IX. The Grand Canal

Transportation continued to be a serious problem. Despite all the money and energy already spent on turnpikes and government-built roads, most of the highways into the interior of the nation were deplorable. Only a drastic move could significantly improve the situation.

It was in the power of New York, more than in any other state, to make such a dramatic change. New York had two natural advantages: a gap through the Appalachians and a series of almost adjacent waterways. The magnificent Hudson stretched from New York City to Albany, and westward were the Mohawk River, Wood Creek, Oneida Lake, and the Oneida, Oswego, and Seneca Rivers. These could provide the basis for an uninterrupted system of inland navigation from the Atlantic to Lake Ontario. By eliminating the rocks and sandbars, widening and deepening the rivers, and constructing short canals with locks across the portages, the state would have a navigable thruway. A short canal around Niagara Falls could then connect Lake Ontario with Lake Erie. If such a project were completed, New York City would have ready access to the Great Lakes and into the very heart of the continent. Nature had already done most of the work, so man could finish the job.

Much of this projected route had been used for over a century. The Hudson was an economical waterway from New York City to Albany. From there, fur traders had carried Indian goods sixteen miles overland to the Mohawk River at Schenectady. Then, they had paddled their canoes up the Mohawk River, Oneida Lake, and Oswego River and into Lake Ontario, with only one sizable portage of three to five miles at what is today Rome. This passage had not been fully utilized because of the Indian wars and the American Revolution. Nevertheless, New York held a precious natural resource that was an invaluable key to unlock the enormous potential of the areas around the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River.

The formula for this transportation revolution was to combine river improvements and short canals. The prescription was simple and reasonable yet took many years to put together. Before the American Revolution, the canal project had been discussed in hazy fashion. After
the nation had gained its independence, New York’s war debts had discouraged additional loans for internal improvements. In the 1790’s, the assumption of state debts by the federal government had rekindled an interest in the canal. However, it was the growing settlements in western New York that pushed the canal topic to the fore. The population increase had been explosive. In 1790, the area west of Seneca Lake was sparsely settled numbering 1,075, with the land west of the Genesee having only 51 people. Within a decade, the number living in Ontario County had climbed to 15,052; that county in 1800 was the only one in western New York. By 1810, the population west of the Genesee had mushroomed to 23,416 and more than quadrupled to 108,981 ten years later. (See Tables I and II, Appendix.)

A start toward implementing the formula of river improvements and short canals had been made in 1792. That year, the state legislature had granted charters to the Northern Inland Lock Navigation Company and to the Western Inland Lock Navigation Company. The former was to connect Hudson’s river with Lake Champlain by a continuous water route, while the latter was to provide unbroken water travel from Albany “to be extended to lake Ontario and to the Seneca lake.”¹ The Northern Company failed after a short existence. The Western Company was more durable. Beginning work in 1793, it constructed nine locks and completed three canals at Little Falls, Wolf Rift in German Flats, and at Rome. On these limited improvements, the Western Inland Lock Navigation Company collected tolls for about twenty-five years until relinquishing the charter and selling its property to the state. Technical ignorance, labor shortage, and financial limitations contributed to the downfall of the Western Company. One author concluded that the Western Company was a “premature experiment” but at least the formula was being tried.²

The concept now was of an all-water route directly from the Atlantic Ocean clear to Lake Erie. Credit for this brilliant idea goes perhaps to Gouverneur Morris, the witty aristocrat who had served the nation during and after the Revolution. In 1800, Morris had journeyed through the interior of New York, and observing the changes in the Mohawk Valley brought on by the Western Inland Lock Navigation Company, predicted that ships would one day “sail from London through Hudson’s River into Lake Erie.”³

The Morris idea was carried one step further by Jesse Hawley. A little-known merchant in Geneva, New York, Hawley and a partner had been sending flour to the New York market. He was frequently annoyed by the difficulties of shipping cargo on the Mohawk. When
the water level dropped during the summer months, it increased the carrying fees. One day, while looking at a map of New York, he suddenly got the notion that water from Lake Erie could be carried from Buffalo to the Mohawk. His friends considered this view visionary, but Hawley clung to the idea. In 1806, he went bankrupt, and as a debtor spent twenty months in jail. It was during this period of incarceration that Jesse Hawley started to write a series of fourteen essays explaining the feasibility of constructing such a canal. Signed “Hercules,” the articles appeared in the Genesee Messenger in 1807 and 1808 and made Hawley, as one authority neatly described, “the first publicist for the Erie Canal.”

Jesse Hawley’s plan called for a Genesee Canal two hundred miles long. One hundred feet wide and ten feet deep, the canal would carry the almost inexhaustible supply of Lake Erie water down the Mohawk to Utica. His proposed canal started near the mouth of the Niagara River, continued along the Niagara Escarpment, and fell 410 feet as it moved eastward, flowing into Mud Creek, Seneca River, finally entering the Mohawk. Hawley also assumed that the great accretion of water would make easy navigation possible to Schenectady. When the portage to Albany was eliminated by a canal, he concluded, the water would flow freely from Buffalo to Albany and into the Hudson to New York City. Prophetically, Hawley proposed a route that was almost the same one later followed by the Erie Canal.

Hawley’s essays received limited circulation, were read with skepticism, yet had sufficiently concrete suggestions for further action. Interest in the canal grew as the settlers increased in number, produced larger crops, and found the problem of getting the goods to a market increasingly acute. The entire state, but particularly the western sector, was suffering from growing pains. As the discussion about the canal mounted, the question of the best route began to be debated. The choice lay between a canal to Lake Ontario or one to Lake Erie. Joshua Forman, a member of the state assembly from Onondaga County, was very much aware of the transportation needs of his constituents in central New York. In 1808, he introduced a resolution that called for a survey of the most direct route for a canal between the Hudson and Lake Erie. A wary legislature approved the Forman motion but voted only $600 for the survey.

Hawley’s essays and Forman’s resolution culminated in the indispensable report of the surveyor. Simeon De Witt, the surveyor-general, was instructed to make an accurate survey of the “rivers, streams, and waters... between the Hudson River and Lake Erie” and “such other
routes as he may deem proper." For the first time, the citizens would get more factual information about the suitability and location of a canal. The survey, therefore, became vital to the prospects of an all-water route from the Hudson to Lake Erie.

