In the first of a special three part series, author Leo McNeir explores the canals of New York State

CRUISING USA

PART 1: How the west was *really* won

It came as something of a surprise, even a shock, to learn that the American West wasn't really opened up by settlers in wagon trains trekking across the wilderness, keeping their eyes peeled for Redskins. At least, that was not the only way or even the first way. After spending a few weeks travelling on the Erie Canal in New York State earlier this summer, I now have an inkling of how the West was really won.

I want to tell you a story, a tale of two projects, one historical, the other modern. Both of them are examples of the American Dream, with determination and achievement born of ambition, with vision backed by a solid sense of commercial possibilities.

The first part of our story begins early in the nineteenth century. The fledgling United States of America had gained its independence a few decades earlier. They then secured a lasting peace with Britain following the war of 1812. Now the young and vast country could turn its full attention to developing its huge potential. It was no easy task. The distance to the interior was immense, and the country between New York City on the coast and the furthest point of the state beside

Lake Erie passed through hundreds of miles of wilderness.

One example shows the magnitude of the problem. Farmers around Buffalo in the west were producing wheat worth $100 per ton. The cost of transporting it to the coast? About $100 per ton. Our American chums call that a no-brainer.

Enter the New York State Governor, Dewitt Clinton. The Governor's big idea was to open up the route to the Mid-West by building a canal from the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Lakes. He knew about the canals recently opened in Britain and thought they could solve his transport problems, too.

Many influential people poured scorn on the proposal as being totally impractical. When great thinkers like Thomas Jefferson condemn your plans – "it is a little short of madness to think of it …" – you have to take their views seriously. But Clinton was not a man to back down, even in the face of difficulties that would have daunted a lesser spirit.

First of all, the country had no qualified civil engineers. There were simply no establishments in the US at that time for training them. Their only recourse was to the information they had gathered while observing the work on the construction of British canals.

Second, the scepticism with which the project was regarded meant that Clinton's team could not raise the financial backing for the works. On paper it looked very unpromising. The task was to create a waterway over 500 miles long through terrain that had never even been properly surveyed.

Work eventually began in 1817 and the builders encountered one major problem after another. They faced up to these challenges with admirable determination and resourcefulness.

In the middle of their route through the wilderness they ran into an area of solid rock thirty miles long. It was so hard that the dynamite then available was incapable of getting through it. Undaunted, they developed a more powerful high-explosive and blasted through.

In other sectors they ran into quicksands and developed a method of piling to support the canal itself and the towpath beside it.

Perhaps the greatest challenge lay in stabilising the banks of the canal to guarantee that it remained solid and water-tight throughout its considerable length. To achieve this, they invented a new kind of hydraulic cement that would harden under water.

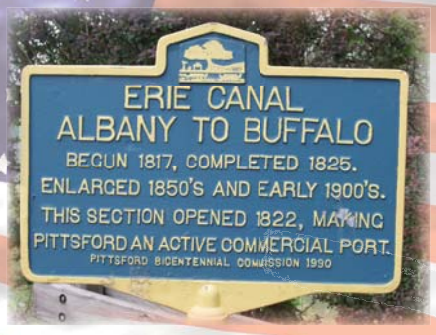
The Marriage of the Waters - Governor Dewitt Clinton pours water brought from Lake Erie into the Atlantic in New York City at the official opening of the canal in 1825

The lock flight at Longport

These were massive achievements for a team that lacked any formal training and virtually had to make things up as they went along. After eight years of hard work the canal was finally completed.

The opening was on as heroic a scale as the work itself. Leaving Buffalo on 26 October 1825, Governor Clinton drew two barrels of water from Lake Erie and stowed them aboard the canal boat, *Seneca Chief*. This was the first cargo ever transported on the new canal and it had a special purpose.

The Governor's flotilla travelled the length of the canal, around 363 miles, joined the Hudson river and headed on to New York City, a total distance of over 500 miles. Roughly every mile a celebratory cannon was fired. Was this the longest gun-salute in history? Sadly, one cannon exploded, killing its gunner.



The *Seneca Chief* reached New York City on 2 November. At the opening ceremony, Clinton poured the barrels of water taken from Lake Erie into the sea. This opening, combining the poetic with the heroic, became known to history as the 'Marriage of the Waters', uniting the Great Lakes with the Atlantic Ocean.

