Biographical Note: Erie Canal Bicentennial Research Project

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"Certain Heavy Scales Fell Off My Eyes": William Seward, the Erie Canal, and the Making of a Whig Identity

I have been to the wedding — the wedding where blue-eyed Lake Erie was the bride and the old salt sea was the groom. They tried for a long time to forbid the bans, but the ring was put on at last and can never be taken off again.
~ William Henry Seward, 1851

In the unlikely event that historians were convened and asked to create a list enumerating and ranking the accomplishments of William Henry Seward (1801-1872), it is doubtful that his role in advancing the Erie Canal would crack their top ten. It might not even factor into the first twenty selections. This is understandable: in a career spanning almost half a century, Seward is much better remembered for his long track record as an anti-slavery statesman as well as his place beside Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War. Through the decades and offices held, historians recount Seward's expansionism, encapsulated by his so-called "folly" of the 1867 Alaska Purchase; they reflect on his doomed 1860 presidential run followed, in defeat, by his integral service as Secretary of State in Lincoln's "Team of Rivals" cabinet. At the Seward House Museum in Auburn, NY, visitors are shown visual reminders of the Seward family's abolitionist stand, touring the space in the home used as a stop on the Underground Railroad. Elsewhere, a coterie of scholars have written at length about Seward's foreign policy, his legal career, his connections to Harriet Tubman, and even the intimate details of his personal and domestic life. By contrast, very few examiners have lingered overlong on his relationship with the Erie Canal. Even for those that do, the topic tends to serve as a perfunctory prelude. The canal leads quickly to a broader discussion of Seward's generalized support for Antebellum internal improvements.[1]

But a closer look reveals something instructive. While Seward was too young to have played any significant role in the original debates over establishing the Erie Canal, the final

project nevertheless proved extremely impactful. Indeed, it ultimately shaped his long trajectory in public life. Coming of age politically in his teens and early twenties—the son of a Jeffersonian, slaveholding, patrician farmer from downstate New York—he inherited a framework of conservative ideals, including a strong antipathy for the viability of the massive state-sponsored canal. To impress his father, he parroted popular derisions of "Clinton's Ditch" and affiliated himself with Governor DeWitt Clinton's antagonists in the Bucktail faction of New York's Democratic Party.

Then Seward experienced the Erie Canal for himself. Riding it westward for the first time at age 21, he felt the world shift under his feet. As he recorded in his memoirs some fifty years later: "Certain heavy scales fell from my eyes as I descended from the wharf and entered the packet-boat that was to convey me on the Erie Canal (which two years before I had pronounced impracticable) eighty miles to Weedsport, the landing-place for Auburn." Once removed, the "heavy scales" imposed during his upbringing would never again skew his perceptions. Like many awestruck New Yorkers of his modernizing age, Seward underwent an extraordinary internal revolution. Where he had once opposed and mocked the canal as an "impractical" abstraction, after his first direct contact he wholeheartedly embraced it. Unlike most of his contemporaries, however, Seward positioned himself to act upon this dramatic reversal. Elected to the State Senate in 1830 and as Governor of New York in 1838, Seward emerged as a champion of the Erie Canal. He advocated tirelessly for deepening and extending the waterway, eventually claiming the mantle as DeWitt Clinton's true heir.[2]

The canal also became a gateway for Seward during his formative period in New York politics. It provided the intellectual ballast for his identity as a key founding member of the Whig Party. From the core convictions favoring direct state intervention in infrastructure, Seward

sketched out a broader positive vision for government. The same impetus that drove Seward to grow the Erie Canal spurred him to justify using state power to open pathways for immigration, resist slavery, and invest in an expansive portfolio of public projects. Long after his last battles for funding were over in Albany, Seward continued to fight for the canal, specifically its place in public memory. Elevated to the U.S. Senate in 1849, and installed as Secretary of State in 1861, he repeatedly invoked the Erie Canal in his oratory. Seward carefully honed and crafted his version of the canal's history for ever-expanding national audiences. A talented wordsmith who eventually drafted Lincoln's famous inaugural line about "mystic chords of memory," he grasped the power of drawing inspiration from the past as well as selectively gleaning lessons for the future. At present, as the Erie Canal commemorates its bicentennial, a revaluation of Seward's history with it seems well overdue. [3]

Fig. 1 The Seward House Museum in Auburn, New York.

From Canal Critic to Convert: Origins

The odds must have seemed very small that the fourth of six children of Samuel and Mary Seward would ever grow up to become a progressive defender of anything. *Small* was also

the operative word frequently used to describe this boy: William Henry Seward, born on May 16, 1801 in the rural hamlet of Florida in New York's Orange County. Although measurement accounts vary, as a grown man he stood barely more than five feet tall. Combined with frequent bouts of poor health, the diminutive child—commonly called by his middle name—was of little use on the family's sizable farm estate.[4]

Fortunately for Henry, the combination of his older and younger brothers proved more hale and adept at working the land. On the other hand, enslaved people likely completed the hardest tasks for the Seward family. While New York passed an emancipation law in 1799, two years before Henry's birth, the act only gradually conferred freedom over decades and forced the children of enslaved New Yorkers into a reclassified form of indentured bondage to age 25 for males and 28 for females. Samuel Seward took full advantage of the extended timeline. The 1820 census listed seven enslaved people in his household. For his part, Henry seemed almost inured against the institution's daily cruelties. "[M]y parents never uttered before me a word of disapproval of slavery," Seward admitted in his older age. Likewise, as a boy he was taught to believe that escape attempts by the enslaved were "just as inexcusable and ungrateful toward their masters as it would have been in me to bring dishonor upon my parents."[5]

Under his roof, Samuel embodied the stern values of an old world patriarchy carrying over from the 18th century. Henry's father could be an exacting disciplinarian, quick with the rod to his children and firmly subscribed to the belief that "man alone ruled the family and projected authority." Samuel expected—and received—rapt obedience from all of his subordinates, prizing such deference over emotional attachment. In memoirs Seward recalled finding more "affectionate" relationships in the enslaved quarters of his childhood home than his

father's orbit. "What wonder," he later mused, "that I found their apartment more attractive than the parlor, and their conversation a relief from the severe decorum which prevailed there?"[6]

The politics of the Seward home in Florida were as clear cut as its patriarchal ties. Samuel enjoyed minor patronage appointments and aligned himself with the party of Thomas Jefferson—just two months into his first term as President when Henry was born. Along with certain pro-slavery leanings in childhood, Seward described being "brought up in the Jeffersonian Democratic Party," an affiliation chosen for him "from the influence of tradition and personal association." Part of ascribing to the standards of Jefferson and Madison meant being avowedly anti-Federalist. The son imitated the father's distrust of Hamiltonian centralized power in general, preferring less state involvement for an individual rights-based ideology. In essence, as Seward later recalled: "My father and his associates explained to me in this way… [Federalists] really desired a stronger and even monarchial government." Large government was to be feared and avoided at all costs, lest the victory of the revolution be squandered.[7]

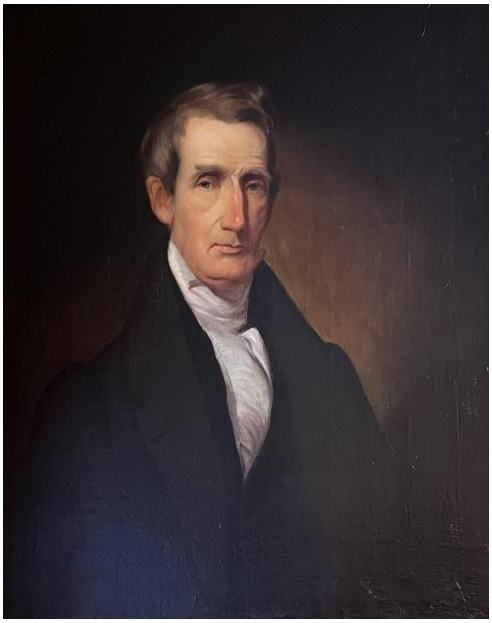

Fig. 2 Samuel Seward, mid-19th century, by artist William Morgan. Courtesy of the Seward House Museum.

Seward gained a modicum of distance from his father shortly after turning fifteen. Leaving his more strapping brothers behind on the farm, the bright, bookish, and outgoing youth was admitted to Union College in Schenectady, where Samuel paid to enroll him to study law. The autumn 1816 journey was as arduous as it was intimidating: a stagecoach ride from Florida to Newburgh, a steamboat along the Hudson to Albany, and finally another coach transporting him overland on "a potholed road with only the occasional roadside tavern to break the monotony." Despite the difficulty of getting Henry to campus, the Seward family (read: Samuel) evinced little enthusiasm for the massive transportation project then being debated in Albany and across New York. The idea of connecting the state's natural bodies of water through a man-made artery traced back for generations but had gained serious traction through the rise of DeWitt Clinton. Not long after Seward arrived at Union, Clinton—the former U.S. Senator, Mayor of New York, and Federalist Presidential candidate—won election for the first of four terms as Governor. His pet project, the Erie Canal, was dismissed as "madness" by Thomas Jefferson and ridiculed as "Clinton's Ditch" by hostile opponents. The same sentiments were echoed by Samuel Seward and handed down to his sons for loyal repetition.[8]

Henry Seward entered college excited to take part in these same debates, and to represent his father's position. The latter proved immediately challenging. Under the leadership of President Eliphalet Nott, the Union College of the 1810s earned a reputation for liberal reformism, friendly to causes like anti-slavery and temperance. (Samuel evidently selected the school for cost over political affinity). Henry, a self-identified "Madisonian," complained in a letter to his father that it was "almost heresy" at Union to support Jefferson's Virginia Dynasty successor to the White House. Despite its leanings, the polarized campus divided along factional lines during Seward's time, with competing debate societies organized by students to mirror a

growing national and sectional schism. Seward joined the minority Adelphic Society more congenial to his conservative viewpoints.[9]

Samuel must have been pleased by his son's efforts. On behalf of the Adelphic, Henry attacked internal improvements as calamitous acts of state overreach. In one particularly strident debate against the Erie Canal he argued that "even if it should be successfully constructed, it would financially ruin the state." Separately he harangued the proposed waterway as an "idle dream" and lamented the "stain" Governor Clinton brought to his office. Despite his barbs, one gathers that Seward failed to sway many of his classmates. In one irate letter to his father, Henry grumbled about how the "Big Ditch has made so many proselytes here to the Clintonian creed."[10]

For all his apparent struggles to persuade his fellow students on the fallacy of canals, Seward experienced no equivalent academic difficulties. He graduated in 1820 with high marks, full accolades, and the honor of delivering a commencement address. The nineteen-year-old Seward, taking the stage mere months after the passage of the Missouri Compromise created, in his phrasing, "a new line of alienation" on campus, sought to promote unity. Rather hopefully (if not decisively), his address predicted "that the American Union will probably be permanent" and, in that interest, he avoided the polarizing rhetoric of the college's vitriolic debate societies. On the loathsome Erie Canal, Seward demurred. He did not utter a single word on the subject, at least not directly. Between the lines, however, he cautioned—somewhat vaguely—against the "imperious mandates on private citizens" risked by "consolidation of the powers of the nation."[11]

