

tor Robert Fulton), on the results to be expected from building the Erie Canal:

“A man’s life is short; the time is not far off when those who make this report will have passed away. No time, however, is fixed for the existence of a *state*, and the highest desire of a patriot’s heart is that the state to which he belongs might be immortal. . . . And even when our constitution shall be

dissolved and our laws be lost in the current of that unending stream which destroys all human institutions, the offspring of our children’s children will nevertheless remain, these same hills will stand and these same streams flow. . . . [A]fter the lapse of two thousand years . . . when the records of history shall have been obliterated . . . this national work shall remain. It will bear witness to the genius, the learning, the industry, and the intelligence of the present age.”¹¹

A state enterprise, the Erie Canal was completed in 1825, connecting New York City and the Hudson River to Lake Erie and the Midwest. Political allies of President John Quincy Adams now pressed for the construction of a railway line to parallel the canal. Such a railroad would connect the Atlantic port of Boston, the interior of Massachusetts, the Hudson River, the large undeveloped western area of New York State, and the Great Lakes. Action on this project came in both New York and Massachusetts, led by the Adams forces.

The New York & Erie Railroad, incorporated in 1832, had its route surveyed under direction of the New York legislature in 1834. New York State in 1836 authorized a \$3 million loan for it. But the panic of 1837 had ruined the credit of investors, and the railroad had to stop construction. At a special convention on Oct. 17, 1837, William H. Seward, an aspiring politician and an avid follower of John Q. Adams (later, Adams’s biographer), wrote the address promoting the re-starting of the Erie railroad as a public project.

Seward wrote: “It is well to remember that the experience of human government affords not a single instance in which a state or nation became impoverished or subjected to an irredeemable debt by works of internal improvement. Ambition, revenge, and lust for extended territory, have been the only causes, and was almost the sole agent, in entailing those calamities upon nations. Palaces and pyramids, the luxurious dwellings of living tyrants, and the receptacles of their worthless ashes when dead, have in every country but our own cost more than all its canals and roads. . . . Egypt, Rome, Netherlands, England, and France, and even our own peace-loving country, have severally disbursed more in a single war than was required to complete a system of improvements sufficient to perfect their union, wealth, and power.”¹²

Seward’s political lieutenant, Samuel R. Ruggles, put forward as the principal promoter of the Erie rail line, was elected a few days later to the state legislature and became chairman of the ways and means committee. Seward was elected governor the following year, on a platform of building transportation infrastructure. In the legislature, Ruggles wrote the 1838 “Report upon Finances and Internal Improvements of the State of New York.”

The state paid for the revival of the Erie railroad, contrib-

11. March 14, 1812, quoted in Gerstner, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

12. Frederick W. Seward and William H. Seward, *Autobiography of William Henry Seward, with a Memoir of His Life* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1877), pp. 342-343.

Great rail projects raised living standards

The earliest U.S. railroads, government projects with private participation, as in the 1960s Apollo space program, immediately increased Americans’ standard of living. The expense and time involved in travel, and in shipping farm and factory goods, were dramatically minimized, increasing freedom, productivity, and overall profitability, while making everything more affordable.

These figures, suggesting the change, are taken from George Taylor’s *The Transportation Revolution*.

Freight rates per ton-mile

	1816	1853	1860
Turnpikes	\$30.00 and up	\$15.00	\$15.00
Mississippi-Ohio rivers			
downstream	1.30 (1815)		0.37
upstream	5.80 (1815)		0.37
Erie Canal		1.10	0.99
Chesapeake & Ohio Canal		0.25	0.25
New York Central Railroad		3.40	2.06
Erie Railroad		2.40	1.84
Pennsylvania Railroad		3.50	1.96

Time for freight shipment, Cincinnati to New York City

1817: Ohio River keelboat to Pittsburgh, wagon to Philadelphia, wagon or wagon and river to New York City: 52 days

1843-51: Ohio River steamboat to Pittsburgh, canal to Philadelphia, railroad to New York City: 18-20 days

1852: Canal across Ohio, through Lake Erie to Erie Canal and down Hudson River: 18 days

1850s: Steamboat to New Orleans, packet boat to New York City, 28 days

1852: All rail via Erie Railroad and connecting lines: 6-8 days