At its start, the Erie Canal was forty feet wide and four feet deep and the craft that travelled on it, hauled by mules, were able to carry 30 tons of cargo. Among the earliest beneficiaries were those farmers working the land near Buffalo. Their produce could now be transported safely and reliably to the big city at a cost of only $10 per ton, a saving of 90 per cent.

The Erie Canal enabled New York rapidly to become the foremost seaport of the United States, racing ahead of its nearest rivals, Philadelphia and Boston, and generally boosted the economy of New York to the extent that it became the nation's major centre for wealth creation, which led to its title as the 'Empire State'.

The rapid growth of New York as a commercial hub, fuelled by its major artery, the Erie Canal, led to a period of canal mania across the United States, similar to that experienced in Britain in the 1790s. In New York State ten further lateral canals were added within little more than a decade, and the mainline of the Erie underwent a series of improvements and upgrades to keep pace with demands, that kept it in the forefront for well over a century.

By the 1860s the Erie, increased to seventy-five feet wide and seven feet deep, was handling boats with a cargo of 240 tons. Throughout this period tolls were charged.

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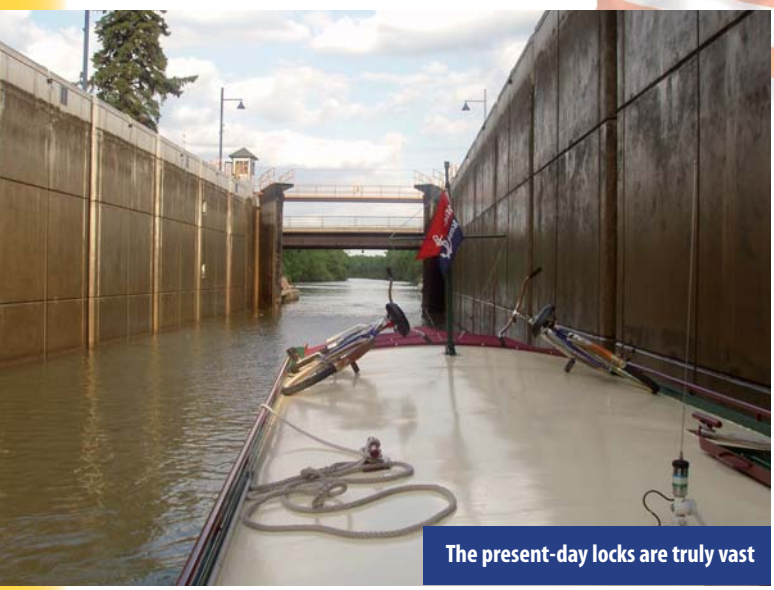
Skaneateles Lake - where Peter Wiles Sr began his boating enterprises. Inset: Peter Wiles Sr is commemmorated on every boat in the hire fleet

In 1882 the tolls were abolished and the Erie became a free canal. The accounts showed that in less than sixty years it had earned a profit of some forty-two million dollars, after taking into account all construction, maintenance and operational costs; a major success by any reckoning.

In 1903 it was decided to improve the canal further. This was the 'Barge Canal' project, linking the main canals of the New York State system: the Erie, the Champlain, the Oswego and the Cayuga and Seneca. This network joined the Hudson River and the neighbouring lakes to form a combined waterway in excess of 800 miles.



The present-day locks are truly vast

To ensure an adequate water supply for the whole system, the operators were able to draw on the Great Lakes at the western end and two huge new reservoirs in the east. These sources guarantee a plentiful supply of water unaffected by any drought ever known in the region.