Perhaps Seward's canal omission was more cannily strategic than conciliatory. During his college years, "Clinton's Ditch" evolved from a contested hypothetical to an established fact. Built in sections starting in 1817, construction for the artificial waterway ultimately stretched for 363 miles. All early indicators were favorable for Clinton: his engineers continuously pulled off

incredible feats as workers steadily dug a 40-foot wide trench; the first tolls were collected in 1820, filling state coffers; a year later, service opened as far west from New York City as Utica and Little Falls. Even some of Clinton's most trenchant critics were softening their derogatory attacks about the "Ditch" in response to its canal's successes and popularity. As one Clintonite crowed, Democrats muted themselves "in a twinkling of time," reconciled to the Erie Canal's inevitability if not to the leadership of its gubernatorial patron. Reading these changes from Schenectady, young Seward followed suit.[12]

Regardless of his take on the political landscape, "Clinton's Ditch" remained more abstraction than reality for Seward upon his graduation. Avoiding contact with the canal again, he departed Schenectady bound for the east: first an apprenticeship to a local law practice back in Orange County and then, in 1821, a plumb position in a Manhattan firm which necessitated a move to New York City. There he rubbed elbows in elite social and professional circles. One mentor in the city was considered "the best practitioner at the New York bar" while another had read law under Alexander Hamilton. Samuel could hardly approve of the latter, but could not question his son's promising rise in the legal profession.[13]

The metropolis beckoned out to Seward with an exciting life of theater, balls, literary societies, private clubs, new friendships, possible courtships, and youthful excess. New York was equally a bastion of Tammany Hall and Democratic politics, in particular the anti-Clintonian branch of the party associated with Martin Van Buren. Through the machinations of his powerful Regency, "the Red Fox of Kinderhook" enjoyed exorbitant influence over the city and across large swathes of the downstate electorate. Like his father, Henry Seward readily embraced Van Buren's platform, including its aversion to public support for the canal. "Committed by my early training to the support of that faction," Seward later conceded, "I was so far prejudiced against

Mr. Clinton." This meant identifying with the so-called "Bucktail Democrats," Van Burenites who wore literal deer tails in their hats to outwardly display their allegiance. According to one observer's report, young Seward was not only a true believer in party politics but vindictive: "a thorough-going Bucktail—dealing out unmeasured censure to those who deviated from that faith." A major part of this involved condemning the canal with a party line, as Seward framed it, that "presented an alarming picture of debt, taxation, and bankruptcy."[14]

Everything changed one year later. In the fall of 1822, for reasons that are still obscure, Seward decided to travel to Utica to sit for the bar examination. More accurately, Samuel decided to send his son west. In his autobiography Seward recalled that, "My father furnished me with the necessary means of travelling to Utica for examination in the Supreme Court, and return." The prodigal son did indeed return, though only briefly. In addition to passing the bar in Utica, he quietly took advantage of the discretionary travel allowance "to explore the western part of the state with a view to my establishment there." In the east, the prestige of employment in New York firms often came without a commensurate salary; there, Seward was one of many hungry young lawyers in a crowded throng. He complained of money woes, lamenting that well before his earnings cleared the bank they were "already expended in keeping up with my proper state in society."[15]

If New York City and the surrounding region felt overcrowded, competitive, and miserly in terms of compensation, the west appeared to be booming. Thanks in large part to the ongoing Erie Canal construction, the frontier beckoned with the promise of quick fortunes for those willing to pursue risk in fast-growing pioneer settlements. From Auburn, some eighty miles further west from Utica, a pair of lucrative offers reached Seward after his initial exploratory mission. Either would substantially elevate his financial standing. Samuel, of course, had to be

talked into it; hungry for internal improvements, the west was Clintonian country, and Henry's removal threatened to place him beyond the reach of direct control. In the end, the prospects were too tempting to resist. Henry ultimately secured paternal permission (and a gift of fifty dollars) "with the assurance of his constant expectation that I should come back again too soon." Other than occasional, obligatory visits, he never did.[16]

From Canal Critic to Convert: Fallen Scales

For the 21-year-old Seward, going westward was as much about means as ends. The physical process of getting to Central New York all-but-required him to finally confront the reality of what he previously attacked only in the abstract: Clinton's much-maligned canal. The central portion of the canal, started first, had been completed by the time Seward needed to travel to Utica, and he availed himself. Even semi-finished, Clinton's waterway reduced shipping and travel costs by nearly 90 percent and slashed travel time almost as dramatically—shrinking the burden from weeks to days for those looking to traverse the width of New York. (Before the canal, an overland trip from Albany to Buffalo took 32 days; after its completion, the time was cut to five). If Seward hesitated to journey via packet-boat along the dubious "Ditch," he made no comment about his act of expeditious hypocrisy.[17]

For Seward, the power of the transportation revolution embodied by the canal struck him as a life-altering revelation. To his credit, he acknowledged the epiphany that reversed a (short) lifetime of contrarian opposition. Perhaps because his mind was sufficiently young and malleable enough to be open to change, perhaps because he had finally attained critical distance from his father, he permitted himself to be wholly moved by the new experience. More than that, the Erie Canal activated a radical metamorphosis of character and beliefs. Almost literally, the Seward

who stepped off his first packet boat at Weedsport, eight miles north of Auburn, was not the same person who boarded at the wharf. Writing about this transformation half a century later in the early 1870s, Seward remained mesmerized by that inaugural Erie Canal journey. The "heavy scales" he described falling "from my eyes" provided not only new sight; their removal initiated the kind of instant conversion usually associated with revival movements like the Second Great Awakening (which would also be spread west along the canal lines).[18]

Fig. 3 "Canal Scene," undated, by artist William Bruce. Courtesy of the Seward House Museum.

While Auburn was Seward's destination, he could not help himself from exploring the canal pathway to its western terminus, nor to exploring its greater significance. He did both in 1824, inviting his parents to inspect his situation in Cayuga County and join a travelling party to Niagara Falls. Whether the accompanying Samuel shared any of his son's newfound enthusiasm went unremarked upon, although he might have wryly noted how carriages still had to be hired

since the canal remained incomplete. By contrast, the journey west only deepened Henry's altered convictions. Bearing witness to the rapid growth of the state along the Rochester-Buffalo corridor, much of it conducted through free labor, reaffirmed a rebellion from the ideals of his father. The apotheosis came when the group toured the canal harbor under development in Buffalo. As Seward reflected:

> My mind, for the first time, swelled with a large though by no means complete conception of the grandeur and beneficence of the system of internal improvements in which my native State was then so deeply engaged, but without support or sympathy from the Federal Government… Whatever doubts I had before entertained in regard to the direction of my political course, I now determined to give my best efforts to the achievement of an enterprise which, while it would greatly exalt the State of New York, would tend to increase immeasurably the wealth, prosperity, and greatness, of the whole republic.

All erstwhile "doubts" now banished, Seward pledged himself to a new political vision of his own choosing, one he would adopt with or without his father's blessing.[19]

Too much can be made of the transformative potential of western migration. Since Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his famous "frontier thesis" in 1893, generations of historians have debated and critiqued his arguments that continual westward movement created, defined, and regenerated American democracy. And, although there is good reason to question Turner's broad claim that frontiers meant "perennial rebirth" for the (predominantly white) pioneers pushing borders, in the very specific case of William Seward there is some truth to Turner's logic. Seward did reinvent himself as a result of his Erie Canal sojourn; he underwent an interior revolution of the mind and heart. Tellingly, in later years when young men in Auburn approached him seeking advice for how to succeed, he repeated the well-worn adage about which direction to go. "[S]ettle in a county town," he urged, "in the county and not in the great cities, and better to settle in a *new* county than an old one."[20]

It helped that the Erie Canal brought Seward not only to a "new county," but a propitious situation. Founded in 1793 and incorporated as a village in 1815, Auburn epitomized the western boomtowns sprouting up along the longitudinal axis of the canal. While industry, capital, agriculture, and land speculation flourished, one of its most lucrative areas of growth potential lay in the law. "Lawyers were among the earliest purveyors of the frontier," according to economic historian Scott Anderson. "[W]hen Auburn was made county seat in 1807, the lawyers drifted in from the margins and gave the county a prosperous urban core." The money they made in building the frontier's legal infrastructure augmented further as the proprietors invested in real estate, commercial property, mills, and manufacturing. Seward's employer Elijah Miller (the man who had extended the more enticing of those two original offers), was effectively already royalty when Seward arrived. An unusually tall man at 6 '4" in stature, Miller stood as Seward's opposite. But he was also a fellow downstate transplant, from Westchester County, as well as a lawyer by training who settled in Cayuga County in 1795 and began profiting at once. His law practice thrived, he became a judge, and his wealth intermingled with nearly every other industry in town. Recently widowed, in 1816 he broke ground on what would emerge as the finest—and first brickmade—house in Auburn for himself and his daughters.[21]

Seward began work in Miller's practice in the winter of 1823. He ingratiated himself to his benefactor and distinguished himself in the courthouse, where he "shocked the bar" by trying his own cases at a time when younger lawyers were "generally in the habit of employing their elder brethren" for formal proceedings. Seeking to secure Seward's talents, in 1824 Miller offered him a partnership, a promotion that brought a guaranteed income and elevated status. Seward countered, asking Miller for his permission to marry the younger of his two daughters, Frances Adeline. Four years apart in age, the two had enjoyed a courtship under her father's

watchful gaze. Miller, in turn, agreed to bless the union in exchange for an additional concession of his own: the couple would have to live in his house indefinitely. They agreed, wedding and then cohabitating alongside Miller—where he presided as the dominant figure over their domestic sphere. Once again, a towering patriarchal figure loomed over Seward. As he relayed to his own jealous father back in Orange County: "Judge Miller has adopted [me] as a son."[22]

Fortunately for Seward's new worldview, his father-in-law's politics aligned nicely. Born into a large Quaker family, Miller possessed few of Samuel's conservative inclinations: he sent his daughters to progressive boarding schools, defended the rights of Native Americans in court, had no love for slavery, and battled with the state's stingy Democratic-Republicans. Miller was also an avid supporter of canals, and an investor in private canal companies. According to his biographer, the Judge "had always been a warm friend of internal improvements of every kind." Not surprisingly, he encouraged his son-in-law's admiration for the Erie Canal and gladly nurtured Seward's transformation in general.[23]

The majority of Auburn shared their pro-canal opinions. Throughout the debates around the feasibility of Clinton's vision, the community overwhelmingly favored the state investment; once the project had begun, powerful citizens like Miller even lobbied to route it locally. As Seward recollected, "while the work on the Erie Canal was in progress, the people of Auburn had made unavailing efforts to have that great channel of commerce pass through the village." Despite their disappointment at being rebuffed by engineers, Auburnians celebrated the canal's completion with all due fanfare. In October 1825 the village emptied out, travelling north *en masse* to Weedsport to revel during Governor Clinton's ceremonial "wedding of the waters" passage. Seward remembered a glorious scene of "salutes, bonfires, and fireworks" receiving Clinton as his packet boat, *Seneca Chief*, wound its way from Buffalo to New York City.[24]

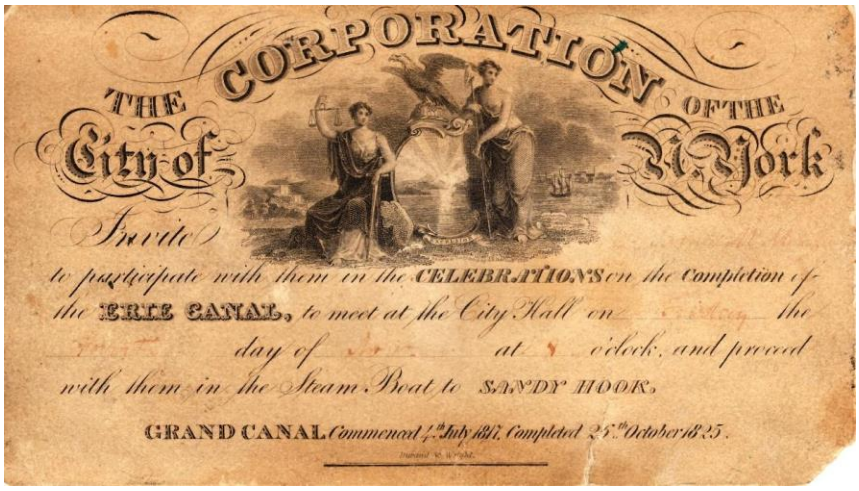

Fig. 4 Ticket from Erie Canal Opening, 1825. Courtesy of the Erie Canal Museum.

