

The Fourth of July

by Lynne Belluscio

As everyone celebrates the Fourth of July this week, it's interesting to note that it wasn't until 1870, that Congress declared the Fourth of July a holiday – albeit an unpaid holiday for government workers, but none-the-less, a holiday.

The symbolic holiday prompted other events. For example, the cornerstone of the Washington monument was laid on July 4, 1848. And slaves in New York State were granted their freedom on July 4, 1827. But on July 4, 1817, an event happened in Rome, New York that would have an impact on the Town of LeRoy.

It was on July 4, 1817, in Rome, New York, that the first shovel of dirt was dug for the Erie Canal. It most certainly was a symbolic gesture, for the route had not been verified. Funding was not guaranteed. There were massive engineering challenges. And the Canal was a political football. But Herman LeRoy and his business partner, William Bayard had been waiting for this day.

With the building of the Canal, the economic future of Western New York would most certainly be insured and their investments would be profitable. The idea of canals that would link the ports of the East Coast with the interior of the United States had been in the minds of many men, even George Washington. Other men would claim to be the visionary that created the Erie Canal. Elkanah Watson in 1788 explored a variety of routes. He claimed to be the father of the Erie Canal, but as we know, it would be DeWitt Clinton who would be tied forever to the great "Ditch."

After much haggling and political posturing, the New York State Legislature decided in 1808, that a canal would be built. Now the political and financial shenanigans began in earnest. Who would control the canal? Who would be awarded the construction and engineering contracts? Who would finance the canal?

When Thomas Jefferson was President, he proposed using federal funds to upgrade and enhance the country's



The first shovel was turned at the west end of the Village of Rome on July 17, 1817.

infrastructure but when a group of men from New York put the plans for the Erie Canal on his desk, Jefferson declared that the project was a century before its time. He believed that it was beyond the resources of the new republic. When the Canal project was submitted to the New York State Legislature, the Conservative representatives from New York City refused to support it, although it would be their constituents who would benefit the most.

In 1815, a public meeting was held in New York City to present the project to potential investors and to convince them that the canal had to go overland to Buffalo. (Many men had proposed that the canal connect to Lake Ontario- near Oswego, and then boats would enter the Niagara River, and travel by Canal to Lake Erie).

William Bayard who was the senior member of the New York firm of (Herman) LeRoy, Bayard and McEvers presided over the meeting in New York City. Bayard and LeRoy had a big stake in the canal and Bayard was a man who was always looking for business opportunities – especially if they would be profitable.

LeRoy, Bayard and McEvers

had entered into land speculation with foreign investors, known as the Holland Land Company. It was illegal for foreign investors to buy land in the United States for speculation, but Bayard and LeRoy became the "front men" in numerous land deals.

Joseph Ellicott had a hand in the deal too. He also wanted the canal to cross through the Holland Purchase. To sweeten the pot, Bayard and LeRoy offered several thousand acres of land as a right-of-way for the canal. The truth was, that the western route of the canal had not been determined. From the Genesee River, the canal could dip south and head toward Batavia – a route much preferred by Joseph Ellicott. This was the shortest route but unfortunately there wasn't enough water to fill the canal so the northern route was eventually chosen, and the land offered by LeRoy and Bayard was never utilized.

The Erie Canal opened in 1825. Herman LeRoy had sent his son Jacob to the Triangle Tract to sell off the land in 1822. Jacob lost no time and bought the old Stoddard flour mill and added new mill stones. He built a distillery to make whiskey from the corn that the new settlers were growing and he acquired a warehouse on the Erie Canal in Brockport.

Every day, wagons loaded with barrels of flour and whiskey made their way seventeen miles north to Brockport to be shipped on the Canal to Albany, then by steamship to New York City. The wagons would return filled with goods from the East and New York City to be sold in the stores in LeRoy.

So with the first shovel of dirt in 1817, what was to be known as the "Eighth Wonder of the World" was begun. It made the Empire State the richest state in the Union, and it opened the West to thousands of enterprising settlers.

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