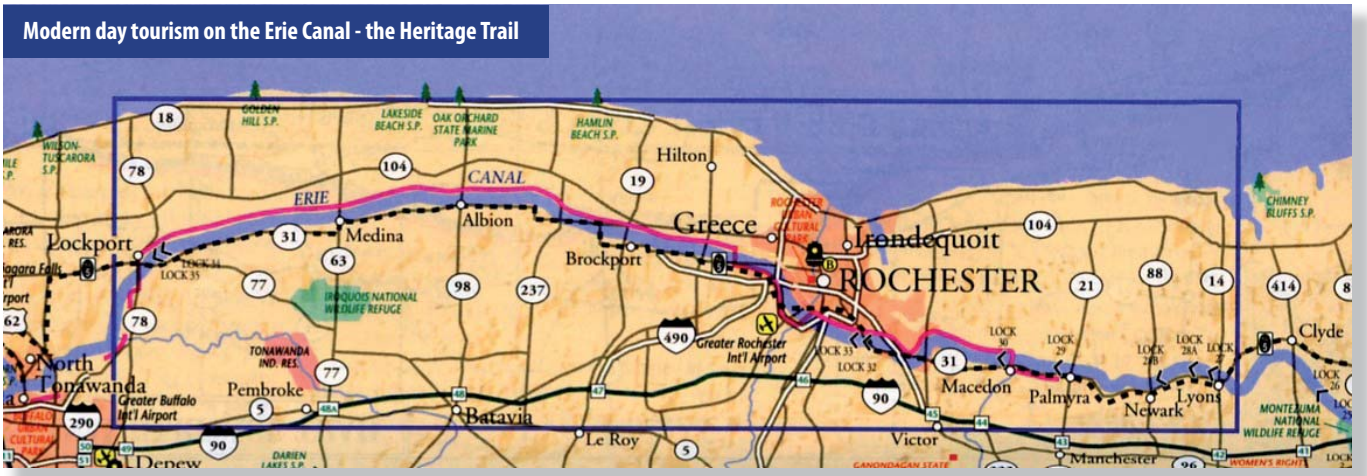
The Barge Canal project was completed in 1918. The system was served by 57 locks with a rise to the highest point of over 560 feet and was crossed by over 500 road and railway (sorry, railroad) bridges. It had reached the size we recognise today: 120 feet wide and on average twelve feet deep. The locks are generally some 300 feet long and 45 feet wide.

For almost a century and a half the New York State Barge Canal network powered the economic growth of the country's greatest industrial-commercial base. But then a phenomenon took place which is all too familiar. Gradually commercial traffic shifted to the roads and the railroads. Despite the efforts of the State Legislature, the canals declined to such an extent in the decades following World War Two that there was a real danger the system would fall into decay and ruin.

Here we move on to the second part of our story. In some ways it will seem as familiar as the first part, with tourism and leisure taking over from industry and commerce. But in Britain there were narrow boats available that could be converted for pleasure cruising. In New York State that was not an option. So what made the difference? The answer came in the form of a man with a vision. It is time to meet the Wiles family and in particular, Peter Wiles Sr.

From the late 1960s, Peter ran his own small business, a golf club and restaurant in the beautiful Finger Lakes region of upstate New York. This enterprise enjoyed a moderate success, but was to a large extent seasonal, with business slower in

Modern day tourism on the Erie Canal - the Heritage Trail



the harsh winters of that area. Peter, with a young family to support, looked around for opportunities to expand.

He had owned cabin cruisers on the Erie Canal in the 1950s and was a fan of the waterways. When the opportunity arose to acquire the mail-boat contract on Skaneateles Lake in 1968 he seized it with both hands. The following year he expanded into dinner cruises as a result of an idea from one of his staff, a young boat captain named Curtis Feldmann.

The success of the dinner cruises encouraged him to buy another boat, *Packet I*, in 1972, which he ran for two years. He replaced her with the larger *Emita II*, which the company still operates. Travelling as far as Palmyra and Fairport, they offered dinner cruises, weddings and lunches. By this time he had sold the golf club to devote his considerable energies to the world of boating.