Seward did more than bask in mutual canal enthusiasm with his neighbors, however. As his standing rose in Auburn, he played an increasingly visible role as a civic leader empowered to act. By 1827, at age 26, he assumed the rank of colonel in the local militia and became a member of the vestry in the Episcopal Church. Thanks to his father-in-law pulling some strings, a private canal company hired him to become secretary of their organization. Miller dedicated some ten years and sank considerable money into an enterprise that became the Auburn and Owasco Canal Company, and he brought Seward into the boardroom. The assignment: link the community to the Erie Canal via the Owasco outlet and the digging of a lateral canal north to the main line. Seward advocated and angled for the extension, busying himself with a schedule of "meetings, surveys, and legislative applications." Before long, the scope of the project grew even more ambitious. The investors proposed "to dig another canal south from Owasco Lake through the moraine debris below Moravia to the watershed of the Susquehanna River, linking Auburn directly with the Chesapeake Bay, Baltimore, and possibly even Pittsburgh." For a shining moment, Auburnians dreamed of residing in the center of a canal hub, and Seward threw himself in the middle of trying to make it happen.[25]

Progress on the Auburn and Owasco Canal moved slowly. The northern extension alone required a 38-foot dam to raise the outlet to the level of the lake and establish a navigable channel. And this did not account for any treacherous digging towards the marshlands at Montezuma. Nevertheless, Seward faithfully pitched a vision "that mills and manufactories would at once spring up in the town" while steam vessels "would bring lumber, grain, wool, etc. down the lake." In this scenario, Auburn could keep up with—if not exceed—the growth pace of canal ports like Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo. Convinced by boosters like Seward, Scott Anderson writes, "Many citizens believed that Auburn would become the state capital." Until such time as that displacement, Seward trained an eager eye on Albany. As delays compounded at home, and buoyed by Miller's money and clout behind him, he considered taking a giant step forward onto the political stage.[26]

Canals and the Making of a New York Whig

The "lines of alienation" that Seward previously detected at college hardened as the 1820s approached their conclusion. Nationally, the close of the Monroe administration ended an age of founding rule and ignited a new political cycle personified by the populist challenges of Andrew Jackson. In New York, Seward lamented, "the Jackson party were in possession of unlimited sway." Van Buren's Democratic machine—to which Seward once professed fealty—had evolved into a monolith. Seward described the Regency controlling the state "with an iron rod," regarding them as a "central junta [that] had but to touch the springs at Albany, to produce any desired movement in the remotest corner of the state." Although no longer clad in bucktail accoutrement, the party's hostility to canals and internal improvements remained inopportunely intact at a time when Auburn desperately needed state support for its ventures.[27]

Amid the turbulence of the Jacksonian revolution, DeWitt Clinton, the father of the Erie Canal, represented an appealing oppositional alternative. Early in 1828 Seward travelled to Albany for an audience with the Governor in hopes of securing an appointed position. He also took the occasion to soak in meeting a man who had risen to hero status in his estimation. “I had come to regard Mr. Clinton with combined sentiments of reverence for the chief magistracy of the State, and of profound admiration for his eminent talents,” Seward recalled. “He appreciated zeal and devotion to the political principles and interests he represented.” Unfortunately, as Seward discovered, the Governor’s “zeal and devotion” were wavering. Facing tough reelection prospects, and with his own survival at stake, Clinton struck a deal with Van Buren to support Andrew Jackson in a rematch contest against incumbent President John Quincy Adams. For Seward, the price of gubernatorial patronage meant falling into line. A great admirer of Adams, he refused and forfeited the chance. Tragedy followed indignity when Clinton died just a few weeks after his Faustian bargain. As Seward mournfully rued: “he escaped a trial of the consequences of the change of political associations… dead of apoplexy in his residence at the capital.” Forsaking grudges, Seward vowed to pick up the mantle. “For myself,” he later reflected, “I persevered in following the policy of Clinton now that he was dead.”[28]

Although crushing, Jackson’s defeat of Adams in 1828 further galvanized Seward’s political determination. Regretting what he called his previous “weakness in desiring to be nominated for a subordinate civil place,” he decided to appeal directly to voters and stand for election in the 1830 midterms. With no official singular anti-Jacksonian party in place, Seward first appeared on the ballot as an Anti-Masonic candidate. Grounded in conspiratorial origins, the Anti-Masons possessed the virtue of availability. They were, Seward conceded, “of local origin, and acting in a limited field, for several years…formed the only opposition in Western New

York to the Albany regency and the Jackson administration." Under the Anti-Masonic banner, the Auburn neophyte ran on a Clintonian platform for a Jacksonian age. His supporters promoted a man prepared to step "fearlessly into the opposition" and poised to emerge as "its acknowledged leader." His advocacy for expanding canals in particular enabled Seward to win a state senate seat in a district previously captured by Jackson.[29]

With the Erie Canal closed for the winter season, Seward suffered the longer stagecoach journey to Albany to take up residency and assume his seat. From the start, he emerged as a curiosity to colleagues in the legislature: his raw youth—Seward announced himself as "the youngest member that ever entered the New York Senate"—suggested an ambition unmatched by his affiliation with the inchoate movement. It did not help that he was mired in an extreme minority position; out of a body of 32 senators, Seward was just one of seven Anti-Masons in a chamber dominated by Regency Democrats. Undaunted, the backbencher felt sufficiently emboldened to make a name for himself despite a lack of seniority, just like he had as a young Auburn upstart trying his own cases in court. His efforts drew notice. Thurlow Weed, editor of the anti-Jacksonian *Albany Evening Journal* saw Seward as a figure worth rallying around. Marking him as a prospect for future leadership, Weed praised his "rapidly developing elements of character, which could not fail to render him eminently useful in public life." He was particularly impressed by Seward's appetite for work, which manifested in "a rare capacity for intellectual labor, with an industry which never tired and required no relaxation."[30]

Seward bent much of this focus towards delivering on that most crucial issue with his electorate: canals. Closer to home, this meant continuing to push for public investment for the Owasco and Auburn line, but he also took the opportunity to champion similar projects. Heralding the success of the original Erie Canal, he made the case for "the construction of

branches or tributaries into distant portions of the State," noting that these neglected regions "could justly claim a right, by the construction of such branches, to share the benefits of inland artificial navigation." He attached his name to proposals for extension systems like the Chenango Canal, Black River Canal, Oswego Canal, Seneca & Cayuga Canal, Chemung Canal, and the Genesee Valley Canal. State Senator Seward also argued for improvements for the original canal. He favored enlarging it from forty feet wide and four feet deep to seventy feet wide and seven feet deep. Confident that the canal's returns would outweigh any major investments, he also endorsed upgrading from the initial single locks system to double lockages.[31]

In hindsight, as Seward later wrote in his autobiography, "I never doubted for a moment that the system, as a whole, would defray the entire cost of its construction." The Regency shared little of Seward's sanguinity. On the other hand, Seward had math on his side: he demonstrated how "the productive property of the state" increased by nearly tenfold over the course of almost twenty years. Profits surged from $2,973,617 in 1817 (the year canal construction began) to $22,157,742 by the late 1830s. More than self-sustaining, the Erie Canal enriched New York and was singularly responsible for making it the Empire State. It did not matter. At every key vote, as Seward noted, the Regency majority "defeated the measure." Politics interceded where economics should have prevailed. Seward fumed at how the Jackson administration deliberately "made opposition to that institution a partisan issue." In New York, the Regency repeated the pattern, conflating "Government power to construct works of internal improvement" with "another distinct political issue." Through Jackson and Van Buren, Democrats "advanced rapidly in the line of the policy of 'State rights'... a party of obstruction."[32]

Seward returned to Albany in 1834 prepared not only to finish the final year of his state senate term, but determined to win more than symbolic victories. Jettisoning the Anti-Masons, he

joined a rising new national party, the Whigs, who coalesced as much around a positive vision as a negative reaction to Jackson. They represented some of the old Federalism, supporting Hamiltonian banks and tariffs. Yet the Whigs also built their identity around prescriptive values, namely full support for state-funded internal improvements. Seward happily wrapped himself in the Whig mantle, looking to national figures like Daniel Webster and Henry Clay for inspiration in Albany. He gave a major, two-day long speech from the floor of the state senate chamber in April 1834, staking out his beliefs. Simply entitled "The Six Million Dollar Loan," Seward's oration lashed out against Jackson and the Regency for bankrupting the state. He accused Jacksonians of emptying out Hamilton's national banking system, misallocating the deposits by routing them to smaller "pet banks" loyal to the administration, and causing economic collapse. Worse, Regency Democrats proposed loaning themselves money to staunch their crisis by liquidating canal company stock and looting canal budgets. As a result of the nation's self-inflicted wound, Seward decried: "Manufactories are everywhere struggling to sustain themselves, by contracting their operations. Most of the great western mills have been stopped… the President and his partisans—they are responsible for it all."[33]

The next logical step forward was stepping up. Rather than defend his senate seat, Seward accepted his fledgling party's nomination for Governor. The office had changed hands four times since Clinton's death, and was being defended in 1834 by Regency stalwart William Marcy. He enjoyed the advantages of incumbency and seniority, mocking the 33-year-old Seward's youth and attacking him as a puppet of banking interests. While not avoiding personal mudslinging, the upstart Seward attempted to hue to the issues. He pinned his campaign hopes on support for infrastructure—the true heart of his Whig association. "I am, and ever have been, the advocate of the system of internal improvements by means of railroads and canals,"

candidate Seward expressed in public letters printed in friendly newspapers. “I regard it as one of the most important duties of the government, as fast as its rapidly developing resources will allow, to prosecute such a system of improvements.”[34]

In the end, the popularity of Seward’s canal position could not overcome Jackson’s broader popularity. Marcy bested his rival by some 11,000 votes, running up the score in downstate districts and holding Regency-backed majorities in the legislature. Seward accepted the outcome with grace, and hinted at a possible comeback in his farewell to Albany:

> Do not take any grief for this result on account of my feelings. Be assured that it has not found me unprepared. I shall not suffer any unhappiness in returning to private life… If I live, and such principles and opinions as I entertain ever find favor with the people, I shall not be without their respect.

