

# Two Hundred Years on the Erie Canal

## 1817-2017

See the online exhibit at  
[NYHeritage.org](http://NYHeritage.org)

### Canal Culture

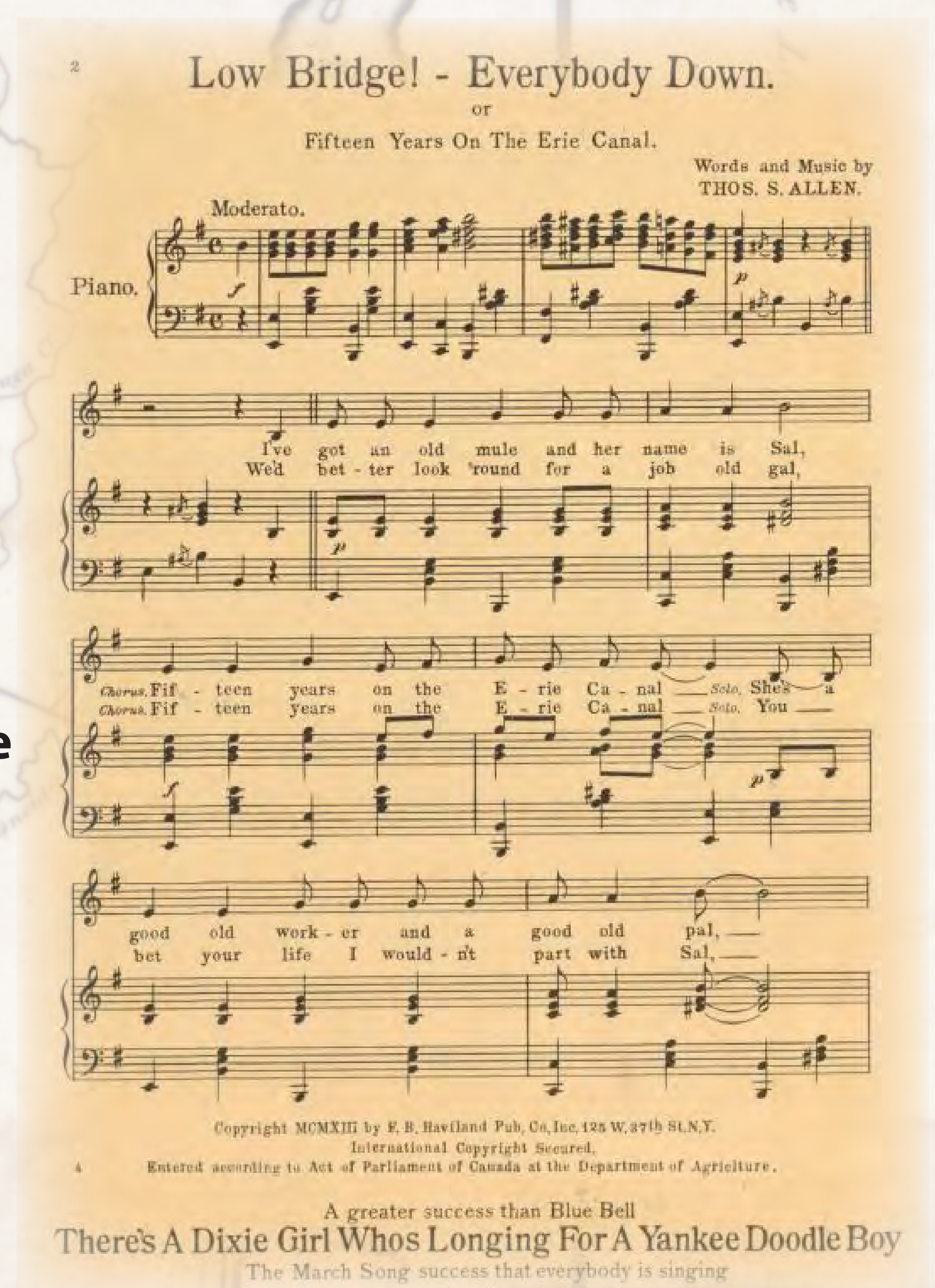
What we know about the Erie Canal from textbooks and official accounts demonstrates its value to the national economy and politics. However, what of its impact on everyday people? How do we know what significance it had in their lives? We have access to many journals, letters, photos and diaries of ordinary and extraordinary people who travelled the Erie Canal. Personal accounts give us an historical perspective that is humane and relative to our own experiences.



View on the Erie Canal, by John William Hill  
Image from the New York Public Library

There are many Erie Canal songs but one popular song can be credited with making the Erie Canal world famous. **"Low Bridge Everybody Down (or Fifteen Years on the Erie Canal)"** was composed sometime between 1905 and 1912. It tells the story of a mule driver and his mule, Sal, who have hauled barges on the Erie Canal for fifteen years and are about to be put out of work with the opening of the last enlargement of the canal, which would replace mules with steam-powered tug boats.

Sheet music for "Low Bridge! Everybody Down"  
Image from the New York Public Library



Excursion boats became a popular form of entertainment in canal towns, taking people for a day trip along the water, or even longer journeys to popular destinations such as Niagara Falls or New York City.

