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### The Price of Progress in Antebellum America

A long list of issues divided Americans during the antebellum period, on the national level and at state and local levels. These divisions could be witnessed through American culture, society, politics, and the nation's economy—all four of which experienced extreme changes through this period. Voters found themselves differing from their neighbors on issues such as Indian removal, abolition, temperance, penitentiaries, workers' rights, and other mediums of national progress and reform. Men adhered to opposing definitions of progress, often based on their moral/religious beliefs, their race, or their economic standing. Some saw progress as necessary to retaining and furthering America's power, while others viewed it as a distraction from the more natural reasons for living. Many questions swirled around the minds of antebellum Americans—concerning both their own self-led interests and that of the common good—but the array of conflicting stances on the forward march of progress was arguably the most pressing of these questions, as it held the potential for some of the nation's greatest victories alongside the consequences of deep and meaningful loss.

Antebellum Americans held diverse opinions on the definition of American culture, usually based around their geographic location, their race, and their income level. Most of them strove for perfection in every aspect of their lives—and therefore, of their nation—which led to many reforms in their culture. One key example of this evolution toward progress was the luxury

that middle class Americans were afforded by the Erie Canal.<sup>1</sup> In total, it took about eight full years to build it, but the Canal gave Northeastern Americans, and particularly New Yorkers, the chance to greatly broaden their world, both from a financial/market standpoint and through the way they experienced life.<sup>2</sup> The construction of the canals completely transformed American society and the American economy—particularly in the Northeast.<sup>3</sup> In her book, *The Artificial River*, Carol Sheriff mentioned even seemingly simple luxuries, such as fresh oysters in Batavia, to show the transformative power of the Erie Canal.<sup>4</sup> Another advent of progress through culture was the idea that everyone should—and for the most part, did—work toward the common good of the nation. This sometimes came at the cost of personal loss for certain citizens, though, such as the immigrant workers that dug out the ditches which eventually became the Erie Canal. These workers experienced none of the luxury that their hard work provided to other Americans, essentially allowing the price of progress to lay fully on their shoulders.<sup>5</sup>

Along with the plentitude of cultural shifts brought on by the progress of the Erie Canal, noticeable societal changes also took charge in the antebellum period. One of the greatest fears of transcendentalists such as Nathaniel Hawthorne was that too much forward progress could bring about unwanted divisions in society. Opposite to Hawthorne, however, many people believed that Americans were immune to the social destruction brought on by speedy improvements, because their nation was sanctioned by God to achieve all-encompassing

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<sup>1</sup> Carol Sheriff, *The Artificial River: The Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817–1862* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997), 65.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Atkins. “The Completion of the Erie Canal,” *The Globe and Mail* (October 26, 1825), [www.search-proquest-com.proxy128.nclive.org/docview/1955419711?pq-origsite=summon](http://www.search-proquest-com.proxy128.nclive.org/docview/1955419711?pq-origsite=summon).

<sup>3</sup> Christopher F. Jones. “A Landscape of Energy Abundance: Anthracite Coal Canals and the Roots of the American Fossil Fuel Dependence, 1820–1860,” *Environmental History* 15, no. 3 (2010): 449–484, [www.search-proquest-com.proxy128.nclive.org/docview/918721370?pq-origsite=summon](http://www.search-proquest-com.proxy128.nclive.org/docview/918721370?pq-origsite=summon).

<sup>4</sup> Sheriff, *The Artificial River*, 64.

<sup>5</sup> Sheriff, *The Artificial River*, 38.

greatness.<sup>6</sup> The never-ending American hubris that has plagued the nation throughout its history seemed to act as a blinder over the eyes of the American people.<sup>7</sup> The supposed immunity did not ring true, though, as a wider divide arose between occupations such as laborers, farmers, and businessmen. The Canal served as a perfect way to examine these societal shifts, as it provided vastly different levels of income and sustainability for each of these three livelihoods. The Canal supplied laborers with a source of pay, both in whiskey and cash; it allowed farmers to vastly expand their market, bringing them more customers and easier access to those customers; and it filled the pockets of businessmen who controlled large amounts of capital exchanged along the waterway.<sup>8</sup>

Strong societal shifts had a major impact on the nation's economy, which affected the everyday lives of Americans, especially in the Northeast. The Erie Canal opened travel for citizens looking for leisure and those who sought to capitalize on the increasingly significant business ventures of the artificial river. The Canal, along with other advancements in labor such as the factory system and the Second National Bank, entirely revolutionized the way Americans viewed their economy. The heightened economic progress was most noticeable on the thirty-six lock sites along the Canal where inns, taverns, and small shops sprung up like weeds to accommodate the never-ending supply of potential customers.<sup>9</sup> Farmers living along the Canal, however, were forced to place their own welfare before the common good when the state of New York refused to reimburse them for the fields/water they lost due to construction.<sup>10</sup> As Sheriff

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<sup>6</sup> Sheriff, *The Artificial River*, 26.

