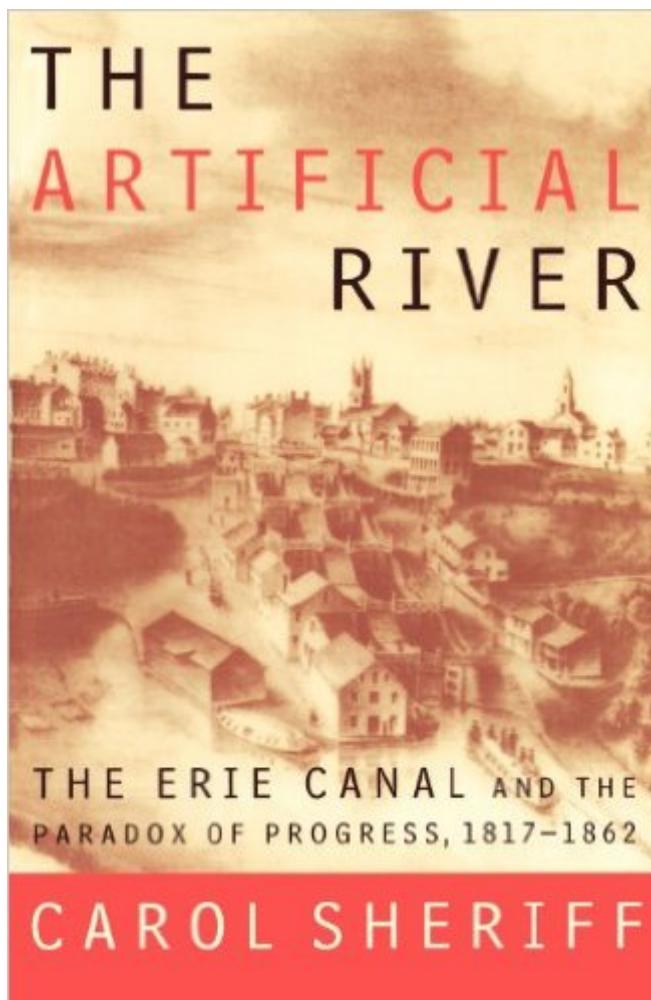


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# The Artificial River: The Erie Canal And The Paradox Of Progress, 1817-1862



## **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**

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.

The Artificial River was a shock for me. I'll admit, I had to read this book for a 19th century American history class and I wasn't too happy. I felt something about the Civil War would be more interesting. And how interesting could an artificial river be anyways? Fortunately, I didn't discard the book, but read it and I was completely shocked. Carol Sheriff has completed an amazing feat. This book about the Erie Canal pulled me into its world giving a tremendous feel of the 19th century world. Sheriff provides a look from all classes of society adjusting to the shifts of progress. This book at its core is just that, a society adjusting to rapid progress - progress that brings its perks and pitfalls.

This book describes the complicated and fascinating social history of the canal that shrunk time and distance and transformed western New York, brought great wealth to many and opened up the west. But this progress came at a price and the book explores some of the paradoxes of progress. The progress and transformation that the Erie Canal brought also brought a new set of challenges for residents and legislators. The canal split many farms causing great problems to many farmers who wanted bridges to get to their farms, the low bridges were a hazard to canal passengers and traffic. Water diverted for the canal and locks created water shortages though the region. Leaks in the canal caused flooding on some farms and created mosquito infested ponds, which were fertile grounds for malaria epidemics. Cultural issues came to the forefront. Ditch diggers who lived in shantytowns, who drank and cussed, who tore down fences caused consternation among the inhabitants who feared that the county was creating a permanent underclass. When the digging was done and the diggers gone they were replaced with another underclass, the boat drivers, who drank, cussed, robbed and hored making the areas adjoining the canal crime-ridden. This book takes you to the time when the canal was being built and is a joy to read.

'The Artificial River' changed everything and nothing would remain the same. The book begins with these particular words, "Oysters! Oysters! beautiful Oysters," trumpeted a headline in a Batavia, New York, newspaper in 1824. The achievement of oysters so far from the sea symbolized a great

achievement that previously seemed impossible. It was a daily reminder to the people along the canal that transportation was reshaping the lives of ordinary Americans. The Erie Canal brought a nation that was divided by mountains and valleys closer together. A distance that took three weeks to travel was instantly shrunk down to a couple days and it economically opened doors of many possibilities to do business. The advancement of technology with the building of Erie Canal shaped a new kind of man that would mold the mountains of nature. These new technologies carried ideas, culture and politics through every stream and corner in the United States. I do agree that historians have a terrible trend at citing unusual sources, but the book is still good. It is beautifully written and reveals how little people know about the amazing Erie Canal. Sheriff covers the problems of the canal (dividing up farms for example), business, the canal reducing the time to travel and the molding of the canal through nature. It is a great book for someone wanting to know about the Erie Canal and learn about the transportation revolution. A few neat facts! A lot of people died in the night for standing on the top of the boat and getting hit by a bridge - giving a new meaning to duck! Also, a lot of people died from drowning because they could not swim, even though the canal was only five feet deep.

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