Teaching with Objects Lesson: Was the Erie Canal the Information Super Highway of the 19th century?

Class/grade: U.S. History or Government high school classes  
Time required: 2-3 class periods  

Dimension 1 of the C3 Framework  

Compelling Question: (D1.1.9-12)  
Was the Erie Canal the “Information Super Highway of the 19th century?”

Supporting Questions:  
How did the Erie Canal contribute to westward expansion?  
How were New Yorkers impacted by the Erie Canal?  
How was the nation impacted by the Erie Canal?

Background for teachers:  
This lesson is intended to demonstrate to students that the 19th century proposal and construction for the Erie Canal dramatically changed the direction of economic, political and geographic development of both New York State and the United States. Like the Internet of today, the Erie Canal was a force for change in American society, with both intended and unintended consequences.

Whose Idea was The Erie Canal?

When the United States won its independence from Great Britain, almost all of our people lived within a few hundred miles of the Atlantic Ocean. The main problem was transportation. With poor roads and rivers with rapids to choose from, it was difficult for farmers and other businesses to get their products to market. Between 1776 and 1825, when the Erie Canal was completed, the landscape of New York was completely altered - see map.

The end of the Revolution opened a vacuum in land both in populated areas (lands of loyalists seized, 1779 Confiscation Act), and the end of British protectorate of Native American lands to the west (1763 Proclamation no longer adhered to). Opportunities opened up for merchants, patriot landowners and land speculators to assume wealth and power. Land was now desired not for ownership, but for resale value.

As early as 1797, Americans were considering ways to expand westward and
increase economic development along the eastern seaboard ports. Robert Fulton wrote a letter to President George Washington about his idea for a canal connecting the port of Philadelphia to the west territories of the country.

There is always some kind of relationship between cartography and politics, but rarely is it as evident as in the mapping of New York in the decades after 1783. During this period, New York's leaders found themselves with millions of acres of land at their disposal. At the same time, the state was split between political factions, including Clintonite Democratic-Republicans, Hamiltonian-Schuyler Federalists, and the followers of Aaron Burr. Later, “Martling Men” associated with Peter Porter, and still later, Martin Van Buren's Bucktail Democrats, became important. In spite of these divisions, and the bitter controversies that were sometimes associated with them, there was a remarkable amount of agreement and cooperation on land policy. Not to put too fine a point on it, so much land became quickly available that anybody with money or a claim to political power could easily obtain a suitable helping of it.

Through a series of land transactions: Commonwealth of Massachusetts (1786 Hartford Treaty), Phelps-Gorham Purchase (1788) - Robert Morris (1790) - Pulteney (1791) and Holland Land Company (1797), western New York became the “new frontier” for westward expansion. To sell the land to individuals, these large landholders needed to create inducements to settle - roads, public buildings, etc. The prospect of the canal was appealing and eventually, the HLC donated large tracts to support the project.

In 1807, a bankrupt businessman named Jesse Hawley was sitting in a Canandaigua debtors' prison. He had failed because he could not get his goods to market cheaply. While behind bars, he dreamed of a great “Western” canal that would stretch across New York State. He wrote a series of articles under the pen-name “Hercules” about his proposals. They were published over several months in the local newspaper, the Genesee Messenger.

Although a Democratic-Republican, DeWitt Clinton shared the federalist’s vision for a canal to create a large web of commerce and became the main supporter until his death in 1827. He managed to attract large American investors (JJ Astor) as well as foreign (Britain) who saw the potential for New York as a center for international commerce. Jefferson rejected the Erie Canal as a federal project. Several other states opposed it (PA, MD, LA) as well as some NYC residents (taxes) and Hudson Valley farmers (competition). War of 1812 intervenes, but also shows how the canal route would have helped the war effort (supply lines).

