

Dewitt Clinton's Dream

Perinton and points west were the great frontier in the late 1700's. Traveling by land was treacherous. Vast swamps, forests, and difficult terrain were a discouraging deterrent to western migration. Dewitt Clinton held many political offices, including Mayor of New York City, State Senator, and Governor. He was the most vocal and persistent champion of a canal to connect the Hudson River with Lake Erie. Clinton's dream had few supporters, and many detractors. Thomas Jefferson, principal author of the Declaration of Independence, third President of the United States, and an intellect of the highest order, did not support the construction of New York's great canal, saying, "It is a splendid project, and may be executed a century hence."



Perinton Historical Society members on a canal trip in September of 1958.

In his tireless efforts to gain support for the construction of the Erie Canal, Dewitt Clinton wrote the following passage, referred to by canal historian Roy G. Finch in 1925 as "Governor Dewitt Clinton's Dream":

"As a bond of union between Atlantic and Western states, it may prevent the dismemberment of the American Empire. As an organ of communication between the Hudson, the Mississippi, the St. Lawrence, the Great Lakes of the north and west and their tributary rivers, it will create the greatest inland trade ever witnessed. The most fertile and extensive regions of America will avail themselves of its facilities for a market. All their surplus productions, whether of the soil, the forest, the mines, or the water, their fabrics of art and their supplies of foreign communities, will concentrate in the city of New York, for transportation abroad or consumption at home. Agriculture, manufactures, commerce, trade,

navigation, and the arts will receive a correspondent encouragement. The city will, in the course of time, become the granary of the world, the emporium of commerce, the seat of manufactures, the focus of great moneyed operations and the concentrating point of vast disposable, and accumulating capita, which will stimulate, enliven, extend and reward the exertions of human labor and ingenuity, in all their process and exhibitions. And before the revolution of a century, the whole island of Manhattan, covered with inhabitants and replenished with a dense population, will constitute one vast city."

As Governor of New York, Dewitt Clinton was able to secure seven million dollars in funding, and construction began in 1817, despite many objections by those that referred to the canal as "Clinton's Ditch." After eight years, the canal was finally completed in 1825. In that time, Clinton had lost and regained the office of Governor. He traveled by packet boat the length of the canal, from Lake Erie to New York Harbor, and was given a hero's welcome in all ports. For many Americans, the Erie Canal was symbolic of the young country's endless potential and spirit. The canal was an emotional and economic success, evidenced by the enormous reduction in cost to ship goods across the state.

In his 1925 essay, Canal Historian Finch confirmed that Dewitt Clinton's dream had come true, stating that "every loyal New Yorker has reason to feel pride" in the state's canal system. People who live in Perinton and those who visit our community would probably agree. In our town, the canal has served as a source of commerce, recreation, and beauty for almost two hundred years.

Written by Bill Poray, Perinton Town Historian Published in the Fairport-ER Post, 08/01/2013