As a shareholder of the Western Inland Lock Navigation Company, De Witt had personally preferred the more conventional route to Lake Ontario, but he loyally obeyed the legislative directive. As part of his fact finding, he sent a letter to Joseph Ellicott, whose opinion as Resident-Agent of the Holland Land Company would command respect. De Witt's communication began with a sarcastic allusion to the meager sum of $600 voted for the survey, recognized that some people favored a canal running clear to Lake Erie, and asked Ellicott's opinion. Knowing that the Resident-Agent had already made surveys in western New York, De Witt requested any other information about "the feasibility of such a canal." 6

Although Ellicott had not been convinced earlier that the canal would be built, he could see many gains if it were. He had always believed that improving transportation facilities would probably increase land sales. A canal would not only provide a substitute for the roads that were necessary to market goods, but most pleasant prospect of all, it would not cost the Holland Land Company an excessive amount of money.

Previously, Ellicott had favored building roads, but when he saw that his program increased the Company's taxes, he decided to use his influence to limit additional road construction. Yet, by 1808, the poor quality of western New York roads convinced him that some other means of transportation would have to be found to assist the farmers in marketing their produce. For, if this could not be done, the farmers' ability to earn sufficient funds to pay their debts to the Company would be seriously limited. What is more, without satisfactory transportation facilities, potential customers might be discouraged from buying land. Joseph Ellicott decided to act. When an opportunity arose early in 1808 for him to take part in the planning of a canal, he eagerly accepted.

Before responding to De Witt, Ellicott discussed the idea of a canal with Agent-General Busti. He praised the project and stressed the points that a waterway could be built at small expense and that it would greatly increase the value of Company lands. On the crucial question of how the canal might affect the value of the land, Ellicott assured Busti: "We might fairly estimate the Holland Company's Property here at $1,000,000 higher" provided, added the ever-circumspect Resident-Agent, "the Canal should be made sufficiently large to admit
the Boats . . . capable of carrying twenty to thirty tons Burthen.” The Resident-Agent also informed his superior that he wanted a direct all-water route rather than one which “might round the Niagara to Lake Ontario and from thence to Oneida Lakes.”

After informing Busti of his position on this matter, Ellicott answered DeWitt’s request in a detailed ten-page letter. First, he carefully examined three possible routes: one swinging around Niagara Falls; a second moving down the Niagara River from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario; and a third connecting the Genesee River with Lake Erie. Then, he eliminated the first two possibilities and supported the third route. With typical efficiency, he approximated the water depths and the lock requirements, estimated the cost of excavation per mile, and even included a map for the western sector. Finally, as proof of his confidence in the practicability of the project, he offered to invest $2,500 in a company organized to build the proposed waterway to Lake Erie. Ellicott’s recommendations revealed his vast and accurate knowledge of western New York and strengthened the hopes for a canal west of the Genesee. His final selection of the Erie route predictably coincided with the best interests of the Holland Company, for the canal would pass through the purchase.

In addition to charging De Witt with the selection of a route, the resolution of 1808 had specified that he should assume the responsibility of having a survey made of the proposed waterway. De Witt appointed James Geddes to make the necessary surveys. This was a critical juncture in the debate over the Ontario and Erie routes, and the Geddes report proved decisive. Geddes spent the summer of 1808 surveying the areas between the Mohawk and Lake Ontario and along the Niagara River. By then, he had spent the $600 appropriation but his curiosity drove him on. Using his own funds, Geddes turned east in December to study what was considered the greatest obstacle to an interior route: the land between the Genesee and Mud Creek (Palmyra). Until then, it had been assumed that this area had high ground with no source of water. Geddes, however, made what proved to be an important discovery. The Genesee was way above the high land. The canal water could thus be carried across the Irondequoit Valley to Mud Creek over a series of natural ridges. Geddes’ findings cost the state an extra $73, but his disclosures were crucial. Making his report to De Witt in 1809, Geddes concluded that both routes were possible. Although he tried to be impartial, his report favored the Erie over the Ontario route, thus brightening further the likelihood of an Erie route.

Impressed by the possibilities inherent in a canal, the state legis-
lature took a more forceful position. In 1810, both houses unanimously passed a resolution to survey two routes from the Hudson to Lake Erie. One would be the interior passage, and the other would run to Lake Ontario and around Niagara Falls to Lake Erie. The resolution also called for a recommendation of the most eligible route. The work of surveying and recommending would be done by a board of commissioners. The legislature then passed another resolution appointing a seven-man board of commissioners and appropriated $3,000 for their expense.

Aware that the prospects of the project might depend heavily on the board of commissioners, the lawmakers selected the men carefully. Political balance, public esteem, and competence were the primary criteria. Four men were Federalists: Gouverneur Morris, the wealthy patrician who in 1800 had suggested an all-water route from the Hudson to Lake Erie; Stephen Van Rensselaer, the large and influential landlord; William North, heir to part of the Von Steuben estate; and Thomas Eddy, insurance broker and successful businessman. Three commissioners were Republicans: DeWitt Clinton, talented naturalist, nephew of the seven-time governor of New York State, former mayor of New York City, and a strong political leader in the Senate who became interested in the canal at this time; Simeon De Witt, surveyor-general and land speculator; and Peter B. Porter, congressman, business entrepreneur, and land expansionist. Financially secure, the commissioners knew each other well, having dealt with one another in politics, land speculation, and business.

The legislative action was a milestone in economics, too. Until then, private enterprise had been encouraged to build canals. However, the failure of the Western Inland Lock Navigation Company, the mounting demands for better roads especially in western New York, and the favorable Geddes report were pushing the state into a new posture. The 1810 resolutions recognized two new trends. First, the canal movement, in two years, had grown from an object of scorn to a project of worth. And second, as a political issue, it was attracting votes in central and western New York. The high quality of the seven-man commission showed how seriously the legislature was approaching the subject. For many reasons, then, the resolutions of 1810 indicated that the government was making a serious shift. The traditional dependence on privately chartered companies for canal improvements was giving ground to the more novel arrangement of the state constructing the canal itself.

