



'Bond of Union' by Gerard Koepfel

The Erie Canal was more than a big ditch

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By Roger K. Miller

In the first quarter of the 19th century, the country was largely a loose collection of states joined by a shared past and facing an uncertain future as a nation, "until the Erie Canal opened on a fine fall day in 1825," writes Gerard Koepfel.

"BOND OF UNION: BUILDING THE ERIE CANAL AND THE AMERICAN EMPIRE"

By Gerard Koepfel

Da Capo (\$27.95)

No single event or achievement of the century can be said to have solidified a union that, after all, came apart four decades later, but Koepfel's superb history shows that the canal, by more tightly drawing the states together through increased commerce, helped create the conditions for a continental nation.

Now, as the nation readies public works projects to aid the plunging economy, it is instructive to examine what historian Paul Johnson has called "probably the outstanding example of a human artifact creating wealth rapidly in the whole of history."

Not that the canal builders received any help from the feds. Presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, preferring to see a Potomac River-oriented canal westward through their native Virginia, denied it federal funds.

So New Yorkers made an artificial river by raising their own money. The story of its building is largely one of the fluctuating political fortunes of its most influential and enthusiastic champion, New York Gov. De Witt Clinton.

Jesse Hawley was nearly as obscure then as he is today, yet it was his essays, written in 1807 from debtors' prison, that caught the attention of prominent persons such as Clinton. Hawley first made his ideas public in tentative form a few months earlier in a Pittsburgh weekly, *The Commonwealth*.

Ground was broken for the Erie Canal at Rome on Independence Day, 1817. It eventually would run 363 miles from Albany, where it connected with the Hudson River, to Buffalo and Lake Erie.

A "Grand Aquatic Procession" was held in New York City Nov. 4, 1825, to mark the canal's completion.

Financially and in many other ways it was a stunning success even before completion, as traffic began to move on individual sections.

By 1855 the Erie-Canal-and-Hudson-River route had supplanted the Mississippi River as the country's major transporter of goods.

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