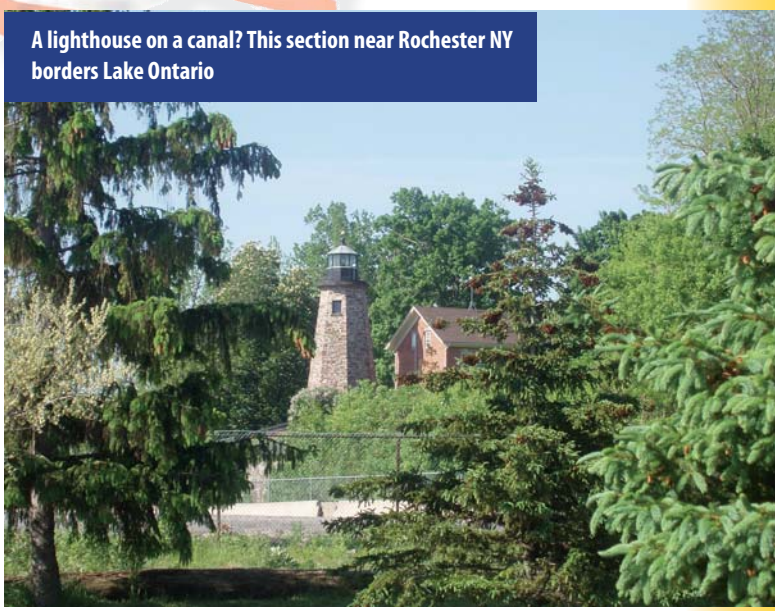
He expanded his fleet with another boat in Maine with which he offered 2-3 day cruises into Connecticut. By the early 1980s he was looking for ways to develop his business further and was fascinated that no one was making use of the major resource, the Erie Canal. It had fallen largely into disuse and disrepair and surely presented opportunities for growth, but how could it be exploited?

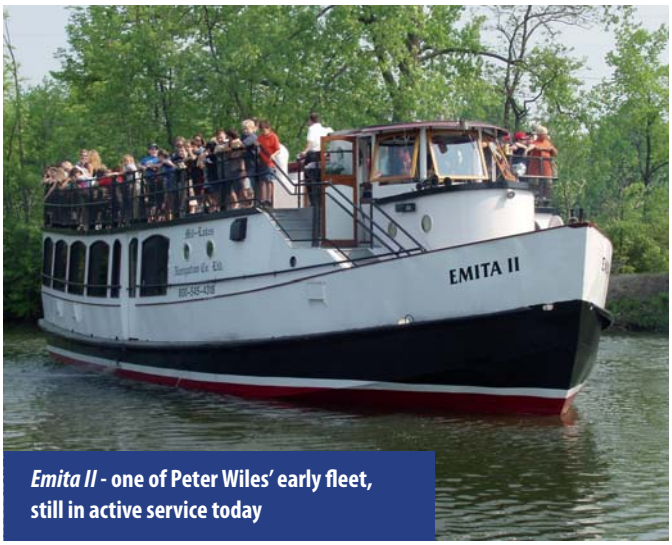
Learning of the growth in narrow boating holidays in the UK, Peter decided to cross the Atlantic and see at first hand how the industry worked. By now, he had expanded into boat building. The keel of a tour boat was laid in January 1985, and the company launched it as the *Judge Ben Wiles*, named after a distinguished grandfather, in July 1986. It may be that during this period the germ of an idea was forming in his mind.

In 1985, after the end of his own boating season, Peter took a group of family and friends to England, armed with a video camera, for a recce and a canalboat holiday.

They hired a boat from Weltonfield Narrowboats in Northamptonshire and cruised the Grand Union Canal. It was late autumn, grey, cloudy and cold … and they loved it. The countryside, the characters, the cosy pubs, the locks, the sense of history and the sheer fun of it all were a revelation. Peter was bitten by the bug. He shot miles of videotape, which he edited back home during the winter.

A lighthouse on a canal? This section near Rochester NY borders Lake Ontario





Emita II - one of Peter Wiles' early fleet, still in active service today

By chance, two of his staff were young women with filming experience, and he returned to Britain the following year with another group, including these two. They shot more videotape and created a much more professional film linking the history of the Erie Canal with their boating experience on the canals in Britain.

At this time a number of major influences coincided.

In 1986 the World Fair was held in Vancouver and one of the exhibits was a narrow boat, *City of Birmingham*, specially commissioned and shipped over by that city as a showpiece. After the World Fair the boat remained behind. On learning of this, Peter struck a deal whereby it would be transported to his company with a view to a trial and possible purchase. It had suffered water damage en route, but he cleaned it up, repaired it and operated it for some months before deciding that it was not quite what was wanted in his circumstances. He had the boat shipped back to Britain, but by now he had a clear vision.