The canal commissioners took their jobs seriously. Morris and Van
Rensselaer, carrying with them Hawley’s essays, Ellicott’s letter and map to De Witt, and the Geddes report, examined the route from Albany directly to Buffalo. The other commissioners restudied the advantages of the Ontario route. James Geddes and Benjamin Wright worked as surveyors and laid out the line of the canals. In March, 1811, the commissioners made their first report. On the question of which route was the better, they favored the Erie over the Ontario passage. The recommendation was a victory for Ellicott, the Holland Land Company, and western New York; it was the first time that an official body had favored the interior route for a canal to Lake Erie. On the issue of who should be the builder, the commissioners took a firm stand that the canal should be constructed by public authority. They rejected the building by private enterprise because of insufficient capital, the danger of speculation, and the great national interest at stake.

Without taking sides about which route to use, the legislature accepted the commissioners’ report and in April, 1811, passed the first canal law. Under this act, the old commissioners were reappointed, Robert Fulton and Robert Livingston were added to the canal board, and $15,000 was voted for their use. To push the project along, the act authorized the canal board to do several specific things: seek aid from Congress and other state legislatures; negotiate with the Western Inland Lock Navigation Company for the surrender of its rights; learn the terms on which loans could be made; and accept the land donations through which the canal would pass.

One month after the act of 1811 was passed, five of the nine commissioners met in New York and apportioned the assignments. Clinton and Livingston were to contact Congress and other states for assistance. Clinton and Fulton were to get in touch with the Western Inland Lock Navigation Company. Meantime, Morris and North were to determine the best terms for loans. Eddy and Fulton were to search for an engineer. And De Witt and Van Rensselaer were to encourage proprietors to cede land where the proposed canal would flow.

The commissioners moved swiftly to complete their assignments. Clinton and Morris went to Washington for federal aid, but constitutional scruples, jealousy among states, and the possibility of war blighted their hopes. Other states were not interested in helping, either. New York was thus left to its own resources. Clinton and Fulton found that the Western Inland Lock Navigation Company was willing to sell, but the final liquidation was delayed until the properties were appraised and purchased in 1820. Morris and North reported that Europe had a money scarcity but were confident that a loan of $5
million could be obtained at 6 percent interest for a period of ten to fifteen years. Eddy and Fulton wrote to England and selected an engineer. To get land cessions, De Witt and Van Rensselaer applied pressure particularly on the largest landowner that would profit from a canal, the Holland Land Company.

Businessmen to the core, Paul Busti and Joseph Ellicott were unromantic, careful, and above all opportunistic during the fluctuating fortunes of the canal project in its formative years. Busti doubted until the very eve of construction that the canal would ever be built, a skeptical view held by many prominent men. Ellicott realized fully the potentialities of the canal. More hopeful than Busti about the canal prospects, he shared with his superior a determination to act only in a way that would benefit the Company. The Agent-General and the Resident-Agent shifted their positions to the degree that the Company interests were affected. When it seemed that the canal would follow the interior route desired by Ellicott, they were zealous supporters. But talk of choosing the Ontario route quickly cooled their ardor.

Even before the legislature had appointed the canal board in 1810, Agent-General Busti, in an effort to encourage the construction of a canal, had offered to donate Company lands to the state. Proceeds from the sales of such lands could be used to finance the proposed waterway. Although Busti had previously opposed canal construction and advocated opening a few main roads, he reversed himself after Ellicott went on record as favoring the project. Thus, he endorsed his Resident-Agent's stand by offering "every other Lot adjoining each side of the said Canal in its passage through the Holland Company's Lands." Each lot contained 160 acres, so the total Company grant would amount to 18,000 acres.

In the early part of 1812, the canal commission rejected Busti's offer, feeling that the special conditions that were attached to it prevented final acceptance. These conditions specified that the canal would have to extend from Lake Erie to the Seneca River; it would have to accommodate boats with twenty-ton loads; the federal or state government would have to build the canal; and the Company would not be responsible for the release of the land until construction of the canal had actually started.

The canal commission felt that Busti's proposals needed clarification. The land should be donated at once, insisted the commissioners, and, certainly, prior to the initial construction. The Company, on the other hand, could not release the lots until the commissioners had laid out the route; for to do so might mean sacrificing immediate op-
portunities to sell this land to private purchasers. Faced with this difficulty, the commissioners countered Busti's offer by requesting a definite block of land that would "at once be located." Busti, a trifle uncertain of his next step, suggested that the Company might offer half a township, which was three miles square, in the neighborhood of the canal.

When Thomas Eddy, the distinguished philanthropist, canal commissioner, and friend of Ellicott, urged him to support a larger land donation, the Resident-Agent decided to table Busti's offer of half a township and suggested, instead, a larger land grant. Eddy had given this advice because he believed that such generosity on the part of the Company would help to offset the criticism that the canal would mainly benefit the large landowners. Moreover, he reminded Ellicott, the land grant would also help to finance the canal construction. The new block of land which Ellicott proposed to donate to the state, therefore, covered an area of over 100,000 acres, in contrast to the half a township of 11,500 acres which Busti had suggested. With a practical man's consideration of the importance of the dollar sign and of public relations, Ellicott pointed out to Busti that such a donation would serve the Company in several ways: a larger grant would establish better rapport between the Company and the public; it would rid their organization of poor land that was not likely to be sold for some time; and it would comply with the commission's request for a grant that "could at once be located." He explained further that the Company might later receive compensation for Busti's half a township adjoining the canal, a substantial sum that it would stand to lose if an outright grant of this property were prematurely made to the state.

Busti studied this plan with all the caution of a man accustomed to the delicate balances of land values, and then, convinced of its merit, he endorsed the land grant that Ellicott had recommended. Thus, the Company offered to donate 100,632 acres of almost unsalable land in the mountainous region that Ellicott suggested. The donation stipulated that the state would have to pay taxes on this land, and return the land to the Company if it did not build the canal within fifteen years. The canal commission accepted this offer on November 27, 1813.

