



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **DISCOVERING THE “DITCH” THAT CHANGED A NATION**

**Albany, New York** – In 1808, when New York Governor DeWitt Clinton proposed building a canal from the Hudson River to the Great Lakes, he might as well have suggested flying to the moon. Many called the project “Clinton’s Folly,” believing the fledgling nation lacked the resources and expertise to cut through the 360 miles of swamps, rocky cliffs, forested wilderness and 568 feet of elevation change between the Hudson River and Lake Erie.

In fact, “Clinton’s Big Ditch” was the Space program of its day, spurring inventions and paying for itself in just ten years. Plus, by creating a super highway to the west, the Erie Canal cemented New York City’s role as the prime seaport for goods from the Midwest and Great Plains. The canals were progressively upgraded to meet growing demand and three offshoot canals were incorporated--the Champlain, Oswego and Cayuga-Seneca--further enhancing New York’s commercial strength.

These days, hikers, bicyclists and roller bladders follow the canal side paths once trudged by barge-towing mules and men, while kayaks, canoes, historic canal boats, fishing skiffs and other pleasure craft ply the waters, happily passing through the locks. Along the way, quaint villages entice visitors to enjoy an ice cream cone, a homemade meal, or tastings of regional wines and to stay in bed & breakfast inns and resorts. And it’s hard not to be drawn into the canal side festivals, historic sites, museums and living history attractions that celebrate the region’s rich past. Here are some highlights of what to see and do along the canals:

### **Hitting the trail from Buffalo to Newark**

Sure, almost no one walks the full hundred mile footpath between Tonawanda, just outside Buffalo, to Newark, but it’s nice to know it’s all there. This westernmost segment of the Erie Canal is the longest continuous section of the Canalway Trail, and whether biking, boating or traveling by car, it’s fun to explore the nostalgic small town Main Streets, farmlands, lift bridges and multi-tier locks. And as an added attraction, Niagara Falls is just a ten minute drive from Buffalo.

In **Lockport**, the triumph of building the canal is apparent. The town is built around two impressive five-lock staircases built to move boats up the steep Niagara escarpment, and an excellent Lockport Cave and Underground Boat tour travels through five flights of locks and includes a walk through a tunnel blasted through solid rock.

Another worthwhile stop is **Medina**, with its Railroad Museum, a beautiful wooden freight depot filled with memorabilia and model trains, where visitors can take a train ride along the Canal. And in **Brockport**, the restored Italianate Morgan-Manning House reveals the lifestyle of a wealthy 19<sup>th</sup> century resident.

Nearby, **Rochester** offers a big city break with sophisticated attractions such as the Rochester Museum and Science Center, with its hands-on Erie Canal model and exhibits on the Underground Railroad, as well as a nostalgic toy museum and Susan B. Anthony's House and the courthouse where she was tried for voting.

And for those who want to know more about Mitt Romney's religion, a stop in **Palmyra** is a must. It was here that the Mormon Church got its start. The Joseph Smith Farm and other Mormon sites are a mecca for Mormons, and at most places, everyone is welcome.

### **Connecting to the Finger Lakes**

Just beyond Palmyra, at the historic town of Montezuma, the Cayuga-Seneca Canal shoots off to connect the Erie Canal with 92 miles of rivers and lakes, including the Seneca River and two of the Finger Lakes--Cayuga and Seneca.

The canal-connected waterways and trails provide a relaxed-paced way to explore this sophisticated, rural region, acclaimed for its fine wines, artisanal food, historic inns and natural beauty.

A visit to the Seneca River Crossing Canals Historic District in **Montezuma** and **Tyre** helps visitors visualize the engineering feats and improvements the canals underwent. The 70-acre site encompasses intact portions of the original and enlarged canals as well as the Richmond Aqueduct, with its massive Roman-style arches.

At nearby **Seneca Falls**, the Women's Rights National Historical Park, which includes the homes of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Wesleyan Chapel, site of the movement's first convention, honors the town's central role in the women's movement.

Those looking for narrated boat tours or charters will find plenty of choices in nearby **Geneva**, while at the southern end of Lake Geneva, **Watkins Glen** is known for auto racing, plentiful accommodations and its popular pier and park, the site of summer concerts. Not to be missed is Watkins Glen State Park, with hiking trails that lead through a waterfall-studded gorge.

Spanning the lands between Seneca and Cayuga Lakes, the Finger Lakes National Forest has more than 30 miles of trails winding through gorges, ravines, pastures and woodlands. And at the tip of Cayuga Lake is **Ithaca**, with two stunning waterfall parks, Buttermilk Falls State Park and Robert H. Treman State Park, as well as Cornell University. With so many natural and manmade attractions, it's no wonder so many travelers feel a connection to this region.

### **Exploring the original Erie Canal in Central New York**

When Central New York's original Erie Canal became too narrow for the big barges of the early 1900s, traffic was rerouted through rivers and lakes just north of the original route. Nevertheless, towns such as Port Byron, Weedsport, Camillus, Syracuse, DeWitt, Chittenango, Canastota and Oneida that were bypassed by the new route, maintain and showcase their Canal heritage, making the area ideal for those who want to combine outdoor fun with living history.

The 36-mile Old Erie Canal State Park Trail, which runs from DeWitt to Rome, connects the original route by land and water, cutting a scenic pathway through the surrounding woodlands and wetlands for walking, bicycling and horseback riding as well for canoeing and fishing.