A member of Peter's boatbuilding team, David Wiltse,

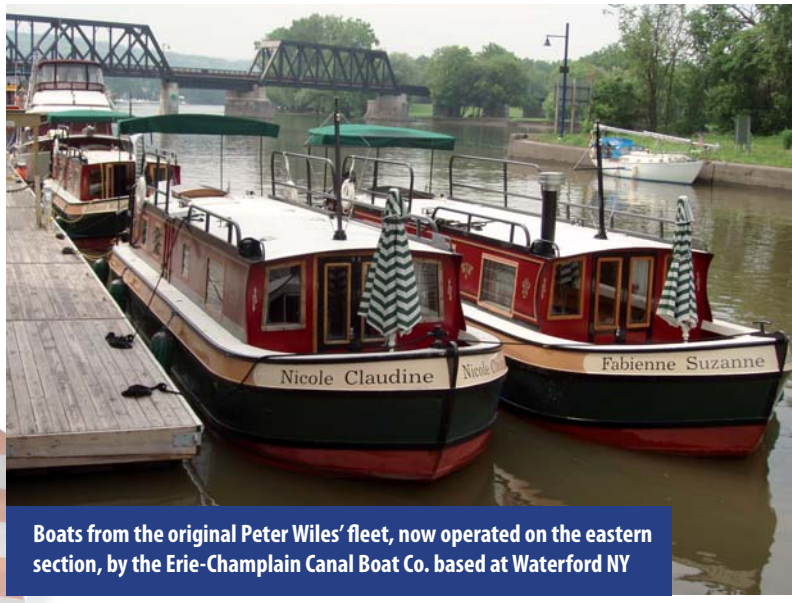
produced a sketch design for a 'narrow boat' that might be suitable in their situation. The main difference was that this 'narrow boat' was not narrow. There was no need to copy the British boats exactly, as the Erie Canal had locks that were 300 feet long and 45 feet wide.

Their design was for a boat that was only 42 feet long but 10 feet wide. This produced a very compact craft that was easy to manoeuvre, roomy and comfortable inside. Externally it possessed the looks and charm of a British boat, but with a much more spacious interior. Although short by UK standards, it packed in as much accommodation as a 60-foot narrow boat.

In the winter of 1986 they began building *Skaneateles I* and she went into service in the summer of 1987. The company was already working on a second hire boat of similar design, Otisco, which began operating in the autumn (sorry, the fall) of that same year. From that time onwards Peter's company built a new boat every year until the early 1990s.

From 1991 onwards they began selling the original boats to another company operating at the eastern end of the Erie Canal and replacing them with new boats constructed in their boatyard in the beautiful town of Skaneateles (pronounced somewhat like 'skinny-atlas') beside the lake of the same name.

During my visit I tried to gain an impression of the man whose drive had done so much to regenerate the wonderful resource of the Erie Canal. Friends and family described him as energetic, dynamic, entrepreneurial and determined. I'm sure he was all those things. But I also detected a genuine warmth and admiration for this remarkable man. More than one member of the family remarked that he and I would have got on well together. I'm sure that's true.



Boats from the original Peter Wiles' fleet, now operated on the eastern section, by the Erie-Champlain Canal Boat Co. based at Waterford NY

This charming period house was originally a hostel and bar for the labourers

The fleet run by Peter's company – Mid-Lakes Navigation – now contains eleven boats and operates from its own marina at Macedon NY. Sadly, Peter did not live to see the completion of the fleet with the introduction of *Otisco II* launched in 2001. He died a month after his 67th birthday in July 1995, and was survived by his widow, Harriet. She had been the stalwart home-maker throughout the exciting years of struggle and growth. They both had the satisfaction of knowing that the company passed into the capable hands of the next generation of the Wiles family.

The sons, Peter Jr and Dan and the daughters Sarah, Libby and Hattie are all involved in the running of the company. Apart from being a lot of fun, they are people of tremendous integrity and do great credit to their remarkable parents. It is particularly pleasing to think that the canals of Britain have had some involvement in this true expression of the American Dream. C&R

The original canal builders forced a way through hundreds of miles of wilderness

Next month Leo and Cassandra travel the western reaches of the Erie Canal on a boat belonging to the Mid-Lakes fleet.