While the Company and the canal board ironed out their differences over the land donation that was to assist in financing the canal, Ellicott faced the equally troublesome problems involved in the selection of the canal route in western New York. He wanted a waterway that passed through the Company lands, for in this way the Company
would profit from the project. Peter B. Porter, however, favored a canal route that facilitated trade on the Great Lakes, and sought a passage by way of Lake Ontario. The Ontario route would aid the Great Lakes shipping firm of Porter, Barton and Company at Black Rock, for the canal would run from Albany to Lake Ontario. The Porter, Barton Company had a twenty-year contract with the State of New York that gave the Company a trade monopoly on the Niagara River and over the Portage Road. Thus, the Ontario route would remove the need for a canal through the purchase and insure the trade position of Porter's Company.

Ellicott adamantly opposed Porter’s route. In the ensuing clash, Porter had the good fortune to be one of the canal commissioners: this initial advantage was offset, however, when the board authorized Ellicott to make the recommendation of a route. The commission chose Ellicott because he probably had more information about the topography of western New York than anyone else. Prior to his appointment as Resident-Agent, he had spent two years tramping through the woods of western New York when he prepared the original survey of the purchase. In his position as consultant, Ellicott demonstrated that he was as effective a Company publicist as he was an advisor; for he persuaded the board to select a route favorable to his Company. In 1811, the canal board reported to the state legislature that it favored a canal route directly to Buffalo, in preference to Oswego on Lake Ontario. Ellicott had won his point.11

In 1812, the canal commissioners made their second report to the legislature. They urged the immediate construction of a canal and pleaded for the necessary legislative action. Both houses approved an act in June of 1812 that allowed the commissioners to continue their surveys and to borrow up to $5 million from Europe on the credit of the state.

No sooner had this authorization been granted than the opponents of the canal project spoke up vehemently and from different quarters. The inhabitants of eastern New York felt jealous of western New York; residents around Lake Ontario demanded that the canal route go to Oswego; and several leaders of the southern counties that bordered Pennsylvania saw no personal gains from the canal and resented paying additional taxes to help western New York. Politically, Tammany Hall opposed the canal because its enemy, DeWitt Clinton, favored it. In 1814 these opponents united and, using the war as an excuse, persuaded the legislature to rescind the authority of the commission to borrow the money from Europe. The canal project had reached the nadir of its fortunes.
While the war delayed further progress in the building of the canal, at the same time it accentuated the need for such a waterway. It dramatically revealed the necessity for better transportation. Only with the greatest difficulty did the army transport cannon, and poor facilities slowed this movement to a snail's pace. Indeed, when the government, in 1814, moved to protect the western frontier from another British invasion, it had to spend large sums of money just to carry arms and ammunition to the frontier. A cannon worth $400 at Washington cost $2,000 to transport to Lake Erie. Thus the war proved that bad roads imperiled a sound American defense of the Canadian frontier, and the canal project gained additional converts. Unfortunately, the proponents of the canal lacked the leadership necessary to organize their efforts.

At this point in the canal's progress, DeWitt Clinton came forward and used his prestige to stimulate interest in the project. A canal commissioner since 1810, he had trained himself to be an expert on the subject. He had traveled extensively over the suggested canal route in 1810 and knew the topography well; he had also added to his knowledge of the subject by considerable reading. With the end of the war, he united the unorganized proponents of the canal. He did this by writing and distributing his famous "Memorial" of December, 1815, a brochure that convincingly demonstrated the advantages of such a waterway. A committee sent copies of the "Memorial" throughout the state. As a result, many responsible citizens signed petitions in support of the canal. Numerous mass meetings were held in the area between Albany and Buffalo, and speakers agitated in its favor. The newspapers added their encouragement and aided by informing the public of the issues involved. When the legislature received Clinton's "Memorial" in March, 1816, over one hundred thousand people had petitioned the lawmakers to build the canal.

Clinton's "Memorial" had specifically supported an interior route, so Ellicott gave his support. In January, 1816, he organized a mass meeting in Batavia that sent a petition to the legislature favoring a canal. Those present at this meeting appointed a committee to continue working for the waterway. The committee consisted of Joseph and Benjamin Ellicott; James Stevens, the Company's clerk; David Evans, Ellicott's nephew; and Ellicott's friends William Rumsey, James Brisbane, and Richard Smith. Ellicott urged William Peacock, his nephew by marriage and subagent of Chautauqua County, to call for a mass meeting in Mayville favoring the canal. He encouraged Jonas Harrison, collector of customs for the District of Niagara, to add his influence at a meeting that Buffalo had planned. He sent a map with plans for the canal to Senator Chauncey Loomis, a nephew by
 marriage, and told Loomis that he hoped the legislature would pass a bill to build the waterway. A week later, Ellicott informed Loomis that he had sent William Rumsey to Albany to lobby for the canal.

Despite the clamor and pressure for a canal, the state legislature passed a bill that instructed the commissioners merely to study the canal project further. Governor Tompkins, in his annual message of that year, mentioned the canal in one paragraph but did not urge the legislature to appropriate the needed funds for construction. In March, 1816, the commission recommended as it had in 1812 that the state begin to build the canal. Later that month, Rutzen Van Rensselaer introduced a bill that provided for the immediate construction of the Erie and Champlain Canals. In April, the house resolved itself into a committee of the whole, discussed the bill, and, after making a few changes, passed it. Martin Van Buren in the senate successfully amended the bill so that the commissioners could not begin immediate construction. After considerable haggling, both houses accepted the senate bill on the last day of the session. The act in its final form ordered the commissioners to make additional surveys to examine further the costs involved, and to study ways in which the state could issue the necessary bonds. Thus the legislature had again postponed the actual construction of the canal. The 1816 legislature also decided to appoint a new group of canal commissioners and to reduce the number of commissioners to five.

