

# **Cleveland's First Infrastructure: The Ohio & Erie Canal from George Washington to Alfred Kelley A Multi-Media Presentation**

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“Cleveland's First Infrastructure: the Ohio & Erie Canal, from George Washington to Alfred Kelley,” is a web site funded by the Cleveland Section of the American Society of Civil Engineers and hosted by Special Collections at the Cleveland State University Library, at <http://web.ulib.csuohio.edu/SpecColl/canal/>. This presentation will tour the site and explain the significance of the Ohio & Erie canal to the changing landscape of the early Western Reserve and its two major cities: Cleveland and Akron. There are four parts to the presentation.

*Discussing A Passage:* The importance of a passage from Lake Erie to the Ohio River was recognized by America's founding fathers, including surveyor and engineer George Washington, who traveled to the Ohio River valley in 1753. Once the French and Indian Wars and the American Revolutionary War had ended, Washington and others again turned their gaze toward these waterways.

*Planning the Canal:* Concerned with the economic prosperity of their new state, Ohio business and political leaders of the late 1810s and early 1820s looked to the successful Erie Canal project in neighboring New York for a model of internal improvement. The leaders, including Cleveland's Alfred Kelley, commissioned surveyors to determine possible routes. While the surveyors charted territory and measured water levels, political leaders considered the economic interests of the populations they represented.

*Building the Canal:* In 1825, work began on the Ohio & Erie Canal. A massive operation of grubbing and clearing, ditch digging, and the construction of the intricate system of hydraulic locks, aqueducts and culverts, and slackwaters challenged engineers and laborers working in a mostly wilderness state. When the last section was completed, these men and women had created the first true infrastructure linking together the village of Cleveland on Lake Erie, interior towns such as Akron, Navarre, Chillicothe, and Columbus (via a feeder canal), and the town of Portsmouth on the Ohio River.

*The Canal Era:* The new canal changed the natural and social landscape through which it carried passengers and cargo. Industries grew near locks, taking advantage of the power generated by water spill off. Land values rose and speculation ensued. At the Portage Summit, where a staircase of 17 locks carried boats the distance of a mile and a half to cross between the Great Lakes and Mississippi River drainage basins, Akron businesses thrived. Positioned at the juncture of Lake Erie and the Ohio & Erie Canal, Cleveland's status as an important port grew, as did its population and industry. Further inland, farmers were able to get their produce to market on a regular basis, bringing cash and luxury goods into their homes and towns.