In 1810, New York appoints canal commissioners and in 1817, creates a canal fund and commences construction.
Dimension 2

Applying Disciplinary Concepts & Tools: (D2.Civ.2.9-12; D2.Civ.5.9-12; D2.Eco.1.9-12; D2.Geo.5.9-12; D2.His.1-5.9-12 and D2.His.9-12, 11.9-12, 16.9-12)

Civic & Political Institutions
Economic Decision Making
Human-Environment Interaction
Change, Continuity, Context
Perspectives
Historical Sources & Evidence
Causation & Argumentation

Students can be guided in discovering how the Erie Canal brought about change in both the national and state contexts by analyzing objects and applying their analyses through the lenses of economic, political and social influences. Some of the points that can be made in studying the objects below include:

- Whereas prior to the completion of the Erie Canal, New York City was ranked seventh among US ports, it became number one in 1839, largely because of the increase in commerce of goods flowing east and west along the Erie Canal.
- The Erie Canal dropped shipping costs from about $100 a ton to $10 a ton. Farming as a way of life now became farming for profit. It also created new markets and new job sectors in the state and national economies (now people needed to broker, distribute, ship, hold and advertise goods).
- It also helped encourage greater economic activity between the North and the West - whereas, prior to that time, more Southerners settled in the West, the Erie Canal made it easier for Northerners to go West and they soon became the dominant group. This last point has led some scholars to suggest that the Erie Canal may have been a factor in the rise of both the abolition movement and the women’s rights movement.
- The very rapid economic growth and prosperity in the US also brought a religious backlash against the new wealth and materialism that many felt was undermining American society, particularly the dependence on slavery for production of what were then “luxury goods,” such as cotton, tobacco and sugar. In this way, the Erie Canal contributed to the Second Great Awakening and the rise and spread of the abolition movement. Many prominent Republican party leaders came from western New York (Governor Reuben Fenton is one example).
- The Erie Canal also helped inspire a new direction in art and literature, demonstrating a longing of a return to “simpler times” and a fear of spiritual retribution as seen in the literature of people like Nathaniel Hawthorne and James Fenimore Cooper; the works of the Hudson River Valley artists; and the explosion of religious revival movements (Mormons, Oneidas, Shakers, and so on) that swept across New York State and out to the western frontier.
Include use of New York State resources in discussion and further analysis, including

_Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor site:_
http://www.eriecanalway.org/learn_history-culture_social-innov.htm

The Erie Canal: [http://www.eriecanal.org/](http://www.eriecanal.org/)

Annenberg Learner: The Rise of Capitalism:
http://www.learner.org/series/biographyofamerica/prog07/transcript/page03.html (*maybe show this as a hook into the lesson before evaluating sources)

**Dimension 3**

_Gathering & Evaluating Sources (D3.1.9-12)_

Divide students into groups (depending on class size and time willing to spend in examining documents) and assign each group 1 or 2 different objects to examine. Ask them to examine and discuss their assigned objects and to be prepared to report to the rest of the class on their examples.

**A chart or graphic organizer can be created and used for students to record their information or, just ask them to list on paper their responses to the prompt questions below. Teachers may wish to utilize the Smithsonian’s Artifact and Document Analysis Tools:**

_Possible sources and examples for group work_ (selection size and complexity can be matched to fit classroom needs):

![Image of objects](image-url)
Procedure:

As students enter the classroom, have the image above projected onto a large screen for the students to observe (Do not reveal the object description until after the discussion). Ask them what they see. Ask them what they might wonder about the image. Prompt questions could include:

Where did this come from?
When was it made?
Who might have made it?
What is it made of? Does that tell you anything about it?
What would it be used for?
How big is it?
Who would have owned this or used it?
Have you ever seen anything like this anywhere else?
(if applicable) What do the words convey?
Who was the message directed to?
What appears to be the tone of this image and phrase?

Next, provide students with the full object descriptions at:

http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_490289 (wood box)

https://americanhistory.si.edu/america-on-the-move/transportation-1876
(commemorative plate of Buffalo, NY along the Erie Canal)

http://americanhistory.si.edu/american-enterprise-exhibition/merchant-era
(1829 “View on the Erie Canal” by John William Hull from “The Merchant Era, 1770s-1850s)

http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/collection/1977.0803.89.html
(Stoneware jug from Utica, NY)

https://library.si.edu/image-gallery/100283
(print of Process of excavation in Lockport, NY)

https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1065091
(surveyor’s chain)

https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_629453
(Catalina Juliana Mason’s Map Sampler)