When Ellicott learned that the legislature planned to alter the canal board membership, he acted quickly to influence the lawmakers in their selection of a commissioner from western New York. He wanted James W. Stevens to replace Peter B. Porter as a commissioner because Porter had supported the Oswego route instead of the Buffalo one. Porter’s mercantile interests clashed with Ellicott’s desires to attract farmer-settlers. Further, Stevens, as the Company clerk, had served Ellicott with undeviating loyalty. Ellicott urged Archibald McIntyre, the state comptroller, to use his influence to get Stevens appointed. Ellicott also instructed Chauncey Loomis to use his senatorial prestige to obtain Stevens’ appointment. To Loomis, Ellicott admitted that the real reason for preferring Stevens to Porter stemmed from the fact that the Company could control Stevens.

Ellicott did succeed in obtaining a canal commissioner sympathetic to the company. It was not Stevens, however; by a strange tug of destiny, he found himself appointed one of the five canal commissioners. The appointment surprised Ellicott for he “had not the most distant expectation of being named as a commissioner.” 12 In
addition to Ellicott, the legislature chose as canal commissioners DeWitt Clinton, Myron Holley, Samuel Young, and Stephen Van Rensselaer.

As the canal evolved, so did its name. Originally the canal opponents had dubbed it Clinton's Ditch, a term of ridicule tinged with malice. As engineers constructed sections of the artificial waterway, the common man adopted the title of Big Ditch. By the time the builders had completed the entire project, the people identified it as the Grand Western Canal or more briefly the Grand Canal. And, with the passage of years when feeders were added to this man-made channel, they finally settled on the somewhat one-sided title of either the Old Erie or the Erie Canal.

Ellicott and DeWitt Clinton worked closely and harmoniously at this time. When Clinton asked Ellicott for suggestions for the waterway, Ellicott offered two practical ideas: the legislature should appoint a small group of commissioners to prepare a sample route that would include bridges, docks, and excavations; and the legislature should not employ foreigners because Americans knew better the business management techniques in this country. Ellicott also suggested various methods to raise money for the canal. Altruistically, he included a tax on bachelors despite the fact that he was unmarried; but he excluded any tax on landowners.

Clinton was impressed with Ellicott's proposals and confided in him. He blamed Tompkins for the split in the Republican party, and accused him of "shrinking from responsibility" in the canal project. He felt that Ellicott's suggestions regarding the canal "will I have no doubts be adopted either on this or future occasion." And the lobbying of Colonel Rumsey, whom Ellicott had sent to Albany, he found "active and useful."

Meanwhile the work of surveying the canal route went forward. Clinton examined the eastern sector and found "its practicability beyond all manner of doubt." The commissioners next had to lay out a route from the Genesee River to Buffalo Creek. Ellicott knew the great importance of this route to the Company and appreciated its role in the over-all canal battle. He had won the first round in 1812 when he had persuaded the commissioners to recommend a direct route to Buffalo and Lake Erie, rather than to Oswego and Lake Ontario. Now he wanted to locate this canal route so that it ran through as much of the Company land as possible. This latest survey required that a detailed examination of the route be made, in contrast to the broad view resulting from the 1812 recommendation. With
this in mind, Ellicott offered to organize a party “to trace a line for the canal from Lake Erie” to the Genesee River. He was fully aware that he could thus serve both the state and the Company.

The canal commissioners accepted Ellicott’s offer and in July, 1816, ordered him to lay out a route from the Genesee River to Buffalo Creek. Ellicott gave much time, thought, and energy to the examination of this sector of the waterway; fortunately, he found a satisfactory route that ran through the Genesee and Niagara Counties. He carefully investigated the reported “insurmountable obstacles” to his suggested waterway; and, in order to assist him in his task, he organized a party to go over this route thoroughly. To execute this job, he assigned William Peacock as the engineer; then he appointed his nephew, Andrew A. Ellicott, as the surveyor. Ellicott maintained that only Peacock had “sufficient scientific skill in this part of the country capable of accomplishing it with necessary accuracy.” To Busti, he admitted that he selected Peacock, too, because he “would be doing that which in the end would be equally profitable to the Company.”

The commissioners had two routes in the west from which to choose: a northern and a southern route. To complicate matters, the commission had already employed an engineer to lay out the northern route. Ellicott favored the southern route, so he tested his ideas scientifically. He stationed Peacock at Tonawanda Creek for an entire week to gauge the amount of water that flowed. Deliberately, Ellicott chose the driest time of the year to determine whether the Creek had enough water to fill a lock. Peacock’s findings convinced Ellicott that Tonawanda Creek could promise enough water “to fill a lock 75 feet in length, 16 in breadth and 12 feet in depth in less than four minutes and 50 seconds which in 24 hours would admit the passage through the locks at each end of the summit canal respectively to the number of 148 boats.” Ellicott estimated that the cost of the southern route would be some $300,000 less than that of the northern. Thus, he found no barriers to his suggested route.

Six months after the commissioners had instructed Ellicott to lay out the western sector, he presented a detailed report for such a route to the commission. In this account, he minutely traced the exact route, approximated the amount of earth that needed to be excavated, and gave estimated costs for the various sections of the route. The commissioners now submitted Ellicott’s recommendations to the legislature. This delighted Ellicott because his proposed route went through more of the purchase than any other waterway and thus coincided with the best interests of the Company. He confided to Busti
that the Company stood to gain some $1.2 million if the legislature
adopted his route.20

Not only had Ellicott been compelled to work hard to get a western
route that favored the Company, but he needed constantly to combat
Busti's skepticism. Although Busti favored a canal and knew its
advantages for the Company, he doubted that the state would ever
construct it. Even after Busti approved the land donation for a canal,
he badgered Ellicott with questions and comments that revealed his
disbelief that a canal would be completed: he complained that the
commissioners offered "vague plans" that left "ample room to doubts";
he requested that Ellicott elaborate on ways in which the canal would
increase the value of Company land as distant as fifty miles away
from its site; 21 he found fault with the route the commissioners had
recommended in 1812, a route that Ellicott had suggested to the com-
missioners; and he hedged his offer of land with conditions stipulating
the return of the land if the project failed. "I have so little expectation
of the Canal ever being undertaken," he said, "that I have been
tempted to reduce the number of years of its beginning to 10, but I
rather submit to put a longer lien on the land, than incur the reproach
of illiberality." 22 Even after Ellicott had chosen the route for the com-
missioners in 1816, Busti continued to doubt that the legislature or
any groups would ever construct the canal, stating that "the magni-
tude of the undertaking of the Canal is so great that it is impossible
for me to believe that the work will ever be perfected." 23 As late as
1817, Busti wrote gloomily: "I cannot divest myself of my old opinion
that if ever begun it will in no age be completed. I am very much
afraid that in case the work was begun and not completed in your
quarters its imperfection would greatly depreciate every farm lot cut
up by the dry canal." 24

