

# Ohio and Erie Canal Fact Sheet

## Canal Boats

1. Three kinds of canal boats traveled the Ohio and Erie Canal: freight, passenger and state maintenance boats.
2. A team of three horses or mules pulled canal boats. Mule skimmers had the job of managing the team. They walked alongside the team to make sure the animals kept going. Freight boats often carried an extra team of mules in their middle cabins.
3. The captain usually owned the canal boat and often lived aboard with his family. A 9x12-ft. cabin, located near the stern of the boat, served as the family's home. Captains often could be distinguished from the rest of a crew by appearance, as they sometimes wore military-style jackets and stovepipe hats. Mothers and daughters often performed the domestic activities of the boat such as preparing meals or washing clothes in the canal.
4. Young males often served as mule skimmers. Parents tied the youngest children to a post located in the center of the boat to prevent them from falling into the canal.
5. Outgoing freight boats carried farm products and raw materials that often eventually reached markets in the eastern United States. Freight included wheat, corn, flour, whiskey, pork, coal and timber. Incoming boats carried manufactured goods and consumer products such as nails, glass, cloth, salt, coffee and tea.
6. Passenger boats, also called packet boats, transported 40 to 60 passengers. The boats were enclosed and generally possessed a row of windows along each side of the boat. If you spent the night on a passenger boat, your bed was a berth attached to the cabin wall that was stacked three beds high.
7. For navigational and safety purposes, canal boats carried large oil lamps to illuminate the deck after dark.
8. Canal boats measured 14 feet in width and stretched up to 80 feet in length.
9. While traveling through the town of Peninsula, Ohio, aboard a canal boat, one may have caught a glimpse of Robert Andrew in a boatyard as he put the final coat of paint on a recently completed canal boat. Painters brushed the traditional white colored paint on the boat's hull and cabins. The colors red, green or black generally were reserved for the boat's trim and decorations.

## Laws Along the Canal

1. Canal owners avoided speeding fines by traveling slower than the 4-mph speed limit enacted by the State of Ohio to protect the canal banks from erosion.
2. Boat owners proudly displayed their boats' names on their stern. The practice involved more than an owner's pride, however, and actually was required by law. According to Ohio law, a boat was required to have its name and home port "painted in some conspicuous and permanent part of the outside of the boat, in letters of at least four inches in height." Examples of boat names that traveled the Ohio Canal are *State of Ohio*, *St. Helena*, *Two Sisters* and *Monticello II*.

 **Locking Through**

1. Traveling the section of the Ohio and Erie Canal between Akron and Cleveland required boats to pass through 44 locks. Locks raised or lowered the canal boats from one level of the canal to another. The steersman had the job of making sure that the boat did not bump into the walls of the lock, which could have resulted in great damage to the canal boat or the lock's masonry.
2. In November 1834, President John Q. Adams wrote of the experience of "locking through" on the Ohio and Erie Canal: "The most uncomfortable part of our navigation is caused by the careless and unskillful steering of the boat in and through the locks, which seemed to be numberless, upwards of 200 of them on the canal. The boat scarcely escapes a heavy thump on entering every one of them. She strikes and grazes against their sides, and staggers along like a stumbling nag."
3. Boats traveled north and south along the canal; however, only one boat could pass through a lock at any one time. This meant that people often had to wait to move through a lock. According to Ohio law, the upstream boat had the right-of-way into locks. Canal owners, however, did not always respect the right-of-way. Competitions for the right-of-way sometimes occurred among mule skimmers, who grabbed long poles called pikes and climbed atop the lock gates for a joust. The skimmer remaining atop the lock gates won both the competition and first access to the lock.

 **Accounts of Traveling on a Packet Boat**

1. Here is one passenger's description of a trip aboard a boat, which had a gentlemen's cabin, a ladies' cabin and dressing room, a barroom and a kitchen: "Into this space were stowed 35 men, 19 women and 10 children. ... During the day, the beds, consisting of mattresses, sheets, pillows and cotton quilts, were pile one above another. ... The smell of animal effluvia, when they were unpacked, was truly horrid ... they were saturated with the perspiration of every individual who had used them since the commencement of the season." Excerpted from *Ohio and Its People*, George W. Knepper, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1989, pg. 155.
2. After a trip aboard a packet boat, American author Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote in *The Canal Boat* about experience. He described time aboard the boat as being "so tiresome ... that we [the passengers] were driven to the most childish expedients for amusement."
3. One event that Hawthorne found humorous enough to mention was the story of Anon, a Virginian schoolteacher. Anon failed to duck when the captain warned about an upcoming low bridge. In Hawthorne's words, Anon "was saluted by the said bridge on knowledge box." After the passengers discovered no harm had been done, Hawthorne remembered that they "exchanged glances and laughed quietly."
4. Hawthorne described the sleeping quarters for passengers aboard a packet boat in the following passage: "The crimson curtain being let down between the ladies and gentlemen, the cabin became a bed-chamber for 20 persons, who were laid on shelves, one above another. For a long time, our various incommodities kept us all awake, except for five or six, who were accustomed to sleep nightly amid the uproar of their own snoring, and had little to dread from any species of disturbance."
5. Hawthorne described the bunk in which he slept as "hardly so wide as a coffin. I turned suddenly over during the middle of the night and fell like an avalanche on the floor, to the disturbance of the whole community of sleepers."
6. Canal workers waited for their boats to be raised or lowered by locks. Stores and taverns sprang up near locks. The building that is now Canal Visitor Center, located near Lock 38, served as a tavern and store. Members aboard boats took advantage of the opportunity to restock on food and other supplies, as mule skimmers took a rest from a long day of walking.

 **General Information About Life at This Time**

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1. Ohio became a state in 1803.
2. Prior to settlement, the land was generally forestland. Many settlers came to Ohio as farmers and had to clear trees to build houses and create fields.
3. Settlements grew around the canal. They included canal-related businesses such as boat-building yards in the villages of Boston and Peninsula.
4. The canal changed economic conditions for farmers. Before the canal, they mostly lived in log cabins. Poor transportation made access to markets to buy and sell goods difficult. People grew or made much of what they needed, or they bartered for necessities. With the canal, people could more easily ship their farm products to market, as well as buy consumer goods.
5. Life expectancy was much shorter than ours. Diseases were common. Malaria, a disease spread by mosquitoes, posed one of the most serious of threats. Those who contracted the disease often noted symptoms of severe chills and high fevers.
6. Deaths of children were common, too, touching many families. Most people died at home rather than in hospitals.