Even in defeat, Seward took some comfort from the election results. He performed well in the western part of the state, and he claimed for himself de facto leadership status for the Whigs. “They were now a national instead of a local organization,” Seward consoled himself. Time would tell if these principles might “ever find favor with the people.” If so, he would be ready.[35]

“Something More is Wanting”: Beyond the Auburn and Owasco Canal

The prospect of resuming private life was brightened by good news. Seward returned to Auburn in 1835 just as leaders from the Auburn and Owasco Canal Company announced plans to commence work on a 40-foot stone dam. Private capital succeeded where state investment fell short—prominent citizens like Elijah Miller helped raise more than $100,000 to fund the project. As work began, almost the entire village gathered in October for what Seward called an “imposing ceremony” to lay the dam’s cornerstone. Led by a procession of local militia in

regalia, a parade of Auburnians marched together in jubilee. The spectacle concluded at the cornerstone with a speech from Seward.[36]

Surrounded by family, friends, and supporters, Seward stood poised for a comeback moment, pausing to draw breath as cannonade thundered across both sides of the Owasco outlet. He had taken time to prepare his remarks, in some ways a continuation of his campaign themes, in others a barbed denunciation of Marcy and the Democrats. Seward opened with a blistering diatribe attacking the "cupidity" of his anti-canal opponents, hypocrites from "the eastern counties" who enjoyed how "the value of their lands has been enhanced nearly two fold" from the Erie Canal. The irony, he added, remained the persistent and original "jealousy with which they regarded the prosecution of that great work." The very canal they had opposed had made them rich, and yet Regency supporters had not softened their stance on state investment for internal improvements. Far from it, they fought against new investments like the Auburn and Owasco as threats that would "depreciate" their own downstate property. Instead, they clung to tired arguments about "monarchial government" overreach and oppressive taxation. As Seward decried, "Plausible pretexts are never wanted to cover the real odiousness of these sectional jealousies." Eastern Democrats, by resisting canals, wanted to choke off opportunities for western communities to share from the fruits of the Erie Canal's promise. "It is time, fellow citizens," Seward implored, "that we should explode these prejudices."[37]

Seward reserved ample space in his remarks for praising canals. Turning from offense to defense, he lauded the specific merits of the Auburn and Owasco Company while also applauding the general spirit of canal extensions. "Now, in my humble opinion," Seward advanced, "a state can no more wisely conduct its affairs than by contributing to the internal improvement of the territory within its limits." He made clear that he took no issue with private

capitalism per se, qualifying that public support ought to rise "where individual enterprise and capital are insufficient to accomplish a desirable work." Using the Erie Canal as an example, he demonstrated how state investments paid for themselves, usually within a few years, and spread equitable abundance as a matter of course. Where canals went, "individual wealth and national prosperity tend to increase and multiply domestic enjoyments."[38]

Fig. 5 Undated image, "The Big Dam." Courtesy of the Cayuga Museum of History & Art.

On this occasion, Seward went even further in expounding on his ardency for canals, in effect, highlighting how his overall thinking had matured since that first ride. What started as a ceremonial civic speech adopted the fervent tones of a rally. The former state senator urged the adoring crowd to follow his logic as he reached for higher aspirational meaning. "Splendid as will be the results of the work we this day commence, and bright as are the visions of national prosperity dawning upon us," Seward insisted, "it ought to be borne in mind that those results and those prospects are not, and ought not to be, the chief end of our exertions." Here was a bold claim: canals marked only the beginning of the positive role the state should play in advancing the public good. Rather, as Seward posited, "neither the happiness of our people, nor the stability

of our government depends on the length or number of our canals and railroads." Getting to the crux of the matter, he insisted that, "Something more is wanting."[39]

Seward did not hold his audience in suspense about *something* meant. It was nothing less than a vision for an activist state, one that would channel the same generous impulses for the "moral good" of canal-building and "convert them into agents" for the next chapter of "great work." The very spirit that brought the Erie Canal to New York and the new cornerstone to Auburn must be directed to the next vast projects to improve equality: free universal education, public libraries, and other acts of uplift in the name of "liberty." The former state senator brought his remarks to a rousing close with an appeal to posterity. "Better would it be for our successors, that the waters of the Erie and Hudson had pursued their ancient passages to the ocean, strangers to each other," he espoused, than for New York to drop its determination to advance "progress" and direct "mighty improvements of… social conditions." Looking to the future, he imagined "some distant day" when a wanderer might discover the cornerstone and conjure from "oblivion" all who came before during its installation. The duty to these unborn generations was clear to Seward:

> we shall not be judged by the improvements we shall have made in our lakes or our rivers, upon our mountains or in our valleys, nor yet by the wealth we shall have accumulated, or the monuments we shall have reared; but we shall be judged by the indelible impression we shall have left upon the moral condition of our country.

With these words, Seward laid out the basis for a powerful new Whig platform and political identity. Together, they would carry him back to Albany for a second act in state politics.[40]

Canal Governor: "He Found Himself in the Place of DeWitt Clinton"

The ~~road~~ towpath back to Albany was neither easy nor preordained for Seward. He sat out the 1836 election season, which saw Marcy re-elected governor by even larger margins than his contest against Seward. To make ends meet and burnish his western base, Seward took up temporary residence in Chautauqua County as an agent tasked with resolving disputes between settlers and the Holland Land Company. He watched favorable political headwinds gather as Jackson left the White House just as his de-regulatory policies caused an economic panic in 1837—a cascade of banking collapses that landed heavily on President Van Buren's desk. There were setbacks as well as opportunities for the out-of-power Whig. Following its inaugural pomp and circumstance, the Auburn and Owasco Canal venture languished. The recession hit investors hard, a fact that—combined with the rise of railroad competition—sapped spirits and drained budgets. Company managers sold off property along the outlet channel to recoup losses until they were finally forced to abandon the effort altogether while pivoting to the Auburn and Syracuse Railroad.[41]

The trials of the Auburn and Owasco Company did not shake Seward's confidence. After all, as he outlined in his dedication speech during better times, canals signified a manifestation of a larger Whig ideology, one dedicated to using the state as a vessel for "social improvement." He accepted his party's gubernatorial nomination in the fall of 1838, preparing for a rematch and buoyed by the substance of his more cohesive political economy. Marcy lobbed familiar insults at Seward, criticizing his youth (now 37) and branding him a tool of money interests. Fewer of the blows landed amid public unrest over economic contraction. Not taking chances, Seward blanketed the state with newspaper articles and pamphlets about his positions. Echoing the themes he established in his Auburn and Owasco speech, he hammered home an appealing Whig

message: “Especially in hard times, the government must take positive action to stimulate economic recovery.” According to his reasoning, vast public projects like canal extensions “would not only provide jobs but lay the groundwork for future growth.”[42]

The campaign theme resonated. Seward toppled Marcy by roughly the same count he had lost by four years earlier, with canal-hungry western New York carrying him to victory. Headlines from Thurlow Weed’s *Albany Evening Journal* crowed over Seward’s return, declaring it “The Sober Second Thought of the People.” Seward took pride in claiming the first Whig governorship in New York. Triumphantly, his political team invoked a great name from the past: “With the exception of DeWitt Clinton, he [Seward] was the only one who had ever been elected in opposition to the Albany regency.” Taking stock of his reversal of fortune, Seward could not help but ruminate further on Clinton. Less than two decades after his anti-canal attacks and Bucktail affinities, “he found himself in the place of DeWitt Clinton.” Before long, Seward continued, he also found himself “urging the enlargement of the canal to double its original capacity… recommendations [that] were regarded as even still more visionary than the schemes of Governor Clinton.”[43]

Governor-Elect Seward further telegraphed his Clintonian succession plans when he returned to the state capital. His first order of business was choosing a residency, and only one location would do. Seward selected the Kane’s Walk house near the legislative building, a site that primarily appealed because it had been where Clinton himself lived during his tenure in office. Seward even hired the same servants, whose stories “were full of traditions connected with the domestic life” of his venerated predecessor.[44]

Fig. 6 Kane's Walk House, c. 1840, artist unknown. Courtesy of the Seward House Museum.

For New York's Whigs, Seward's inauguration was a cause for mass celebration. Thousands assembled on January 1, 1839 for an open house style party at Kane's Walk. Seward, who recounted shaking hands somewhere between 3,000-4,000 times, shared the enthusiasm of the revelers who washed over him while helping themselves to his food and drink. Although the festivities proved merry, the Governor made plain that the most essential act of business for the start of his administration was its inaugural message. In contrast with his predecessors, he was determined to make a public splash out of the occasion. Formerly, in Seward's estimation, such messages were "usually understood to be a mass of dry statistics and drier recommendations, without special connection, and forming several columns of very dull reading." Not this time.[45]

Eschewing modesty, Seward described his first address as possessing "a unity and coherence of plan on as grand a theme as that of one of Homer's epics." Whether it rose to that level remains a matter of personal taste. Less debatable, though, was another quality Seward later attached to his effort: "it contained the groundwork of his political philosophy." He intended his

message to encompass the totality of his Whig vision. To amplify its range, Seward dispatched advance copies to newspapers across the state ahead of print deadlines.[46]

While few of Governor Seward's contemporaries—friend or foe—could count self-effacement among his qualities, most would have conceded a gift for self-awareness. It was telling, therefore, that the first subject he chose to meaningfully address—after a brief and lyrical introduction calling for "conciliation" after the heated election—was the Erie Canal. Seward began what amounted to his inaugural address by sharing the Erie Canal's budget and projections: the previous year brought nearly $1.5 million in earnings compared to about $640,000 in upkeep costs. While hardly Homeric, Seward's delving was nevertheless strategic. He furnished a reading of the canal's bottom line because the budget had become a political football. That is, despite the canal's irrefutable profitability, Democrats still seemed inclined to want to starve it on the specious grounds that it ran into the red. Seward accused former Marcy loyalists of manufacturing "embarrassments" for the Whigs to "shake the public confidence in the ability of the state to complete the [canal] system in which it was engaged." These were the same old politics that haunted the Auburn and Owasco project. Seward wanted to win the battle over the canal's narrative to prove its still potent utility, and he sought to overcome the messaging of previous Regency officeholders to do so.[47]

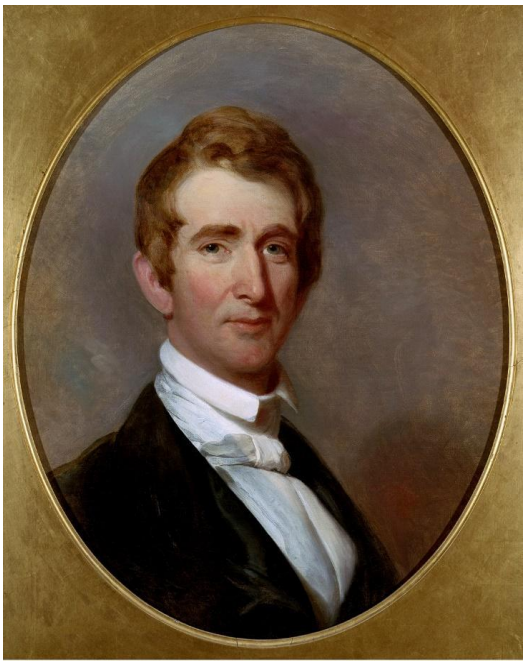

Fig. 7 Governor William Henry Seward, c. 1843, by artist Henry Inman. Courtesy of the Seward House Museum.

