



Grand Canal Journey Comes Full Circle

BY JEAN MACKAY



The schooner *Lois McClure* is a full-scale replica of an 1862 sailing canal boat. The schooner was designed to sail from lake cities to canal ports using wind power. Upon reaching a canal, the masts were lowered and centerboard raised, transforming the vessel into a typical canal boat.

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It's a gorgeous Indian summer afternoon on the water, with barely a wisp of cloud in the September sky. A circle of twelve men and women—the crew of the *Lois McClure*—sit on deck of the replica 1862 canal schooner. They have spent the last 100 days together, living history and making history as they traveled 1,000 miles through the waterways of the NYS Canal System to celebrate the nationally significant Erie Canalway. They have come together to tell their story and share lessons learned.

This hearty group has done what few of us would: living together in close quarters on an 88- by- 14½ foot vessel with no toilet, no shower, no television, and precious little contact with family or friends for three months.

In exchange, they have experienced what few of us ever will: not only a journey through the scenic and historic waterways of Upstate New York, but the satisfaction of connecting with people and communities from Whitehall to Albany to Buffalo, as they explored and celebrated a central feature of New York's history: the Erie Canal.

The journey took place as the signature voyage of the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor, undertaken in partnership with the NYS Canal Corporation and the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum. In the course of the *Lois McClure's* travels, more than 30,000 people from 25 states and six countries stepped aboard for free tours offered in more than 25 communities.

Discovering the unexpected

Before setting out, few of the *Lois McClure's* crew had traveled beyond the Champlain Canal portion of the Erie Canalway, having made a voyage there in 2005. Beyond scouting ports- of- call for the Grand Canal Journey, traveling the Erie, Cayuga- Seneca, and Oswego Canals was uncharted territory.

What they discovered surprised them.

“I thought it would be a long, boring ditch,” admits Captain Roger Taylor, “but mostly what I saw was a gorgeous, gorgeous waterway.”

Taylor has plied the canals of France and Holland over the last six years, but the trip along the Erie was his first. “The Dutch canals are more crowded, but less beautiful, while the French canals are pretty, but have more commercial traffic,” he notes.



Designated by Congress in 2000 for its national significance, the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor works in partnership with its 234 communities to protect this treasured cultural and historic resource and to promote the Erie Canal system as a recreation destination for today's boaters and visitors.

Photo: NPS/BART CARRIG

The fact that the canal was dug by hand made it all the more astonishing. When it opened in 1825, the Erie Canal was America's greatest feat of engineering, transforming New York into the Empire State. In the century that followed, the canal contributed to the growth of every town and city along its path and made New York City the nation's principle port.

The crew echoes Taylor's sentiments. The nature and beauty of the scenery and the unique canal towns, along with the hospitality extended by communities and citizens alike, made the long Grand Canal Journey especially rewarding.

Making Connections

The Grand Canal Journey officially kicked off on July 2nd in Ithaca. *Lois McClure's* majestic sails unfurled and filled with hope, as much as wind, as she sailed Cayuga Lake to the delight of thousands of onlookers. From the Finger Lakes, the *Lois McClure* transformed into a traditional canal boat, with mast and sails lowered to accommodate the low bridges along the Erie Canal as the schooner headed west. Her trusty tug, the *Churchill*—the modern equivalent of mules or horses that towed canal boats in the 1800s—pulled her from port to port.

As the *Lois McClure* journeyed to Buffalo and then east again, she stopped for tours and festivities in small towns like Lyons, Palmrya, and Lockport, as well as larger cities, including Rochester and Syracuse. She cruised to Oswego, then east through the picturesque Mohawk Valley, and finally north through the Champlain Canal along the upper Hudson River.

As in olden times when the Erie Canal was the internet of its day, word spread about the Grand Canal Journey. Lock tenders passed news of the *Lois McClure* forward through the canal system. Family members from distant canal towns contacted each other to encourage siblings and parents to visit the schooner. People returned to the *Lois McClure* with their relatives and friends, photographers traveled for hundreds of miles taking pictures from each bridge and lock; one boy came back five times cajoling his friends to step on board.

"There was a magic that came along with the *Lois McClure*," says Art Cohn, Director of the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum. "The boat became a magnet for people with an interest, people with a curiosity, and people with a connection."

Communities responded with numerous gifts and acts of kindness. The crew was presented with baskets of peaches and cherries in Western New York, ten pounds of garlic in Brockport, and a block of Medina sandstone—cargo reminiscent of what would have been carried on canal boats in the 1800s. A homeowner in Waterford offered electrical hook-up to his garage; an elderly gentleman in Ithaca donated the bell from a boat he could no longer operate.



Learning Goes Both Ways

The crew educated 30,425 visitors who stepped on board for free tours. Five hundred and fifty school children were among the eager learners, not only impressed by life without television or gaming systems, but also more knowledgeable after seeing a real canal boat first hand—and realizing that had they been born 150 years earlier, they might have lived and worked on such a vessel themselves.

The crew, too, came away with valuable knowledge and new skills. During the *Lois McClure's* arrival in Medina, the boat was towed by mules for the first time.

Plan Your Visit

- Enjoy a picnic, fishing, or boating at one of the many Locks and canalside parks.
- Walk or cycle along the Erie Canalway Trail.
- Visit New York State historic sites, National Park sites, and other public or private attractions.
- Go to town for a unique shopping and dining experience or visit one of the Corridor's many farm stands and farmer's markets.
- Boaters should plan their itinerary carefully to allow ample time to go through locks and reach refueling stations or marinas.

“The experience with mules was one of the most important things that happened,” notes Captain Taylor. Though the crew had researched how to do it, and read recollections passed down through generations of family members who worked the towpath in the late- 1800s, book knowledge paled in comparison with life experience.

“We learned how it works and what it feels like to be towed by mules,” shares Taylor. “This gave us the ability to interpret the experience and pass on this knowledge ourselves.”

Bridge to the Future

As the Grand Canal Journey comes full circle, the crew is ready to head home. Other adventures, long needed rest await.

But America's greatest canal still beckons. Communities all along its banks are bringing the same can- do spirit and muscle power that built the Erie Canal to ensuring that it plays a prominent part of their future. Partnerships among governmental agencies, non- profit organizations, businesses, and municipalities are ensuring that the significant historic, cultural, and natural resources are preserved and showcased for the benefit of present and future generations.

“The Erie Canalway is a gem that unites communities from Buffalo to Albany to Whitehall,” reflects Museum Director Art Cohn. “It's all here: unique history, geology, and natural beauty; small towns and big cities. Equally important, we discovered a growing spirit of optimism and enthusiasm all along the canal that will help to ensure that others follow in our wake.”



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