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Spotlight on the Erie Canal Museum

While the canal that sparked the development of the city of Syracuse no longer flows through it, the **Erie Canal Museum** remains a proud reminder of the city's origins. This recently reaccredited museum in New York pays tribute to the manmade waterway completed in 1825. Stretching 363 miles, linking the Hudson River in Albany to Lake Erie in Buffalo, the Erie Canal is responsible for creating hundreds of canal-side communities through the revenue and traffic it brought to the state, earning it the nickname "The Mother of Cities."



Looking west down the canal at the Weighlock Building in 1869.

The Weighlock Building in Syracuse, built in 1850, makes up the majority of the museum and is the last remaining structure of its kind. Used to weigh canal boats to determine the toll charged for using the canal, the weigh lock is listed in the National Register of Historic Places of the United States.

Weigh locks worked by draining all of the water in the lock after a boat entered and rested on a special cradle attached to a scale. The weight of the empty boat was then subtracted from the weight determined at the weigh lock, and a toll was paid on the difference.

A beautiful architectural achievement with impressive brickwork and elaborate tin wall panels, the Erie Canal Museum now houses a dry lock with an actual-size replica of a line

boat. In 1922, the stretch of the canal that runs through Syracuse and several surrounding towns was filled in and became Erie Boulevard. The Weighlock Building was used for office space for several decades until the Erie Canal Museum opened in 1962.

The museum is now preparing to celebrate its 50th anniversary this October with a large renovation project scheduled to start later this year. "It has taken us years to get everything we need to complete the renovation in order," says Diana Goodsight, Executive Director of the Museum. "There were grants, permits and SHPO [State Historic Preservation Office] approval required."

Because the museum also contains the Syracuse Heritage Area Visitor Center, renovations to the building will include creating an improved space for the visitor center that provides maps and information about local attractions, in addition to the canal exhibitions. "The first floor renovation will begin by telling the story of all canals and then focus in on the Erie Canal," says Goodsight. "The space is designed to lead the visitor on a logical path to the canal boat replica. Once they reach it, they will have an appreciation for what life was like on the canal."

Though its goal is ultimately to take patrons back to the birth of a city almost 200 years ago, the Erie Canal Museum is constantly finding ways to relate the history of a simpler time to today's tech-savvy community. In the past year, the museum has twice extended a membership offer through discount site **Groupon** for half-price annual memberships. They received a record number of new memberships—more than three times what they normally sell annually.

The museum also recently began using QR codes on its donation box and a moving special exhibit sign to accept donations. Although admission to the museum is free, the use of this technology encourages more patrons to make the suggested donation upon entering or to donate when they enjoy a new exhibit they have seen. "We know many people no longer carry cash, but just as many people do have smartphones with QR scanners," says Goodsight. "This allows people to make donations when they otherwise wouldn't have been able to, and we get an email instantly notifying us when a donation has been made." Goodsight says that she has gone out and personally thanked visitors for their donations after receiving these emails.

The museum also connects with members and potential visitors through social media with oft-updated **Facebook** and **Twitter** pages. Marketing Director Natalie Stetson posts and tweets facts about the Erie Canal, old photos, upcoming Museum events, and other happenings in the city that she can relate back to the canal or the museum. "Social media helps to make us more than just a building full of objects," says Stetson. "It helps us have a personality."

Stetson says the museum uses social media to build relationships with its stakeholders. “We are able to provide them with regular updates about all of the exciting things that go on here at the museum,” she says. “I plan to have our renovation be very well documented on Facebook.”

Stetson says that the museum continues to use social media to promote new exhibits and events, and she is very pleased with the response they get. “Many of our events are promoted almost entirely through social media, and we are always impressed with the turnout.”

Additionally, outlets like Facebook and Twitter allow the museum to reach a broader audience. “Social media allows us to connect with individuals all over the world who may not be able to come to the museum,” says Stetson. “We are also able to connect with other organizations. I love that we can develop a relationship with other local institutions, as well as museums all over the country.”



The Weighlock Building in 1907.

Last summer, the museum teamed up with **Syracuse’s Public Arts Task Force (PATF)** for a project called **Arterie**. This large-scale art project transformed the stretch of Erie Boulevard from the Erie Canal Museum to Clinton Square in downtown Syracuse into “water” once again with a series of painted blue lines spanning the width of the street. Once again blending history and technology, the pattern reflects both the effect of rippling water at street level and a giant scannable barcode from above. According to Arterie’s website, the goal of the project was to “celebrate the historical relevance of the canal and bring tribute to the lasting effect the canal has had on central NY.” The project garnered a lot of attention for the museum, both from its involvement with PATF and the media used to promote and gather volunteers to help paint.

In other efforts to modernize, the museum continues to update its exhibition area with electronic, interactive displays, including their Weighmaster Game. The game utilizes specially designed computer software geared towards children to help them learn about how a weigh lock operates. The museum features many exhibits designed with children in mind—New York State’s education program teaches the history of the Erie Canal to 4th graders across the state, and much of the museum is geared towards reinforcing their study of the canal.

The Weighmaster Game guides them through the process of registering a boat to determine its empty weight, choosing and taking on cargo, and navigating in and out of the weigh station. Children then learn about the weighing process and the math formula for determining the toll. The game also helps students assess the distance the cargo will need to be carried and calculate the end-of-season profits to see if the choices made throughout the year ensure the financial survival of the captain, crew and boat. “We believe the game reinforces the principles of math, geography and critical thinking,” says Goodsight. “It was designed for the 4th grade New York State curriculum standards for social studies as they apply to the Erie Canal.” However, Goodsight also notes that adults and children alike enjoy playing the game.

When the museum recently updated its **website** to include the ability to purchase from the gift shop, make donations, become a member and view the event schedule online, they also made the **Weighmaster Game** available so you can give it a try even if you aren’t able to visit the museum.

There are plans to add more interactive exhibits as part of the museum’s renovation project, including a model of a lock using water to show how locks work. Additionally, the museum updated its children’s nook to include a puppet theater and an assortment of dress-up clothes, so kids can literally step into the shoes of someone working and living on the canal.



The Weighlock Building being utilized for office space in the 1950s after the canal was filled in.

In another effort to engage young patrons, the Erie Canal Museum has put together a Children’s Advisory Council. They invite six to eight young people to the museum to lend their opinions on what they would like to see in the museum, what will get them interested in history and what kind of features will keep them coming back. “We look at these children as the future leaders of Syracuse, and hope that their involvement in the advisory council will make them museum-goers,” says Goodsight.

The Erie Canal Museum is able to continue to take its patrons back in time by carefully preserving its collection with a specially designed collections storage building next door. This temperature- and humidity-controlled structure is used to store the museum’s most

important artifacts long-term. The building housing these collections is known as a “double-ender,” designed specifically during the canal days to have storefronts on both the canal and street sides of the building. A large mural on the side of the museum’s collections storage building depicts the movement of goods in a double-ender.

While thoughtfully preserving the past of a once modern feat of engineering and the city that formed as a result of it, the Erie Canal Museum continues to look to the future and find new ways to relate to its current audience. Faced with a struggle no doubt many other museums endure, this museum perseveres to provide its visitors with a modern look at a time long since passed. “Even though the canal is nearly 200 years old and

we are a 50-year-old museum,” says Goodsight, “we are doing everything we can to stay on the cutting edge and engage people with technology.”

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