

Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin County Historian

Vol. XIII

9-25-91

No. 39

TRAVEL BY PACKET BOAT



The Grand Erie Canal officially opened for service across the state on October 26, 1825. At that time Governor DeWitt Clinton left Buffalo on a flotilla of canal boats for New York City where he arrived on November 4. Travel by packet boat soon became a very easy and popular way to travel across New York State. Overland it took no less than twenty days to get from Albany to Buffalo while by boat this distance could be made in six days.

Packet boat fare was two cents per mile with board and one cent without board. The food served on these boats was the best that could be obtained and some of the stewards received as much as \$125 per month salary, a considerable amount for those items.

The boats were drawn at the rate of four miles an hour by three horses hitched together tandem, and fresh horses were procured at relay stations every eight or ten miles.

The early freight boats were 60 or 70 feet long and 12 feet wide and carried from 15 to 20 tons. They were drawn by two horses at the rate of two miles an hour/ later on, horses and mules were carried in a stable in the stern of a boat and changed every four or five hours.

The steamboat made its appearance in 1879. However, mules were used to haul canal boats until the completion of the Barge Canal about 1916.

In 1897 there were around 4,000 boats plying the Erie Canal. The canal was deepened to seven feet in 1886 and to nine feet in 1896. In 1835 the canal was open for 245 days, one of the longest years on record and in 1871 over 800 boats were frozen in by a sudden cold snap.

No other part of the state received such benefits from the canal as Western New York. The canal was responsible for opening up this part of the state and stimulated it to become the rich and profitable area.