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## **Erie Canal put city and state on the map**

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Your Turn

Mark Zupan

Guest columnist

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Oct. 26, marks the bicentennial of the Erie Canal's opening – an extraordinary milestone in American history.

The canal stands as one of the most successful public investments in commerce, reducing the cost of transporting goods between Albany and Lake Erie by 90 percent. This transformative project put our Flower/Flour City, Rochester, on the map and elevated New York to its status as the Empire State.

Remarkably, the cost of constructing the canal was recouped in under a decade. Once dismissed as 'Clinton's Folly' – a reference to its chief advocate, Gov. DeWitt Clinton — the Erie Canal eventually earned the title 'America's First Super Highway.' Its legacy shapes our region to this day as 80 percent of Upstate New York's population lives within 25 miles of the canal.

More than a marvel of engineering, the Erie Canal exemplifies the enduring benefits of public efforts to foster commerce – and, by contrast, what can be forgone if the free flow of goods and people is restricted.

### **From obscurity to prominence**

When the first U.S. census was conducted in 1790, New York was not the most populous state; it ranked fifth. Rochester didn't even exist until 1811, when it had just 15 residents. It was incorporated in 1817 – on the second attempt, after initial opposition from neighboring communities.

The Erie Canal changed everything. By 1830, just five years after its opening, Rochester had become the 19th largest city in the nation. Dubbed the 'Young Lion of the West,' it continued to grow, reaching 13th place by the 1840 census. Although the rise of railroads eventually eroded some of Rochester's canal-based advantages, the city's early boom was unmistakable.

New York state's ascent mirrored Rochester's. From holding 8.7 percent of the national population in 1790, New York's share grew to 14.9 percent by 1830 – despite the addition of several states. By then, New York had become the most populous state in the country, with nearly 50 percent more residents than Pennsylvania, which ranked second.

### **Commerce, culture, civic progress**

The Erie Canal did more than move goods – it moved people and ideas. It fostered prosperity and cultural openness that helped shape political rights, civil liberties and civic engagement. The canal enabled the migration of individuals from modest beginnings who rose to entrepreneurial prominence in upstate New York, including:

**John Jacob Bausch and Henry Lomb** , co-founders of Bausch & Lomb

**George Eastman** , founder of Eastman Kodak

**Frank Gannett** , founder of Gannett Co.

**Hiram Sibley** , co-founder and first president of Western Union

Rochester also became home to two of America's most influential social reformers: **Susan B. Anthony** and **Frederick Douglass** , champions of women's rights and racial equality, respectively.

### **A personal connection**

As a Harvard College undergraduate, I was assigned Paul Johnson's 'A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837.' The book explores the interplay of politics, economics and religion during the Second Great Awakening – the 1820s religious revival that sparked reform movements for temperance, abolition and women's suffrage. Johnson's work highlights the moral and commercial transformations catalyzed by the Erie Canal.

At the time, I had no idea that my professional journey eventually would lead me back to my birthplace, Rochester. My parents immigrated here in the 1950s, fleeing the authoritarian regime of Yugoslavia. Like many others, their path was shaped by the employment and educational opportunities made possible by the Erie Canal's legacy.

Even more unexpected was the opportunity to serve as president of Alfred University since 2016 – an institution whose very existence is intertwined with the Canal's influence.

### **Enduring values**

Founded in 1836, Alfred University was shaped by the values of the Seventh Day Baptists, a religious sect that migrated westward from New England via the Erie Canal. These pioneers

brought with them a commitment to inclusivity and self-governance, rooted in their founding of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations.

Inclusivity became a cornerstone of Alfred University's identity. We were the first higher education institution in the United States to be fully open to women, and among the first to admit Native and African American students.

That legacy continues. In the early 1970s, our faculty, staff, and students helped make Alfred one of the first 10 communities in the nation – and the first rural one – to adopt anti-discrimination policies for LGBTQ individuals.

As we commemorate the Erie Canal's bicentennial, let us celebrate its pivotal role in shaping our region, including through the enduring values it helped instill: openness, opportunity, and innovation. From commerce to culture, from infrastructure to inclusivity, the canal's legacy lives on in our people, prosperity and principles.

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