landscapes

- Dams were needed to maintain both water level and supply.
- Originally, stream beds and wetlands (lakes/marshes) were used as the rights of way.
- Water was diverted and impounded.
- Berms were built to contain water in the canal and create a towpath.
- Feeder canals were needed to bring water to the main canal.
- Trees were cut for construction material.
- Vegetation was cleared. Service areas and roads were built.

Aqueduct over Genesee River

Canals speeded changes in the landscape.

- Trees were cut down for farmland and roads as well as for construction material and fuel.
- In some areas the price of wood for fuel soared because too much land was cleared for farming!
- People made comments about the “bleak and raw look to the land.”

Air photo of current Lock E-7 at Vischer Ferry.

NYS Forest Cover (percent by year)

Changes in New York’s Forest Land Area

- Opening of Erie Canal: 1800s
- Beginning of 20th Century: 1925
- Now: 63%

- 1860: 90%
- 1875: 80%
- 1885: 62%
- 1975: 50%
- 2000: 20%
- 2012: 63%

- Opening of Western New York’s Forest Land Area
  - 1800s: 1800
  - 1925: 1825
  - Now: 2000

- Opening of Erie Canal
  - 1800s: 1800
  - 1925: 1880
  - Now: 2000