<sup>7</sup> "More American Hubris," *The Salt Lake Tribune* (Salt Lake City, UT), September 10, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Sheriff, *The Artificial River*, 42, 110.

<sup>9</sup> "Erie Canal," Wikipedia, accessed July 16, 2020, [www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erie\\_Canal](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erie_Canal).

<sup>10</sup> Sheriff, *The Artificial River*, 102.

noted, this meant that farmers “began to distrust the state because, in a world of competing interests, the state seemed more often an adversary than an ally.”<sup>11</sup>

Along with the economic developments of antebellum America, the nation’s politics saw drastic changes surrounding the Erie Canal as well. The Erie Canal Board made almost all the decisions regarding funding, constructing, and managing the Canal, which gave the citizens—particularly the farmers—affected by the Canal a direction in which to discuss their needs.<sup>12</sup> Men elected to the Canal Board traveled the state holding hearings and making decisions about reimbursements and land awards for farmers along the waterway, sometimes to the dismay of the farmers and other times to their delight. No matter the outcome of any particular hearing, though, the Canal Board undoubtedly provided a unique way for citizens to make their demands heard. On the other side of this new, helpful innovation lay the changing stance on property rights held by the men who seized and retained power over the Erie Canal. Farmers began to notice a shift in the way their rights regarding their land were viewed, making it possible to alter or destroy the land of another with the idea of the common good in mind.<sup>13</sup> This change in thought came at a crucial point in American history, when the rights surrounding other daily activities, such as factory work, were also suspended in jeopardy.<sup>14</sup> Even in acknowledging the successes and gains of the Canal, farmers “viewed the economic progress with at least a touch of ambivalence” and “made clear their broader feelings about the nation’s political economy.”<sup>15</sup>

The steep price of progress was not unknown to antebellum American society as proven by the African slaves forced to drive ever forward the international cotton industry in the

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<sup>11</sup> Sheriff, *The Artificial River*, 109.

<sup>12</sup> Sheriff, *The Artificial River*, 82.

<sup>13</sup> Sheriff, *The Artificial River*, 81.

<sup>14</sup> Aaron W. Marrs, “Railroads and Time Consciousness in the Antebellum South,” *Enterprise & Society* 9, no. 3 (2008): 435.

<sup>15</sup> Sheriff, *The Artificial River*, 80.

antebellum South.<sup>16</sup> The American South harvested and shipped three-fourths of the world's cotton, making it the largest industry in America at the time—and making it a major point of American progress.<sup>17</sup> Even though the immigrant workers who dug the trenches for the Erie Canal were paid—though not very well—their constant push toward a new and improved America was fully designed by the Evangelical white man, who benefitted greatly from their suffering. Many poor immigrant men fell into the cheap, degrading work of canal-digging because they had no other way to produce a reliable income; nevertheless, these workers were legally allowed to come and go as they pleased, differentiating them from African slaves trapped in the American South.<sup>18</sup> Still, these immigrant workers were seen and treated as less than human in almost every aspect of their lives. Much like freed African Americans in the North, these immigrant workers were viewed as nuisances to the public—drunkards who were mentally and emotionally incapable of upholding the morals of white Americans and, in particular, white American men.<sup>19</sup>

As with many contemporary issues in America, the weight of the positives and negatives of progress depended greatly on the societal/political/economic status held by any given citizen. To laborers who followed the Canal and its improvements around the northeastern United States, progress seemed a hard-fought battle that may not even have been worth it in the end. To the businessmen who made their money off the forward march of progress, it seemed the greatest innovation in American history, in the history of the world. And to the families who lived in the

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<sup>16</sup> Philip N. Mulder, Review of *Welfare and Charity in the American South*, by Timothy James Lockley, *American Historical Review*, (December 2008): 1539.

<sup>17</sup> CrashCourse, “Slavery – Crash Course US History #13,” YouTube, May 2, 2013, video, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ajn9g5Gsv98](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ajn9g5Gsv98).

<sup>18</sup> *Encyclopedia of African American Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (2014), “Slavery.”

<sup>19</sup> Corinne T. Field, *The Struggle for Equal Adulthood* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), EPUB, 64.

middle of these two ends—the farmers, shopkeepers, etc.—the Canal and its subsequent improvements became a new way of life, a new way to survive off the land divinely granted to them by God.



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