Notwithstanding Busti's pessimism, the act of 1816 provided for
the survey of a canal route, and the question of a land donation
promptly reappeared. The Company's offer of a grant of land in 1812
had become void in 1814, for in that year the legislature had cancelled
the authority of the commission to borrow $5 million from Europe to
construct the canal. For some time Busti refrained from making
another definite land offer, growing increasingly skeptical about the
building of such a waterway. At last, on February 22, 1817, Busti
renewed his proposal of 1812 for the donation of approximately
100,000 acres of land in the southern part of the purchase; he also
included the stipulations concerning taxes, the time limit for the canal
completion, and the return of the land if the project were not com-
pleted. The same day that Busti offered the land grant to the state, true to form, he confided to Ellicott his pessimistic feeling that the government would never build the canal: "But the more I consider the nature of the undertaking and compare it with the temper of our State & general government the more I grow incredulous of its ever be[ing] perfected if begun." 25

While Busti was trying to decide whether to renew his land offer of 1812, Ellicott sought federal aid for this project because he felt uncertain that the state legislature would finance the canal. To Congressmen Micah Brooks and Archibald S. Clarke, he presented many reasons for congressional assistance. A completed canal would serve as "the key to the commerce of a vast portion" of the United States and Canada. 26 A state-built canal would give sovereignty over the waterway to the state, which might selfishly exercise its power to the detriment of other states. The canal would affect millions of people in the west and thus require federal control. Congressman Brooks agreed with Ellicott's points, but he observed that Congress needed to study the problem further since other states also had projects to improve transportation. Clarke, long loyal to Ellicott, agreed with the Resident-Agent and tried to obtain the backing of several members of the Committee on Internal Improvements. In support of federal aid for internal improvements, both houses of Congress passed the so-called Bonus Bill in 1817 to distribute the dividends of stock owned by the national government in the Second Bank of the United States. The government would pro-rate the money among the states and, in this way, New York would get some $90,000 a year. However, Madison vetoed this bill and, in so doing, destroyed Ellicott's hopes of federal aid for the canal project.

Ellicott's concern about the financing ended in 1817 when the legislature made a decision that at long last started the construction of the canal. In February of that year, the canal board, in accordance with the instructions of the act of 1816, submitted its report to the legislature. It stated that the commissioners had surveyed the route, had estimated the total expenses of the Grand Canal at approximately $5 million and had examined ways in which the state could finance the construction. The proposed canal would connect Albany with Lake Erie and had these statistical dimensions: 353 miles long, 40 feet wide at the surface, 28 feet wide at the base, and 4 feet deep; the 77 locks could accommodate boats of 100 tons. Again the commissioners urged the state to construct the canal, but no one could tell in advance what the legislature would do about the commission's report. Governor
Tompkins, in his speech to the legislature, had said nothing about the canal and Ellicott felt that the legislature would interpret Tompkins' silence as opposition to the project. In support of the canal, the Joint Committee on Canals in the legislature recommended that construction begin, albeit on one section of the entire route. Both houses debated the recommendation fiercely.

The tide began to turn in favor of the canal as the key counties along the Hudson River saw the possibilities of profit for themselves. After much debate, the assembly, on April 10, passed a bill that followed closely the commissioners' recommendations. When Senator Martin Van Buren endorsed the bill, the majority in the upper house followed the lead of the "little magician." The bill became law on April 15. The legislature reappointed the canal commissioners and thus cleared the way for immediate construction to begin.

The day after the legislature approved the construction of the canal, Clinton sent a complimentary letter to Ellicott, stating: "I cannot leave this place without congratulating you upon the success of the Canal bill. It has become a law by large majorities in both houses and after much opposition." In this way, Clinton acknowledged how effectively Ellicott had worked on the canal project.
Ellicott had indeed played an important role in the selection of the canal route of the western sector. As early as 1808, he had favored a canal from the Genesee River direct to Buffalo Creek. He had helped to persuade the commissioners in 1812 to recommend to the legislature that the canal run directly to Lake Erie, rather than to Lake Ontario. He had convinced Busti to donate a larger piece of land to encourage canal construction. As a canal commissioner, he had urged a more southern route that passed through much of the Company lands. In 1817, the legislature vindicated his efforts by adopting the commission's recommendations to start canal construction.

Ellicott's efforts to build a canal paid dividends, for with the passage of the 1817 law, land sales in western New York increased. In response to the growing number of sales in the northern part of the purchase, Ellicott raised the price of all Company lands in that area by more than one dollar and fifty cents an acre. He was achieving his goal of profit.

The Company profits continued to grow when the commissioners ordered that digging be started at once and pushed the construction work vigorously. On July 4, 1817, the contractor turned the first shovelful of dirt at Rome, and by the end of that year, the labor gangs had dug some fifteen miles of the canal channel. The following year the progress exceeded Clinton's "most sanguine expectations." In 1819, a thousand men working in the marshes near Syracuse were felled by malarial fevers, but the canal building progressed, and in October of that year the workers had completed ninety-six miles of the canal project. In that year, too, the first boats navigated the completed section of the canal and Clinton found his dreams becoming a reality. Tammany Hall, jealous of the popularity that Clinton was gaining from the success of the canal, tried in 1819 to limit further construction westward to the Seneca River. The legislature defeated this move. From this point on, the building continued to completion.

The commissioners had given generously of their time to drive construction forward, but a "severe contusion" on commissioner Ellicott's right leg in 1818 forced him to resign from the board. Although his injury was a real one, resulting from an accident while sleighing, some of his previous complaints revealed an illness more psychosomatic than organic, for he suffered from melancholy and had all the symptoms of hypochondria. In addition to his poor health, Ellicott felt that his "indispensable duties" limited the time he could spend as commissioner. As Resident-Agent, he was extremely busy meeting potential buyers, selling land, writing statements of land sales,
recording receipts, keeping numerous accounts up to date and attending to the many duties associated with his job. His annual reports consumed much of his spare time. Further, Ellicott had his own handsome estate to supervise. Thus it was that when Ellicott thought that his relative inactivity as a commissioner added to the burdens of the other four members of the board, he offered his resignation to Clinton.