Passenger Boat in Lock 22 on Erie Canal, Rexford, NY  
Image from the Town of Clifton Park History Collection

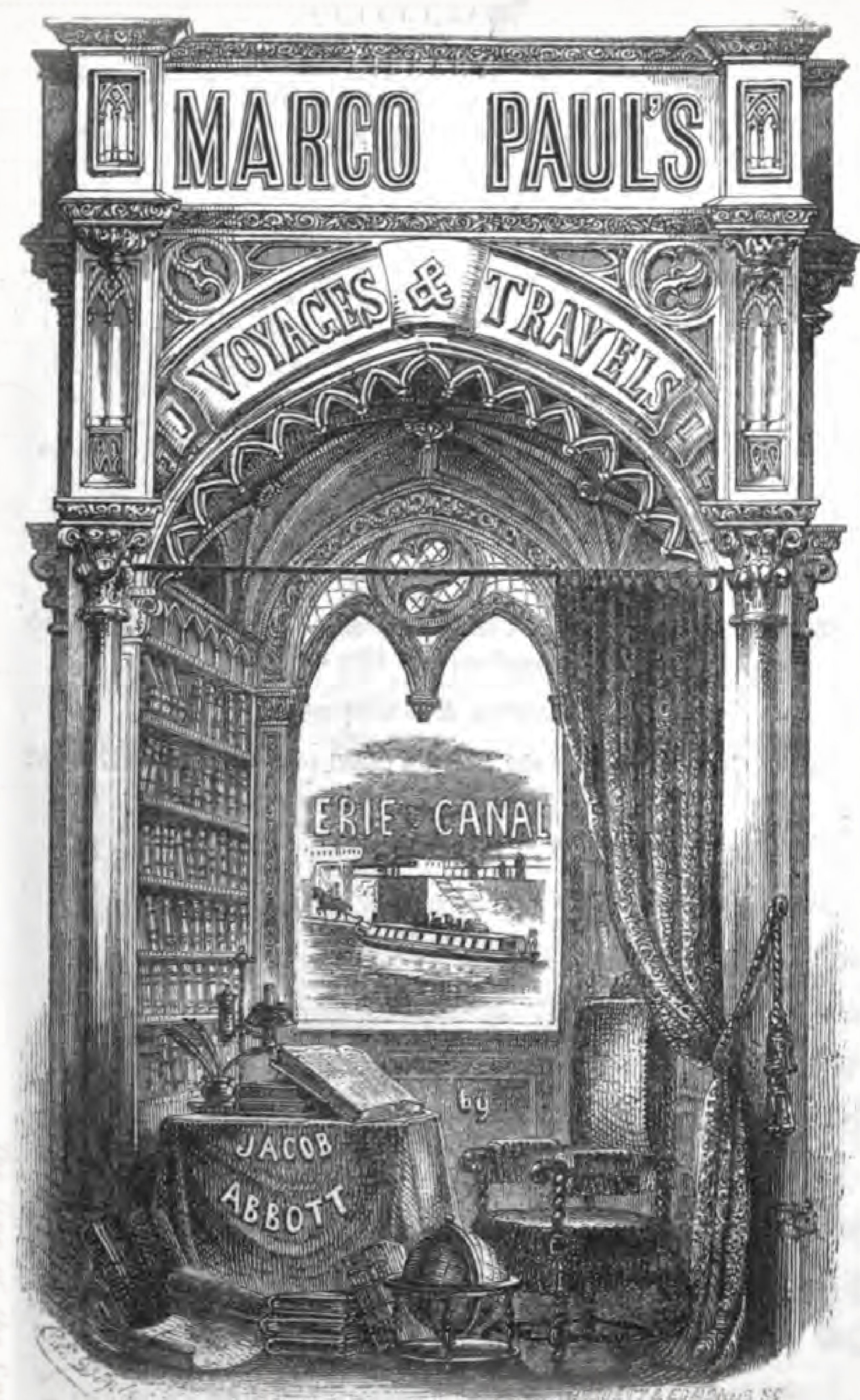
*"...at Schenectady we got on board one of the canal packet-boats for Utica...With a very delightful party, of one's own choosing, fine temperate weather, and a strong breeze to chase the mosquitos, this mode of travelling might be very agreeable, but I can hardly imagine any motive of convenience powerful enough to induce me again to imprison myself in a canal boat under ordinary circumstances."*

Domestic Manners of the Americans by Frances Milton Trollope, 1833

Although it is a fictional account of an adventure on the Erie Canal, *Marco Paul's Voyages and Travels: Erie Canal* by Jacob Abbott is a well written mid-19th century volume that describes a commonplace journey contemporary to its publication. The author made it a point to communicate:

*"as extensive and varied information as possible, in respect to the geography, the scenery, the customs and the institutions of this country, as they present themselves to the observation of the little traveler."*

Book Cover of Marco Paul's Voyages and Travels: Erie Canal  
Image from Harvard University



Watermark:  
Map of proposed Canal from Lake Erie to the Hudson River; 1817  
State University of New York at Fredonia Archives & Special Collections;  
Municipal Archives of Amsterdam; Nederlandse Document Reproductie B.V



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