Specifically, Seward's war of words took aim at the outgoing state comptroller, Azariah Flagg, departing with the Marcy era. Flagg had painted a gloomy economic picture to halt state support for canal enlargements and expansions. Scaring New Yorkers with fearmongering, he fabricated "an alarming picture of debt, taxation, and bankruptcy." Seward's message countered that version of events with more roseate views while also arguing that the Governor needed to purge similarly mendacious actors from the state's canal commissioner system. Like most state posts, the Erie Canal's administrative bureaucracy suffered from a patronage system that rewarded partisanship over competence. Incoming Governor Seward heralded a plan to revamp the canal board by routing out cronyism. He proposed audits, term limits for agents, and more transparent appointing powers for canal commissioners. He attacked the wastefulness of Democratic canal agents—the same men whose party questioned the solvency of state investment—for enriching themselves with lucrative compensation packages "left to the pleasure or caprice of the canal commissioners." His pen seething with revulsion, Seward invited voters

to share his disdain over the commission's sinister sprawl: "So inconsistent and unequal are the best efforts to establish simplicity, uniformity, and accountability throughout the various departments, that a great, mysterious, and undefined power has thus grown up unobserved."[48]

Their greater crime was the debasement of the Erie Canal itself. Across the Empire State, Seward later wrote, the people suffered from "this sudden decay of works of improvement." The enlargement proposal for the main canal had stalled at Democratic hands; nearly every lateral canal system stood as imperiled as the Auburn and Owasco. Seward warned that most of the latter extensions—Auburn and Owasco among them—were being abandoned and "left unfinished." In addition to shaming his Democratic rivals for their negligence, Seward reached for a more positive, aspirational vision to win the hearts and minds of New York's electorate. This entailed both conjuring a positive story about the Erie Canal and coupling it with his larger Whig platform. Following his practical, economic defense of the Erie Canal, the Governor finally reached for Homeric rhetoric. Seward intended his words to signal a new generation rising—inheritors of the Revolution, Constitution, and even Clinton's canal. Together, he promised, the people of New York could achieve "a higher standard of social perfection than it has ever yet attained," creating "the spirit which shall renovate the world." Out of the same impulse that produced the Erie Canal, New Yorkers could come together and build an extraordinary society. And Seward outlined the path forward. His address proposed sweeping proposals for universal education, investments in public libraries, an overhauling of the prison system, state resources to support immigration, new legal rights for women, and other bold reforms of all stripes. Before long, a new imperative entered Seward's addresses and speeches—using the power of the state to resist and oppose the encroachment of slavery.[49]

Even while Seward expanded the scope of "social improvement," canals remained the wellspring from which his larger Whiggery flowed. He used all four of his annual addresses from his two terms as governor to push this agenda. In his first, he extolled not only the Erie Canal's profitability as a public utility, but its loftier place in New York State's firmament. Expanding the point, he waxed poetic on "its incalculable benefits yet to be realized, and by all our obligations to promote the happiness of the people, to multiply and raise their social enjoyments, to maintain the fame of the state." The canal was thus a font for all progress, "inestimably dear to its citizens" and a token of "the paramount duty we owe to mankind, to illustrate the peacefulness, the efficiency, the beneficence, and the wisdom of republican institutions."[50]

Seward's subsequent annual addresses in 1840, 1841, and 1842 were similar exercises—both in advocacy for canals, and in frustration. Despite his best efforts repeating and refining his arguments, he failed to break through Democratic obstruction in the legislature. Hints of frustration crept into his drafts. "In my annual message at the last session of the legislature, I recommended the rapid prosecution of the enlargement of the Erie Canal," Seward complained in his second address. "My opinions in relation to the public importance of these and all other improvements commended on that occasion are unchanged." He struck the same chords in his third and fourth annual messages. Yet where Seward appeared righteous earlier in his administration, by its close he exhibited signs of resignation. His final address broached canals with an air of exhaustion. To recalcitrant Democrats standing in his way, he made one last pitch for increased investment: "if we would maintain the public faith, prevent general distress, retain our commercial precedence and political influence, and guard against the dismemberment of our territory, it is necessary to complete the enlargement of the Erie canal throughout, and with all convenient diligence." It made little difference. As one of Seward's secretaries phrased it, "His

[Seward's] sagacious admonitions were unheeded, and the legislature, in 1842, put a stop to the progress of internal improvement."[51]

In part owing to a deepening economic crisis (and another financial panic in 1839), in part because of the antipathy of the Regency's anti-Clinton and anti-Seward politics, Democrats in the state legislature began constricting the Erie Canal. Just as Seward was clamoring for deeper financial commitments, the legislature slashed budgets. In 1842 Democrats passed the "Stop and Tax" law over Seward's objections. The legislation simultaneously struck two blows against the canal: it ceased all work on extensions and enlargements, and it shifted the basis of paying for the canal onto the citizens of the state through a direct property tax. As Seward feared, these cuts reduced the public's appetite for expenses. While pinning the blame on Democrats, he painted a gloomy picture of their degraded New York: "In all parts of the State unfinished arches, embankments, culverts, and bridges were seen, while the tax-gatherer, always an unwelcome guest, was knocking at every door."[52]

Seward counted the lost battles for canal funding among the many reasons why he declined to seek re-election in 1842. He had narrowly secured a second two-year term in 1840 and, between fatigue and dimming prospects for the Whigs, the odds did not favor a third Seward administration. After making the decision to "retire," however temporarily at age 41, Governor Seward proffered what amounted to a farewell address at a special session of the state legislature called in August 1842. Preparing to leave the stage, a welter of emotion crossed his mind as he worried about whether both his and the Erie Canal's careers were in danger of "a sudden and humiliating close." He made one last appeal, both to Democrats in their majority and to the public at large. "For the first time in the quarter of a century which has elapsed since the ground was broken for the Erie canal, a governor of the state of New York, in meeting the legislature,

finds himself unable to announce the continued progress of improvement," Seward lamented. "The officers charged with the care of the public works, have arrested all proceedings in the enlargement of the Erie canal, and the construction of the auxiliary works… An imperative sense of duty compels me again to declare my conviction that it is radically wrong." With the future looking uncertain, an almost-out-of-power Seward knew that if he was to continue fighting for the Erie Canal it meant entering a very different arena.[53]

The Erie Canal and Public Memory

In the final lines of his farewell, Governor Seward admitted that, at times, his administration may have "urged too earnestly" in pursuit of "the claims of humanity, justice, and equity" as embodied by canals and other reforms. Even where his ambitions faltered, however, Seward professed a gratitude for "the generous appreciation" of the people. On their behalf he pledged, "I shall carry with me into retirement, a profound sense of obligation, and a spirit of enduring gratitude." Yet Seward's seemingly conciliatory goodbye contained as much posturing as contrition. This was less admitting defeat than conceding the moment; with Democratic forces rising, Seward strategically retreated back to Auburn—a regrouping to fight another day.[54]

Seward first returned to the campaign trail after nearly a half-decade (1843-1847) as a private citizen. In 1848, with Whig prospects brightening under presidential candidate Zachary Taylor, Seward re-emerged on the national scene. He cast his eye on an open U.S. Senate seat in New York, taking to the stump across the larger Northeast as he angled for his own power and drummed up votes for Taylor. Fatefully, while giving a speech in Boston that autumn Seward met a young Whig Congressman from Illinois named Abraham Lincoln. Over the ensuing years their arcs became indelibly entwined. Seward achieved his successes first, taking a Senate seat

and serving as a leading reformer in that chamber from 1849 to 1861. Although Lincoln spent the 1850s exiled in Springfield, losing a pair of his own senate contests, he ultimately rose higher and eclipsed Seward, shocking the world by toppling the venerable New Yorker for the Republican Party's presidential nomination in 1860. Perhaps even more shockingly, after winning the general election and amid the "secession winter" that served as a prelude to the coming Civil War, Lincoln tapped his former intraparty challenger to serve as Secretary of State in his "Team of Rivals" administration. Seward held that office from 1861 until 1869, completing Lincoln's unfinished second term with Andrew Johnson under whom he famously orchestrated the Alaska purchase of 1867.

Fig. 8 Secretary of State William Seward (seated, third from the right) in The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation, 1864, by artist Francis Carpenter. Courtesy of the Seward House Museum.

On the surface, it might have been tempting for Seward to forsake the Erie Canal. On the one hand, the waterway was rebounding nicely without him. As if to prove that the personal was political, spiteful Democrats in Albany relented once Seward vacated the Governor's mansion; work resumed on the canal's enlargement in 1847 and continued for a quarter century until the state legislature declared the project completed in 1862. On the other hand, as a Senator and

Secretary of State in Washington, Seward found himself further removed from these squabbles. Vaulted to the capital, he earned an outsized reputation for his fierce hostility to slavery—the long denouement for his Whig ideology. Seward expressed and embodied these views even more doggedly upon joining the northern-based anti-slavery Republican Party, which he adopted in the mid-1850s. For most Americans, Seward as a national figure stood synonymously with this larger debate for the soul of a divided country. It would have been only too easy—and probably good politics—for him to cast off the Erie Canal.[55]

But Seward did not forget where he came from, nor the revelatory experience with the canal that rebirthed his political self. Just as the Erie Canal was essential in determining Seward's conversion to a certain brand of progressivism, it remained central to his public identity and a fixture in his oratory and political writings. While Seward became famous for anti-slavery (occasionally borderline abolitionist) diatribes about "higher laws" and "irrepressible conflicts," his affinity for canals never strayed far from the words he carefully crafted for national audiences. And words mattered a great deal to Seward, who took pride in mustering snappy phraseology, drawing literary allusions, and deploying metaphor while seeking public attention. What he described as his "Homeric" styling was no mere affectation, but a well-honed lyrical intentionality. His calling might have been as a statesman, but his true métier was as a rhetorician capable of soaring oratory and trenchant argument. As the historian Carole Sherriff reminds us, successful political actors from Seward's era felt compelled to "cultivate eloquence in the spoken and written word." For them, "rhetoric was an important tool—a 'practical art'—essential to a political system in which people could not be coerced and so had to be convinced." In a milieu in which all ambitious risers strove for elegant articulation, few could match the artfulness of Seward.[56]

Much like Lincoln, Seward's rhetoric relied on his internal ear for effective storytelling. Seward understood that captivating any audience, whether as a speaker or writer, required both resonance and structure; that is, he needed to find an engaging, relatable subject and then construct a linear narrative around it before advancing a new argument. The origin story of the Erie Canal worked on several levels. Grounded in the human dramas of the people who had built it, the saga of the canal also contained ready-made heroes and villains—those who had advocated it selflessly and those who had opposed it selfishly. Not coincidentally, Seward's "heroes" aligned neatly with his half of the political spectrum where analogous Whigs carried on in their image. In Seward's telling, the Erie Canal's story became one of overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles, a paean for human improvement through determination and collective mass effort. It augured the potential for the next great enterprise in actual or social engineering—all the spiritual successors to the canal that could be channeled through this same impulse. With an almost signature rhythm and cadence, Seward inflected many of his speeches and papers with uplifting, triumphalist treatises on the canal's history—laying an allegorical base for imagined links in a greater chain of American "progress."

In laying claim to the Erie Canal's history, Seward meant to establish a meta-narrative to define the project for future generations. Although some of his older losses to fund extensions still rankled, Seward saw the battle over perception as longer term and ongoing. The heavily varnished accounts he produced about "Clinton's Ditch" brought the fight for the canal into the realm of public memory. The canal became a teaching device, a history lesson with a purpose, a usable past capable of informing and shaping the present. Through his words, Seward hoped to vicariously remove the scales from the eyes of a fundamentally divided nation. In effect, he

figuratively set himself to recreating the life-altering power of that first packet boat ride. Perhaps in doing so he might achieve persuasion of an epic, almost Homeric, proportion.