Busti regretted Ellicott’s resignation. The opponents of the canal were campaigning vigorously to stop the waterway westward at the Seneca River, and Busti realized that the canal would have to continue to Buffalo, if the Company were to gain from its construction. Moreover, he wanted a route in the west that passed through as much of the Company land as possible. He knew the degree to which Ellicott had influenced the commissioners in their original choice of a canal directly to Buffalo rather than to Oswego, and he appreciated Ellicott’s work in trying to determine the selection of a more southerly route in the western sector. With all this in mind, he urged Ellicott to accept some canal appointment that took less time than that of a commissioner, but which still provided him with an opportunity to affect the choice of the western route.

Paul Busti’s concern was not without foundation for there remained the knotty problem of which of the two routes the commissioners should select for the western sector. One route ran on the south side of the Niagara Escarpment, a mountain ridge that extended from Lewiston to Rochester. Ellicott favored this route because it would pass through some forty miles of the Company’s land. The other route ran on the north side of the Niagara Escarpment. At first, the commissioners supported the southern route. It would shorten the canal by several miles and would correspondingly reduce the cost of construction. Furthermore, the Holland Land Company had donated over 100,000 acres of land and the commissioners felt obligated to please the Company. The southern route, however, had serious drawbacks. The summit rose to seventy-five feet above the surface of Lake Erie. The canal would thus lose the waters of that lake as a virtually inexhaustible feeder. Moreover, the canal engineers were not convinced that the immediate creeks near the southern route could furnish sufficient water to replace the expected canal leakages and to compensate for the losses from the use of many locks.

While the commissioners debated which route to choose, James Geddes, a canal engineer, located a depression in the Niagara Escarpment. He found a break north of the Tonawanda Creek through which the canal might proceed without too much cutting of the ridge. The
canal commissioners, therefore, abandoned the southern route, and, in 1820, adopted the route north of the escarpment.

Although the selection of the northern route deeply disappointed Ellicott, this setback did not end his influence or interest in the project. He understood how vitally the canal affected land sales and profit. Thus, when DeWitt Clinton asked him to recommend a suitable person “to examine Buffalo Creek and to report the plan of a safe and commodious harbor at that place for vessels navigating Lake Erie, together with an estimate of the probable expense,” Ellicott accepted the Governor’s request. He saw that this report would probably decide the location of the western terminus of the canal. If Buffalo Creek had “a safe and commodious harbor,” what better place could the board choose as the terminus—particularly since the lands washed by the creek were part of the Holland Land Company? Ellicott therefore submitted the name of William Peacock to Clinton as an excellent man for the position, for he felt that Peacock would favor the Company interest. Clinton promptly endorsed Ellicott’s recommendation and appointed Peacock to the position.

The assignment of Peacock to the task of examining Buffalo Creek as a possible harbor on Lake Erie intensified the long-smoldering fight between Black Rock and Buffalo. Today, Black Rock is incorporated into the city of Buffalo, but during the early nineteenth century, the two were independent villages and bitter commercial rivals. The village got its name from a large black rock, one hundred feet broad, that jutted into the river. Located about three miles down the Niagara River, Black Rock had the only safe harbor at the eastern end of Lake Erie north of Dunkirk, fifty miles away. It was a natural port, sheltered from the lake winds by the rocky Bird Island and the larger Squaw Island.

The Porter Brothers had seen as clearly as had Ellicott that Peacock’s report could well decide the location of the canal terminus. Starting in 1806, when the legislature had permitted the sale of lands in the vicinity of Black Rock, Augustus and Peter B. Porter had accumulated sizable holdings in that area. They had joined with Benjamin Barton and Barton’s uncle, Joseph Annin, in buying some lots along the Niagara River from Fort Niagara to Black Rock and in leasing the landing places at Black Rock and Lewiston.

Barton and the Porters had formed the firm of Porter, Barton and Company which grew into a substantial carrying business. As builders and owners of vessels sailing on Lakes Erie and Ontario, the Company supplied the military posts along the Great Lakes at Fort Niagara,
Wayne, Chicago, and Michilimackinac with meat, bread, flour, liquor, and especially salt; Black Rock was a great salt exchange. The firm also handled nearly all the business of the American fur companies as well as that of large Indian traders. With its monopoly of transportation along this much-used route, Porter, Barton and Company controlled the portage business using the Niagara River. So much was involved that the Porter Brothers understandably wanted the canal commissioners to choose Black Rock, not Buffalo, as the terminal point.

The Porters marshaled their forces for the coming fight against the agents of the Holland Land Company. Black Rock, they pointed out, already had a good harbor that seemed superior to that of Buffalo; and the canal would have to run at least three additional miles if the commissioners extended it beyond Black Rock to Buffalo. Porter, Barton and Company held strongly to its position because it had its store and warehouses at Black Rock, and also owned considerable land in the area. Earlier, Peter Porter had tried to influence Governor Tompkins in the selection of a canal route directly to Oswego and Lake Ontario. Clinton claimed that Porter had "infused his opinions into Tompkins who is profoundly ignorant of the subject, whose opinion [is] not worthy of respect but whose opposition is heretofore indirect." In vain, Clinton had tried to persuade Porter to favor the Lake Erie route.

The Holland Land Company and Ellicott were equally determined that Buffalo should be the terminal point. The Company had much land to sell in and around that village; and Ellicott, himself, at one time reportedly owned one-third of Buffalo. If the canal terminated there, land sales and profits would rocket. Although only three miles separated Black Rock from Buffalo, the termination point of the canal would decide which of the two villages would become the "Queen City."

