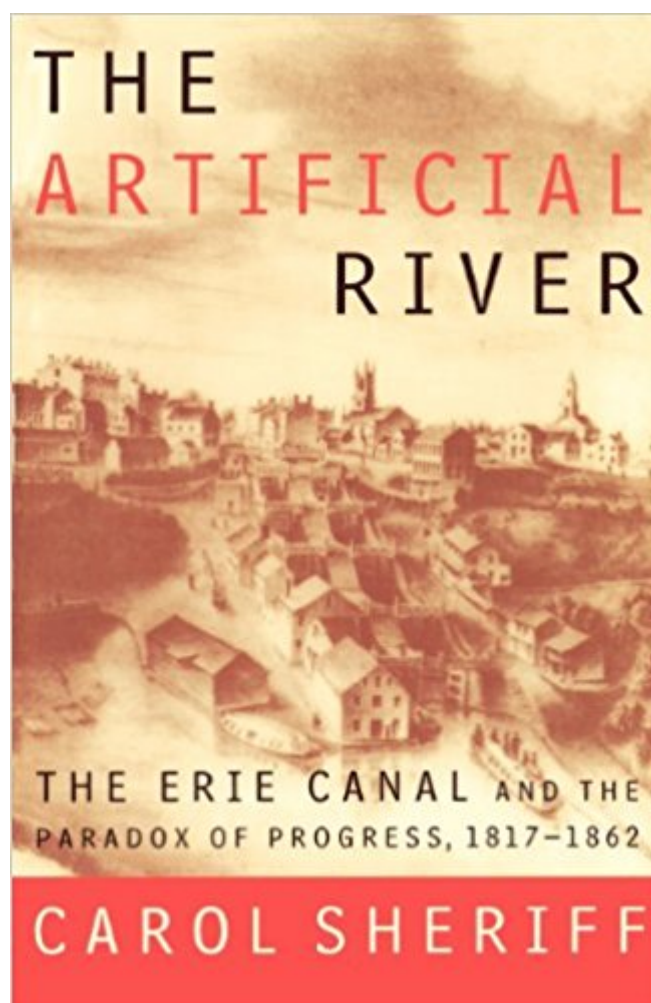


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# The Artificial River: The Erie Canal And The Paradox Of Progress, 1817-1862



## Synopsis

The story of the Erie Canal is the story of industrial and economic progress between the War of 1812 and the Civil War. *The Artificial River* reveals the human dimension of the story of the Erie Canal. Carol Sheriff's extensive, innovative archival research shows the varied responses of ordinary people-farmers, businessmen, government officials, tourists, workers-to this major environmental, social, and cultural transformation in the early life of the Republic. Winner of Best Manuscript Award from the New York State Historical Association. "The Artificial River is deeply researched, its arguments are both subtle and clear, and it is written with grace and an engagingly light touch. The book merits a wide readership." • Paul Johnson, *The Journal of American History*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The United States was a new republic in 1817. The generation of its original revolutionaries was fast dying; a second war with Great Britain had recently been settled; and expansionism was the mood of the day. The "children of the founders," as Carol Sheriff calls this first 19th-century American generation, sought to make its mark with engineering projects that would further national growth and prove to Europe that the new nation "played a leading role in God's plan to improve the earthly world." It did so in grand style with the Erie Canal, a huge waterway that linked Atlantic seaports with the Great Lakes. Sheriff's vigorous account of the canal's conception and building makes for an epic story and fascinating reading.

As an early-19th-century public works project, the Erie Canal dwarfed all others in terms of cost,

size and imagination. By connecting Buffalo to Albany, the canal opened a waterway between New York City and the Great Lakes, dramatically transforming U.S. commerce and industry. In this work, which began as a dissertation, Sheriff, who teaches history at William and Mary, does an effective job of examining the impact of improved transportation on various segments of society: ditchdiggers, farmers, merchants, canal boat captains, politicians, housewives and missionaries. Most interesting is her finding that many of the motifs that define our current age began with the creation of the canal. From family values to government entitlements, and from government deficits to environmental destruction, today's issues seem to be reflected in this antebellum history.

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I have only just begun so my assessment is not accurate yet. We recently rode on the Sam Patch boat on the Erie Canal and had a narration tour. We were on a motor coach tour of Niagara Falls and this Canal ride was one of the highlights of our tour! They passed this book around and recommended it as a good source of information.

Great book!

Good for facts

Came as advertised and in great shape!

Book was in excellent condition!

Sheriff spends too much time repeating interesting facts. She seems obsessed with explaining "God and nature" Fortunately the book is a fast read, so I didn't waste too much time.

While using the Erie Canal as its focus, the *Artificial River* examines the entire impact of the canal in the context of the social and economic milieu of the period. The text is supported and augmented by ample footnotes. The author is an excellent story teller and has the enviable and somewhat rare ability to convert dry data into an exciting *you are there* narrative. LMW 3-214-17

For too many people, the Erie Canal was simply an artificial waterway that opened the American west (back then) to the Atlantic, and, in the process made New York City a business entrepot. Carol Sheriff, in her book, "The Artificial River: The Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817-1862" digs a lot deeper to reveal the complexities of "Clinton's Big Ditch". There were the engineering problems to be surmounted. There were financial considerations. There were the legal knots that plagued the Canal Commission. The relationship--even the definitions--of nature, art and technology became blurred to so many people. But what I came away with the most was the utter chaos and disturbance the building and maintenance of the canal created. This was not a harmonious public work, dug by noble laborers, which enriched the lives and purses of the entire populace. Instead, as Professor Sheriff demonstrates, there was a great deal of strife between the canal builders and the local residents. The wealth went to the few, and the builders got nothing--not even praise or thanks. This, in turn, created a new class of anonymous laborers which was counterpoint to the ideals of Republicanism. And, as Sheriff points out, DeWitt Clinton would have shook his head in disbelief, had he known this would have happened. As a whole, however, "The Artificial River" reminds us of the tremendous efforts that went into the making of the Erie Canal. And equally impressive, is the tremendous effort Professor Sheriff put into this well-researched and quickly paced book.

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