Fascinating interpretative museums bring the region's role in history to life. In Camillus, Sims Museum is a replica of an 1856 canal side store. From here, the trail passes a nine-mile aqueduct and a replica lock tender's shanty en route to the town of Chittenango, where the sight of a 96-foot cargo boat under reconstruction at the Chittenango Landing Canal Boat Museum puts the scale of the canal's traffic in perspective. In nearby Canastota, home to the International Boxing Hall of Fame, the Canastota Canal Town Museum brings the history, folklore and engineering achievements of the canal into focus with artwork, artifacts and activities.

Farther east, on the site where the first shovelful of earth kicked off the mammoth canal construction project, the Erie Canal Village in **Rome** presents a reconstructed 19th century town complete with a tavern, schoolhouse, blacksmith, and the chance to ride a mule drawn packet boat along the canal. **Syracuse**, whose Erie Canal Museum is housed in America's only remaining weighlock building, is also the region's hub for narrated sightseeing tours as well as canal boat charters while **Verona Beach** is action central for beaches, boat launches and water sports on Oneida Lake, the largest inland lake in the state.

### **Stretching to the Seaway**

While the Oswego River Canal is the shortest segment, it provides a necessary connection between the Erie Canal and Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence Seaway. **Oswego** has been an important port since the 1700s. At Fort Ontario State Historic Park, costumed guides tell tales about its strategic roles in history and fans of the "Madeline" stories will enjoy learning about author Ludwig Bemelmans' time at the fort.

In addition to its rich array of historic sites, Oswego is a center for water sports, boating, fishing and hiking, and its annual four-day Harborfest draws more than 150,000 visitors every year.

The 23.7 mile waterway also passes through some of the most remote areas of the state. Several conservation areas preserve the pristine environment while encouraging recreation. Birders are especially drawn to the 45-acre hiker-friendly Curtiss-Gale Wildlife Management Area's towering old-growth trees, which harbor a variety of songbirds as well as red-tail Hawks, Osprey and Bald Eagle, and Three Rivers Bird Conservation Area in **Lysander**, whose 3,615 acres of grassland, shrub land, wetland and forest habitats attract many at-risk species including Henslow's, grasshopper and vesper sparrows and Cooper's hawks. Nearby, hiking and mountain-biking trails wind through the 236-acre Great Bear

Springs Recreation Area, and golfers can enjoy stunning river views the 18-hole course at Battle Island State Park.

### **Driving and Cycling the Mohawk Valley**

Even those who yawned their way through history classes will enjoy learning about the important role the Mohawk Valley played in opening up the American West at the region's many captivating historic restorations and sites. And have no fear: the region also offers plenty of opportunities for boating, biking, hiking and other outdoor fun.

Helping visitors navigate the region is the Mohawk Towpath Byway, a well-marked series of local, country and state roads that follow the historic route of the Erie Canal between Utica and Waterford/Cohoes Falls where it joins the Hudson River. Today, the small canal towns and cities of the region nestle into idyllic farmlands and pristine Adirondack foothills.

While **Utica** was built by the canal, one of the most popular visitor activities is the scenic train ride into the Adirondack wilderness. Back in town, the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute displays an excellent collection of Hudson River School paintings and Saranac Brewery Tours end with a sampling of beer or root-beer.

Just to the east, the village of **Herkimer** provide a glimpse into the region's evolution. The native people were known as "the people of the crystal" and tourists today can prospect for shiny quartz "Herkimer diamonds" at several local mines. For a picture of 18<sup>th</sup> century life, visit the restored Georgian-style home of Revolutionary War general Nicholas Herkimer. And at Historic Four Corners, four 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings illustrate post-canal village life: there's a Victorian mansion, a church, a courthouse and a jail.

In nearby **Canajoharie**, the Arkel Museum offers a wonderful collection of American art, including works by Winslow Homer, Childe Hassam, Robert Henri, Maurice Prendergast, and Georgia O'Keeffe, while in **Fort Hunter**, the Schoharie Crossing State Historic Site is the only place to see parts of all three stages of the canal's expansion.

Schenectady offers insight into life on an 18<sup>th</sup> century Dutch farm at the Mabee Farm Historic Site and at the Schenectady Museum, visitors can marvel at the ingenuity of hometown General Electric's early televisions and appliances. Historic districts and sites also beckon in the state capital, Albany, including the 1761 mansion of noted Revolutionary War General Philip Schuyler.

Heading north through the rolling hills and farmland from Waterford to Whitehall, the Champlain Canal connects the Erie Canal to Lake Champlain. This area's key role during the French and Indian and Revolutionary wars becomes apparent at the Rogers Island Visitor Center in **Fort Edward**.

Nearby, Saratoga National Historic Park in **Stillwater** focuses on the Revolutionary War, while the Old Fort House Museum complex takes visitors back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century with a one-room school house, an 1840 Tollhouse, and five other historic buildings. And in **Whitehall**, the Skenesborough Museum features a sound and light show describing the settlement of the town and exhibits with artifacts that take visitors from the Revolutionary war through the building of the canal and the age of the railroad.

Throughout New York State, canals are generally open to boat traffic from May 1 through November 15, as canal side towns roll out the red carpet for visitors with an array of festivals, concerts and other special events and everyone enjoys “Clintons Big Ditch.”

For more details, visit <http://www.eriecanalway.org/> and visit [www.iloveny.com](http://www.iloveny.com)

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### **About New York State**

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