Peacock's report in 1819 explored the possibilities of a harbor at Buffalo and concluded in favor of Buffalo over Black Rock. Before forwarding his report to Clinton, he submitted it to Ellicott for his employer's approval. In the report, Peacock recognized that in the summer "vast quantities of sand and gravel" clogged the entrance to the Buffalo harbor. To solve this problem, Peacock recommended "the construction of a Stone Pier." He implemented this recommendation with various plans whereby the engineers could erect the pier. Peacock explained how the forces of nature aided Buffalo, for when ice broke up in the spring, the great discharge of water cut a clearance
through the clogged gravel, and this passage formed a channel some twelve feet deep. Furthermore, the lake current flowed one-half mile an hour, added pressure to the spring flow, and eliminated the gravel and sand handicap. Peacock therefore concluded his report by advising that the commissioners select Buffalo for the harbor and the western terminus of the canal. As he put it: “Buffalo from its local situation is apparently the key which opens to the People of the State of New York a most stupendous path of navigation and of commerce extending the distance of more than 2,000 miles.”

Independent of Peacock’s report and Ellicott’s efforts, some of the more aggressive residents of Buffalo had petitioned the legislature for a donation of money to build a harbor. Ellicott felt that “the ever restless Buffalonians” had behaved impatiently in not permitting the legislature sufficient time to analyze Peacock’s report concerning harbor facilities. He was afraid that the blatant approach and aggressiveness of this group might alienate the legislature’s sympathetic attitude. He hoped that the legislature would therefore ignore the petition, for he felt that pushing it might endanger the entire harbor project. Senator Evans, Ellicott’s nephew, agreed with his uncle’s position but remained calm, for he thought that the bill had slight chance of passage.

Contrary to their expectations, on April 7, 1819, the legislature acceded to the demands of the Buffalo residents and passed an act for the construction of a harbor at Buffalo. The legislature, however, instead of making an outright grant, instructed the Comptroller to “lend . . . the sum of twelve thousand dollars” to all or any of the people of Buffalo; the debtors were to repay the loan in ten years. Thus the legislature permitted them to form a special company to construct a harbor at Buffalo. In the event that the commissioners chose Black Rock as the canal terminus, the law allowed the corporation to charge a fee for every vessel that used the newly constructed Buffalo harbor. Ellicott strongly opposed this aspect of the act.

Ellicott’s opposition to the petition for a Buffalo harbor brought him into conflict with the more influential Buffalo residents. Their resentment changed to bitterness when, in 1820, it appeared that the canal commissioners had decided on Black Rock as the terminus. Angrily, Oliver Forward, Samuel Wilkeson, George Coit, and Charles Townsend—all from Buffalo—turned to Busti for financial aid, explaining to him their grievances against Ellicott. They charged Ellicott with misrepresentation, claiming that he obtained high prices for lots in Buffalo on his promise that a harbor would soon be built. They
blamed him for the reported loss of the canal terminus to Black Rock,
and asserted that, by offering in 1818 a paltry $3,500 toward the
Buffalo harbor construction, he had forced the residents to petition
the legislature for an outright grant of money. When the legislature
offered them a loan, instead of a grant, they had been forced to saddle
themselves with debt to obtain sufficient funds to build the harbor.

Despite the gloomy outlook, Buffalo residents still hoped that the
commissioners would choose Buffalo as the canal terminus. If Buffalo
were selected, they felt that the commissioners would then "authorize
the loan to be converted into part of the Canal fund." In an effort to
impress the commission, they therefore proposed to make the Buffalo
site more attractive by building a pier similar to the one that Peacock
had recommended in the 1819 report. From the Holland Land Com­
pany they sought an appropriation for building this pier. If the appro­
priation did not materialize, and if the legislature refused to cancel
their debts, they wanted the Holland Company to share "an equitable
proportion of the loss." 87

Busti refused to share the possible losses if the legislature refused
to cancel Buffalo's debts. Busti explained that he always followed the
rule of aiding public works programs, provided that the legislature,
and not a private company such as theirs, undertook such a venture.
Had the government undertaken the project, Busti would have raised
the capital. As the situation was, he did not have sufficient confidence
that a private company would succeed.

Despite Busti's refusal and Ellicott's noncooperation, Buffalo resi­
dents built a harbor which, in turn, influenced the commission to
choose Buffalo as the terminus. Construction of the harbor started in
May, 1821, and the following year Buffalo extended the pier. Progress
on the Buffalo harbor weakened Black Rock's claim to selection as
the canal terminus. Finally, in 1822 the commissioners decided in
favor of Buffalo as the western terminus. Black Rock refused to accept
this decision and continued desperately to try to reverse the com­
mssion's verdict. The bitter wrangling between the two villages
continued. The newspapers of each village assaulted those of the
other with vigor and venom; the Niagara Journal and the Niagara
Patriot favored Buffalo, while the Black Rock Beacon supported Black
Rock.88 Like their newspapers, the citizens of both villages persisted
to the very end in the fierce battle. Peter Porter commanded the Black
Rock forces and Samuel Wilkeson led the Buffalo group. The com­
mssion, however, stuck firmly to its decision of 1822 that the canal
would end at Buffalo. On August 9, 1823, six of the older Buffalo
residents dug the first shovelful of earth that made Buffalo the canal terminus. Buffalo had won. While Buffalo residents claimed credit for getting the canal terminus at their village, Ellicott deserved recognition for his part in the canal project in the west. Since 1808, he had played an important role in planning and building the western sector of the canal. In the selection of a canal route, his recommendations had received a careful hearing; engineering, and not political considerations, had decided the issue. The differences between Ellicott and the Buffalo group over the canal terminus rested mainly on tactics, rather than on objectives. Both desired and worked towards the identical end of making Buffalo the terminus; but in the process of applying their tactics, each occasionally lost sight of the common goal. These differences developed into the bitterness that many Buffalo residents harbored against Joseph Ellicott.

Despite his important role in the building of the Grand Canal, the antagonism against Ellicott continued. His many years as Resident-Agent and political boss of western New York had left an expected residue of opposition. His enemies gradually increased and now they coalesced. In demands that became increasingly strident, they clamored for the removal of Ellicott. The Resident-Agent's long-time friend and associate, Paul Busti, had now to make a decision fateful in the life of Joseph Ellicott.