The dress rehearsal for this exercise began near the end of Seward's governorship. In the summer of 1842, already somewhat of a lame duck, Seward appended a short essay, "Notes on New York," for an introduction to a geological survey of the state. Reminiscent of Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Seward's writing provided a natural history of New York, including an inventory of its geographical features, religious and civic life, agriculture, horticulture, and contributions to the arts and sciences. One of the longest sections of his approximately 170 total pages, entitled "Internal Improvements," featured a history of the Erie Canal. The Governor did not dilute his praise. He lauded "the enterprise" as "without a parallel in the history of mankind" and commended the canal's early champions for their genius. While other societies governed by "powerful monarchies" had "executed designs" for older canalways, the true wonder of the world sprang from New York. "[I]t remained for a free state to create a new era in history," Seward gushed, "and to erect a work more stupendous, more magnificent, and more beneficial, than any hitherto achieved by the human race."[57]

Seward's history of the Erie Canal was comprehensive, starting with General George Washington's original call for a channel of inland navigation at Fort Stanwix in 1783 into his own waning administration. But Seward also knew that any good story needed a hero, and he found his in DeWitt Clinton. Centering Clinton in the narrative, he traced the canal's long history through the favorable lens of its champion. His Clinton stood as a stoic bulwark "against insidious enmity" of those villains (read: Democrats) who sought "to arrest the progress of the Erie." It fell to Clinton to uphold "the honor and prosperity of the state" which "demanded the completion of the whole of the work." Foreshadowing Seward's own struggles as a pro-canal

Governor, Clinton suffered his share of "difficulties and embarrassments" along the way to defending his bold vision. Unlike Seward, Clinton came into his reward in 1825. With his wedding of the waters tour, "DeWitt Clinton and his coadjutors enjoyed the spectacle of a free people rejoicing in the assurances of prosperity increased, and national harmony confirmed." Yet the work remained incomplete. The still-vulnerable canal required the next generation to maintain and expand its growth. More importantly, as Seward underscored, the canal signified something greater than itself. At his moment of triumph, Clinton, "suppressing all feelings of self-gratulation," urged New Yorkers to pivot from the canal to the next stage of progress. The canal's very existence provided "evidences of the ability, as well as the disposition of republican governments to promote the welfare of mankind."[58]

Yes, this was history, however subjective to an explicit agenda. In fairness, if Seward could not claim impartiality, neither could most historians of his era. Parallel to the newspaper industry, what amounted to written history in Antebellum America often assumed a partisan nature. Seward's work fit that mold. He designed his narrative on the Erie Canal to serve wider Whig aims. Ostensibly objective in tone and built on an edifice of seemingly irrefutable facts supported by documentation like the state budget, Seward's analysis reflected the biases of his ideology. He bent his portrayal of the past, conjuring a Whiggish origin story for the canal to influence his contemporaries and shape discourse.

Seward embarked on one of his first forays in using the Erie Canal as a discursive tool in an open letter that he published in the spring of 1844, or about a year into his interregnum between Governor and Senator. Something of a political op-ed, his piece, "Intolerance," attacked the growth of anti-immigration nativism taking root across the country. "Exclusion of foreigners and hostility to foreign states always were elements of barbarism," Seward warned, adding that

restricting open immigration invited only a reactionary, backwards society. “So inconsistent is exclusiveness with progress, that, sooner or later, Providence wills the subjugation of unsocial states, thus securing the advancement of civilization compulsively.” Such were the sins of the old world, unworthy of the new. Yet, as Seward feared, the nascent American experiment was not immune from the same risks of internal decline that toppled previous republics.[59]

How did Seward know that exclusion impeded progress? He asked his readers to recount with him a time, not long prior, when the Erie Canal’s original opponents attempted to use anti-immigration hysteria as a wedge. “I remember that in Clinton's time the Erie [C]anal then in progress was stigmatized as the ‘Irish ditch.’” Yet, he hastened to chide, if not for the contributions of Irish labor, the project would have languished. Trading in ethnic stereotypes, Seward credited the Irish for powering Clinton’s dream:

> We should now confess for the instruction of mankind, that not only the Erie canal, but its numerous and far-reaching veins and arteries, and our railroads, harbors, and fortifications, were chiefly constructed by hardy, joyous, light-hearted, liberty-loving immigrants from Ireland… He who has left his native land to seek an asylum here, has made a sacrifice to liberty which ought to commend him to our respect and affection. His children born here will be native Americans as we are; the parent is a foreigner only as our own parents or ancestors, near or remote, also were.

Here was the Erie Canal as the ultimate teaching tool. The waterway owed its existence to Irish immigration, a point Seward extended as a debt owed, and a general call for tolerance. Immigrants fueled the great works of a democracy. Closing his letter with a touch of eloquence, he declared that “the battle-cry of liberty is as animating when sounded in French, in German, or in Spanish, as in English, and the accents of love and affection are tender in whatever dialect they may have utterance.” For Seward, this was a lesson backed up by the history of the canal.[60]

Over the ensuing years, Seward repeated versions of the refrain. In 1850 alone—a year most often associated with his reputation-making anti-slavery “Higher Law” speech before the

U.S. Senate—Seward delivered a powerful pair of addresses invoking the Erie Canal. The first, from January 30 (or about two months ahead of the "Higher Law" speech), picked up where "Intolerance" left off. Delivered on the Capitol floor, Seward's "Granting Land to Emigrants" advocated reserving public land to refugees displaced by Europe's 1848 revolutions. Once again, Seward argued that immigrants were the lifeblood of American democracy, and in this case the exiles he sought to assist had fought valiantly "for their own struggles for liberty and independence" in emulation of the U.S.[61]

Fig. 9 Senator William Henry Seward, 1856, by artist John Philips. Courtesy of the Seward House Museum

Confronting an ugly, familiar nativism in the corridors of Washington, Seward brought his New York arguments to bear for the entire country. Refusing to yield to clamoring anti-immigration Senators, Seward fervently declared "I am in favor of the equality of men—of ALL men, whether they be born in one land or born in another. I am in favor of receiving the whole. I acknowledge them all to constitute one great family, for whom it is the business of statesmen and the business of man to labor and to live." New York, with its history of "improvement and

beneficence" formed the crux for his pro-immigration beliefs. By extension, the canal loomed large in Seward's pro-immigration rhetoric. Because of that great boon, Seward conjectured, "the state of New York, having a population of three millions of people, has not in it one child of citizen or foreigner that is not educated, from the age of five years to the age of twenty years, at the public cost." The canal spurred and funded that growth. Padding his figures somewhat, Seward conjectured that "every mile and half" along the canal "is the school house" and "a public library…open and accessible to every citizen—man, woman, and child—in the state of New York." The story of the canal, built on the backs of immigrants, was therefore the story of progress and freedom abounding. Seward could not resist needling his southern colleagues on the subject, turning from immigration to slavery near the end of his remarks. He longed for the day when "progress" truly reigned, anticipating a future of lending his "voice for emancipating the slave in any district or territory." When that day came, he closed, "my vote shall be given to sustain it, with more gladness, more gratitude, and more joy, than it was ever given upon any occasion in my life."[62]

Seward continued to link the freedom born from New York's Erie Canal to the debates swirling around Washington in his second 1850 speech, "Internal Improvements in the New States." As his title implied, Seward crafted this oration—given in late April 1850—to endorse a Whig Party hobbyhorse: state-sponsored infrastructure. More specifically, he targeted incoming western states vying to enter the union. Whereas "Granting Land" focused more narrowly, "Internal Improvements" took a broader approach, outlining Seward's faith in federal investment in canals, railroads, bridges, schools, etc. For that reason, he treated his audience on the Senate floor to a longer history of New York's accomplishments in that area. He tipped his rhetorical hand in his preamble. "A great and extensive country like this has need of roads and canals

earlier than there is an accumulation of private capital within the states to construct them," Seward patiently explained. "[A]nd so an examination of the history of the old states would show that the government of the states has lent or given its aid, directly or indirectly, to assist individuals or corporations in the construction of these great public works which are now so productive." No state, Seward made clear, had done more than his own. He invited Senators to avail themselves of these histories, including his own contribution to the field. Such readers, Seward promised, "will be struck with the beginning of the great system of canals and roads."[63]

Applying the lessons he learned from his native state to a nationwide level, Seward implored his fellow Senators—and all Americans following along—to hold New York up as the golden standard. He then launched into a narrative account of the Erie Canal's origins, from its colonial era into his own present day. Thanks to the foresight of men like Clinton, New York flourished; yet few other states followed suit, foregoing internal improvements owing to "a miserly grasp" of short-sightedness from embattled foes. And so, a full generation after Clinton's creation, the country "has proceeded no further yet than to complete the Erie canal" much beyond New York's borders. To reverse course, Seward envisioned nothing less than the federal government fully underwriting a transportation revolution—replicating for the country what New York built within its own boundaries. The sequel to Clinton's canal, Seward advanced, was "a great national thoroughfare," a proposal he likened to the next "great national enterprise." He equated such a system as nationalizing Clintonianism, calling it "an extension" of what New York wrought—a promise of prosperity and progress conducted on interconnected canal and rail lines. If this meant empowering a stronger, more expensive central government, Seward was all for it. Assuaging fears and dispelling doubts about such consolidation, he insisted that Washington "owes it to itself, and to the states, to make liberal, and at the same time judicious

appropriations, to extend its net-work of railroads and canals over these new regions." New York's history, in this telling, could and should become America's future.[64]

Senator Seward pressed his case further in May 1851, returning to the Empire State to celebrate the completion of the New York and Erie Railroad. He brought Whig luminaries Daniel Webster (then Secretary of State) and John Crittenden (Attorney General), with him to mark the occasion and draw national attention to New York's latest accomplishment. The speech he tendered at the ceremony, "Erie Railroad Jubilee," combined his brand of history with even stronger rhetorical flourishes. Seward began by congratulating his home state for its "commercial supremacy." He then turned to the source of its national and international wealth: "What is that secret? Statesmen and citizens of other states, here it is!" New York's success "came not from favor" or divine providence, but by "her principles and her sentiments," especially as manifested in the state's will to create "her canals and railroads." The legacy of the canal thus became "the dowry of New York," making the state the envy of the continent because of the foresight of its visionaries and planners. By comparison, Seward warned, the rest of the nation lay in danger of missing this lesson and squandering the inheritance. "We have been too timid and too slow," Seward scolded. "Shame upon us!" Hoping the eyes of the nation were upon him, for good measure Seward shared his by-now stock history of the canal starting with George Washington.[65]

As the 1850s proceeded, so did Senator Seward's escalating rhetoric on the canal. He polished his core arguments while also seeking new audiences for his ideas. An example of the latter came in the form of an address given to students and faculty at Yale in 1854. His lengthy tract, "The Physical, Moral, and Intellectual Development of the American People" hinged on his interpretation of the Erie Canal and its larger significance. Playing at "the office of instructor" Seward essayed forth with his usual fare and flair, starting with a familiar thesis: New York

"prosecuted this great enterprise with unsurpassed fidelity." A biographical entry on DeWitt Clinton, authored by Seward for an 1858 *American Cyclopedia*, allowed him to make deeper intellectual inroads. His Clinton was by now thoroughly developed—the sagacious, crusading Governor whose perseverance against "constant, unremitting and factious resistance" furnished New York with "a system adequate to the internal commerce of an empire." For that and his many grand accomplishments, Seward eulogized, "posterity… hails his shade with the homage deserving a benefactor of mankind." Or at least he hoped that would be Clinton's—and his canal's—final reckoning in the annals of history.[66]

The increasing sectional tensions over slavery throughout the 1850s compelled Seward to sharpen his oratory into radical invectives. In one fiery speech, "The Contest and the Crisis," given in Buffalo in October 1855, Seward dropped literary pretense and spoke plainly and directly. "I am indeed earnest!" he proclaimed to his energized crowd. "I have seen slavery in the slave states, and freedom in the free states; I have even seen both slavery and freedom in this state; I know too well the evils of the former to be willing to spare any effort to prevent their return." Harkening back to his own direct familial connection to slavery, Seward recalled the state and system he had both been born into and accepted. Then he posed hypotheticals. What if the New York of his father, of the Bucktails, had been allowed to endure? "Suppose that, fifty years ago, New York, like Maryland and Virginia, had clung to slavery," he asked.

> Where would, then, have been the Erie canal, the Genesee Valley canal, the Oswego canal, the Seneca and Cayuga canal, the Crooked Lake canal, the Chemung canal, the Chenango canal, the Black River canal, the Champlain canal—where the imperial New York Central railroad, the Erie railroad, and the Ogdensburg railroad, with their branches penetrating not only every inhabited district in this state, but every inhabited region also in adjacent states and in British America? Where would have been the colleges, academies, and above all, the free common schools, yielding instruction to children of all sects and in all languages?

Of course, Seward did not need counterfactuals to know where the road not taken led. "Go ask Virginia—go ask even noble Maryland, expending as she is a giant's strength in the serpent's coils, to show you her people, canals… Her silence is her expressive answer." The history of New York, and indeed its canals, belied and exploded the myths of every pro-slavery apologist. "The experience of New York," Seward thundered, "tells the whole argument against slavery extension, the whole argument for universal freedom."[67]

Seward pressed these points still further during the 1860 presidential campaign. After falling to Lincoln's hands at the Republican convention, he crisscrossed the Northeastern and Great Lakes regions of the country to help stir passion and encourage the anti-slavery vote. At a speech given in Chicago in October 1860—the same city where Lincoln's delegation bested him a mere five months earlier—Seward brought his radicalized message to the Midwest. In presenting his ideas, he intended to offset the fearmongering of Southern partisans. He urged bravery in the face of intimidation: "A people who are demoralized are every day more easily operated upon; they are easily kept persistently in the same erroneous habit which has demoralized them. The first practice for continuing to extend the power of slavery upon this continent, is that of alarm." As a result, Seward continued, "[m]ost men, therefore, very cheerfully prefer to let the subject of slavery rest for some better time—for some better occasion—for some more fortunate circumstance, and they are content to keep the Union with slavery if it cannot be kept otherwise." On its own, that "more fortunate circumstance," that more propitious day, would never come. Much like New York once did with the Erie Canal, freedom-loving people of the north needed to build a better future for themselves.[68]

Assuring his audience of their fortitude and righteousness, Seward claimed that he devoted significant time to "a deliberate survey of the broad field." His informed conclusion:

“freedom in the future states of this continent was the necessity of this age, and of this country.” He also believed that Illinois, settled by people from northern states like New York and European migration, was fertile ground to take a stand in 1860. Borne west “through the Erie Canal” they were touched by progress before “spreading themselves in a mighty flood over Michigan, Iowa, Indiana and Illinois, and even to the banks of the Mississippi.” They brought the seeds of freedom with them. “So, as they passed by me, steamboat load after steamboat load, and railroad train after railroad train,” Seward affirmed, the settlers of the plains carried “the better instinct of justice.” They were harbingers of freedom and self-determination, united in a basic "abhorrence" for slavery despite an oppressive pro-slavery national climate. Seward promised to help release these new Americans of the west from fear. “The [R]epublican party,” he pledged, “will not complete this great revolution.” In doing so, they would unlock the revolutionary potential first set in motion by the canal that conveyed them towards the American dream.[69]

After Lincoln’s electoral victory one month later, Seward toned down some of his more extreme rhetoric. He also reduced his speechmaking in general. As Secretary of State, Seward became part of an administration larger than himself or his ties to New York; as counsel to Lincoln during the Civil War, his focus and priorities shifted into new areas. References to the Erie Canal appeared less infrequently. Perhaps, as Seward entered his 60s, he simply believed that too much time had passed for the subject to retain its relevance. Generations, including those of his own children and grandchildren, had been born into the world that the canal made. They accepted it less as revelation than status quo, just as they were drawn to new modern marvels that seemingly heralded the next stage of progress. Did this mean that the war for the Erie Canal’s public memory had been won?

Clinton and Seward: A Tale of Two Follies

Half a century before "Seward's Folly" entered the lexicon as a barbed sobriquet connoting the Alaska Purchase of 1867, another New Yorker was tagged by this exercise in 19th-century mockery. Along with slurs about his eponymous "Ditch," DeWitt Clinton often heard critics impugn the Erie Canal as "Clinton's Folly." The bandying of these words was meant to shame both men—'Folly,' signifying their respective foolishness or naivete in pursuing illusory dreams. Like Clinton, dying so soon after his canal's completion—and living in fear for his political future during the rise of Jackson—Seward also went to his grave cast from power and unsure whether history might ever vindicate him. He died in Auburn in 1872 while his territorial acquisition depopulated and public opinion soured.[70]

In his own lifetime, Seward repeatedly tried to redeem Clinton's memory. During his governorship, Seward proposed erecting a state-funded memorial to Clinton, who died heavily indebted and whose family could not afford a burial plot—leaving his remains interred in private obscurity in the vault of a friend. Perhaps worse, Seward feared, Clinton's abrupt passing robbed him not only of a site for mourning, but the chance for posthumous revisionism. "His death happened in the maturity of his manhood, and while the wisdom of his policy and the purity of his motives were yet loudly questioned," Seward concluded in his 1839 gubernatorial address. In seeking to memorialize Clinton, Seward hoped to enshrine the larger idealism behind the canal, a force which proved so transformative in his own life. More than that, he imagined a site dedicated to Clinton as a place of inspiration for generations unborn—"to stimulate and encourage emulation" of outsized dreams for better futures. Throughout his two terms, Governor Seward urged the legislature to approve funding for a grave and monument on the capitol grounds. He failed at every turn.[71]

If Seward was disheartened by his inability to secure a memorial for Clinton in Albany, he eventually took solace when Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn offered a plot in the middle of its rolling acreage. Clinton's remains were re-interred and, in the early 1850s, the sculptor Henry Kirke Brown received a commission to create a bronze statue for the resting place. The relief on the front and back of the statue's base depicts scenes of the Erie Canal, from its construction to its heyday as a pillar of commerce and transportation. Although it appears that Seward never visited Clinton's grave, its very existence must have been a source of comfort for his own posterity.

Sometimes follies are a matter of perspective. In the end, the canal has always been a contested space. It is an idea as much as it is a construct, a place where generations of New Yorkers have reflected on the past and projected their hopes and fears onto the future. Seward was among the first to recognize and grapple with this complicated inheritance. Whenever he looked at the canal, it must have brought him back to the clarity of that original life-altering, paradigm-shifting voyage. Surely if he fought fiercely enough, spoke eloquently enough, there had to be a way to awaken and rekindle that old spirit. Perhaps even a way to remove the "certain heavy scales" from the eyes of a nation too-often blind to the light of new possibilities for better, brighter tomorrows.

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[1] For Seward, Lincoln, and the Civil War, see the quintessential Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals* (Simon & Schuster, 2005). Additionally, see David Donald, *"We Are Lincoln Men": Abraham Lincoln and his Friends* (Simon & Schuster, 2003) and Joseph Fry, *Lincoln, Seward, and U.S, Foreign Relations in the Civil War Era* (University of Kentucky Press, 2019). On Seward and Alaska, see especially Lee Farrow, *Seward's Folly: A New Look at the Alaska Purchase* (University of Alaska Press, 2017) and Michael A. Hill, "The Myth of Seward's Folly," *Western Historical Quarterly* 50 (Spring 2019): 43-64. On Seward and the 1860 election and its immediate aftermath, see Edward Achorn *The Lincoln Miracle* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2023) and Lawrence Denton, *William Henry Seward and the Secession Crisis* (McFarland & Co. Press, 2009). On Seward, Tubman, and the Underground Railroad, see: Catherine Clinton, *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom* (Little, Brown, & Co., 2004), Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land* (Ballantine, 2003), and Dorothy Wickenden, *The Agitators: Three Friends Who Fought for Abolition and Women's Rights* (Scribner, 2021). Popular books, and even a recent series on Apple TV,

emphasize the fact that Seward was nearly assassinated alongside Lincoln in April 1865, only narrowly escaping death, and bearing the scars dealt to him by an accomplice of John Wilkes Booth until the day he died. For the assassination attempt against Seward, see James Swanson, *Manhunt: The 12-Day Chase for Lincoln's Killer* (Harper-Perennial, 2006) and the eponymous Apple TV show it inspired which aired in 2024. On Seward and foreign policy, see, among other sources: Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansionism 1860-1898* (Cornell University Press, 1963) and Ernest Paolino, *The Foundations of American Empire: William Henry Seward and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Cornell University Press, 1973). For Seward's legal career, see both Robin Bernstein, *Freeman's Challenge: The Murder that Shook America's Original Prison for Profit* (University of Chicago Press, 2024) and Peter Charles Hoffer, *Seward's Law: Country Lawyering, Relational Rights, and Slavery* (Cornell University Press, 2022). On Seward's personal life, see Shellie Clark, "Love, Letters, and the Institutions of Gender and Marriage," *New York History* 101, no.2 (Winter 2020-2021): 175-194; Trudy Krisher, *Fanny Seward: A Life* (Syracuse University Press, 2015); and Thomas Slaughter, *The Sewards of New York: A Biography of a Leading American Political Family* (Cornell University Press, 2025). For general biographies of Seward, the reader is referred to Walter Stahr, *Seward: Lincoln's Indispensable Man* (Simon & Schuster, 2012); John Taylor, *William Henry Seward: Lincoln's Right Hand* (HarperCollins, 1991); and Glyndon Van Deusen, *William Henry Seward* (Oxford University Press, 1967). Unless otherwise noted, Seward family correspondence cited here is from the William H. Seward Papers, Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester, Rochester.

[2] Frederick W. Seward, *Autobiography of William H. Seward, from 1801 to 1834: With a Memoir of His Life and Selections from his Letters from 1831-1846* (Derby & Miller, 1891) [hereinafter Seward, *Autobiography*], 1:51. Ultimately, William Seward's son Frederick edited a three volume autobiographical series based on work begun by Seward at the end of his life. In addition to the above first volume, Frederick edited volume two, *Seward at Washington as Senator and Secretary of State, 1846-1861* and volume three, *Seward at Washington as Senator and Secretary of State*.

[3] William H. Seward, "Internal Improvements and Education" (1835) in *The Works of William H. Seward*, George E. Baker, ed., (Houghton Mifflin, 1888) [hereinafter Baker, *Works*], 3:128-134; Goodwin, 326.

[4] The Seward family estate was impressive. Upon his death in 1849, the value of Seward's father's holdings exceeded $300,000, which, adjusted for inflation, is the equivalent of more than 7.6 million dollars today.

[5] See Taylor, 13-15; Seward, *Autobiography*, 1:27-28. David Gellman, *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom, 1777-1827* (Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 153-186; David Gellman, *Liberty's Chain: Slavery, Abolition, and the Jay Family of New York* (Cornell University Press, 2022), 113-118; Seward, *Autobiography*, 1:28. According to Taylor, "The landowners of Orange County made significant use of slave labor on their farms, and the county at one time ranked second in the state in the number of its slaves" (14).

[6] Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (Basic Books, 1993), Introduction; Slaughter, 35-36; Seward, *Autobiography*, 1:28.

[7] Seward, *Autobiography*, 1:54; 3:479. On Samuel Seward's political affiliations, see Frederick W. Seward, *Obadiah Seward of Long Island, New York, and His Descendants* (Press of the Independent Republican, 1948), 90-92. According to this genealogical account, Samuel Seward was not only "appointed Postmaster by Mr. Jefferson and retained that office until Gen. Jackson turned him out," some two decades later. For much of the same period "he filled the office of assistant Justice, and then he was advanced to the post of 1st Judge of the County" (91).

[8] Taylor, 15; Seward, *Autobiography*, 1:54; See also Peter Bernstein, *Wedding of the Waters: The Erie Canal and the Making of a Great Nation* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2005); Evan Cornog, *The Birth of Empire: DeWitt Clinton and the American Experience, 1769-1828* (Oxford University Press, 1998); Carol Sheriff, *The Artificial River* (Hill and Wang, 1996).

[9] Taylor, 15. The Adelphic Society stood opposed by the Philomeathean Society at Union. Late in Seward's college career, the Adelphics split along northern and southern lines, with a breakaway group of southern "seceders" forming a new society called the Delphians. More so than anything from the curriculum at Union, Seward regarded this jockeying between sections and factions as his true education, leading him "upon the threshold of national politics." Seward, *Autobiography*, 1:45-46.

[10] Seward, *Autobiography*, 1:45-47; Stahr, 14-15; Van Deusen, 11. William Henry Seward to Samuel Seward, January 11, 1818 & May 4, 1818. Samuel Seward Papers, Manuscripts and Special Collections, New York State Library.

[11] Seward, *Autobiography*, 1:45-46; Seward's commencement address from Union College, "Oration on the Probable Permanency of the Union," is available in the Abraham Lincoln Collection, Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

[12] Bernstein, 248.
[13] Hoffer, 11. According to Hoffer, Seward did feel a certain pressure as he came into his own, "a tension between aspiration and achievement, first in fulfilling his father's expectations, and then in reaching his goals" (9).
[14] Van Deusen, 7; Seward, *Autobiography*, 1:50; Stahr, 22; Bernstein, 248-253; George E. Baker, ed., *The Life of William H. Seward with Selection from His Works*, (Redfield, 1860) [hereinafter Baker, *Life*], 70. George Ellis Baker, who served as Seward's secretary, was also tasked with writing and editing this authorized political biography.
[15] Seward, *Autobiography,* 1:50. Not even Peter Hoffer, in an entire book dedicated to Seward's legal career, seems to understand this choice, which he barely mentions except to note that "Utica was along the way" of a westward extending state apparatus. "The court of equity, like the Senate, met in Albany," Hoffer writes, "and the Supreme Court of Judicature held circuit in New York City, Albany, and Utica" (14). As the western-most outpost, Utica offered opportunity amid migrating populations.
[16] Seward, *Autobiography* 1:50; See also, Scott Anderson, *Auburn, New York: The Entrepreneurs' Frontier* (Syracuse University Press, 2015), in particular pp. 49-77, 98-138. Samuel Seward clearly took his son at his word on the "assurance" that we would eventually return home from the west. One of Seward's younger brothers later recalled "that he [Samuel] educated Henry as a lawyer for his counsel, which meant that he expected him to do all his business without compensation." This extended as far as Samuel buying a law office in Florida under the expectation that his son would return and "occupy it." George Washington Seward to William Henry Seward Jr., August 4, 1873.
[17] Daniel Feller, *The Jacksonian Promise: America, 1815-1840* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 18-19; Bernstein, 327.
[18] Seward, *Autobiography* 1:50.
[19] Ibid, 56-57. The closest Seward came to discussing his father's reaction to the journey was a brief line about the hospitality the family received on their stay in Buffalo: "The praises of our host were on the lips of every traveler," including, presumably, 55-year-old Samuel.
[20] Quoted in Stahr, 17, emphasis his.
[21] Anderson, 104-105. The portrayal of Auburn as "new," of course, was a matter of Seward's privileged perspective. What early settlers called "Auburn" sat on the ancestral soil of the Haudenosaunee– dispossessed during the Sullivan campaign, in part, by Lt. John Hardenbergh, who founded the settlement in 1793, having espied choice lands along the banks of the Owasco during his raids. On Elijah Miller, see Benjamin F. Hall, "Genealogical and Biographical Sketch of the Late honorable Elijah Miller," Elijah Miller Papers, University of Rochester, River Campus Libraries, Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation.
[22] Benjamin Hall, 81-84; Taylor, 19; William Henry Seward to Samuel Seward, July 11, 1823.
[23] Seward, *Autobiography* 1:293. On Miller and canals, see Hall, 9 and Anderson, 131-133.
[24] Anderson, 131; Seward, *Autobiography* 1:293.
[25] Benjamin Hall, 9-10; Seward, *Autobiography*, 1: 293-294; William Henry Seward to Samuel Seward, December 20, 1825; Anderson, 131-132.
[26] Seward, *Autobiography*, 1:294; Anderson 132.
[27] Baker, *Life*, 35.
[28] Seward, *Autobiography*, 1:67; Stahr, 24.
[29] Seward, *Autobiography*, 1:67-68, 79-80; Baker, ed., *Life*, 34-36.
[30] Baker, *Life*, 34; Van Deusen, 16-17; Harriet Weed, ed., *Autobiography of Thurlow Weed* (Houghton, Mifflin, and Co, 1884), 423.
[31] Seward, *Autobiography*, 1:67; Baker, *Life*, 68-69.
[32] Seward, *Autobiography*, 1: 89-95; William H. Seward, "Notes on the State of New York" (1842), Baker, *Works*, 2:119-123.
[33] William H. Seward, "The Six Million Dollar Loan" (1834), Baker, *Works*, 1:37-50; Stahr, 40-41; Taylor, 33.
[34] William H. Seward, "Internal Improvements: New York and Erie Railroad" (1834), Baker, *Works*, 3:417-418.
[35] Seward, *Autobiography*, 1:240-241.
[36] Elijah Miller to William Henry Seward, June 23, 1835; Henry Hall, *History of Auburn* (Dennis Brothers and Company, 1869), 186-191; Benjamin Snow, Ed., *History of Cayuga County, New York* (John P. Smith Printing Company, 1908), 34-45; Seward, *Autobiography*, 1:294-295; Anderson, 132.
[37] Henry Hall, 193; Seward, "Internal Improvements and Education" (1835), Baker, *Works*, 3:128-130.

[38] Baker, *Works*, 3:128-130.
[39] Ibid, 131-133.
[40] Ibid, 133-134.
[41] Jessica M. Lepler, *The Many Panics of 1837: People, Politics, and the Creation of a Transatlantic Financial Crisis* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), Henry Hall, 195-196; Seward, *Autobiography*, 1:356. By 1840, as Henry Hall writes, the Auburn and Owasco had been abandoned. " The unwonted stringency of the times had caused public interest in the matter to droop, while the gentlemen who had embarked their private fortunes in the erection of the big dam and the improvement of the water-power of the outlet, having suffered heavy losses in the general decline of prices in 1837, were unable to carry their noble design forward to consummation" (195).
[42] Baker, *Works* 3:xl; Stahr, 55; Sheriff, 98-99.
[43] Seward, *Autobiography*, 1:378-382; Baker, *Life*, 74; Baker, *Works*, 3:xli
[44] Seward himself seemed to enjoy giving tours of the Kane's Walk house based on the memories of these servants. For example, oddly enough, he pointed out to visitors "the stairway where DeWitt Clinton fell and broke his knee-pan." Seward, *Autobiography*, 1: 378-382. Baker, *Works*, 3: xli.
[45] Seward, *Autobiography*, 1:385-386.
[46] Ibid, 385-386.
[47] William H. Seward, "Annual Message to the Legislature" (1839), Baker, *Works* 2:184-185.
[48] Ibid, 186-187. Rather than charter private corporations to profitably manage the Erie Canal, New York established the Canal Board in 1826 for the state to oversee the waterway as a public utility. The power of the Board's ranking commissioners ran through the state legislature, which appointed members and received reports and recommendations for maintenance and growth. Still, as Carole Sheriff notes, the Board operated insularly, determining the majority of its own "decisions about building, funding, and managing the Erie Canal." Efforts for greater accountability, including the direct election of commissioners did not occur until 1844, after Seward left the Governor's office. See Sheriff, 81-82.
[49] Seward, *Autobiography*, 1:597; Baker, *Works* 2:184-185.
[50] Ibid, 205.
[51] William H. Seward, "Annual Message to the Legislature" (1840), Baker, *Works* 2:239; William H. Seward, "Annual Message to the Legislature" (1842), Baker, *Works* 2:316; Baker, *Life*, 71; Seward, *Autobiography*, 1:618-620.
[52] Sheriff, 107-108; Baker, *Life*, 71.
[53] William H. Seward, "Message to the Legislature" (1842), Baker, *Works* 2:335.
[54] Ibid, 341.
[55] Sheriff, 120-121, 176-177; Stahr, 155.
[56] Sheriff, 85.
[57] Van Deusen, 84-85; Baker, *Works*, 2:9-180. See specifically 99-100. Of the 170 pages of Seward's "Notes," he dedicated more than 40 to his history of the Erie Canal.
[58] Baker, *Works*, 2:109, 117.
[59] William H. Seward, "Intolerance" (1844), Baker, *Life,* 230.
[60] Ibid, 230-231.
[61] Seward, "Granting Land to Emigrants" (1850), Baker, *Works*, 1:290-291.
[62] Ibid, 292-296.
[63] William H. Seward, "Internal Improvements in the New States" (1850), Baker, *Works*, 1:302-304.
[64] Ibid, 305-307.
[65] William H. Seward, "Erie Railroad Jubilee" (1851), Baker, *Works*, 3:321-324.
[66] William H. Seward, "The Physical, Moral, and Intellectual Development of the American People" (1854), Baker, *Works*, 4:160, 162. See George Ripley and Charles A. Dana, Eds., *The New American Cyclopedia: A Popular Dictionary of General Knowledge* (8 vols, 1858-1863, D. Appleton and Company). Seward's entry, "DeWitt Clinton" appeared in the fourth volume on pages 686-690, and an extended version appeared in Baker, *Works*, 4:206-221. Passages cited here are from 220-221.
[67] William H. Seward, "The Contest and the Crisis" (1855), Baker, *Works*, 4:241-252.
[68] William H. Seward, "The National Idea; Its Perils and Triumphs" (1860), Baker, *Works*, 4:352, 355.
[69] Ibid, 358-359, 362.
[70] Farrow, 149-155.

[71] Baker, *Works* 2: 210-211; Seward, *Autobiography*, 1:426.