

Transcribed Excerpts from Address to State of New York to Improve and Maintain the Erie Canal, December 29, 1885

ADDRESS OF O. B. POTTER AT A PUBLIC MEETING HELD IN NEW YORK CITY, DECEMBER 29, 1885.

Fellow-Citizens: I am glad to be present with you at this meeting. It is time we commenced the work resolved upon at the Utica conference, of lengthening the locks and deepening the Erie Canal, and putting it in a thorough state of efficiency. This canal has done more for the growth, development and prosperity of the State of New York ... since its construction, than any other agency. If kept free, and in a state of efficiency, it will continue its work of beneficence and blessing to our State for generations. This canal is the only reliable security which the people of this State ... have that the vast commerce of the Mississippi Valley and of the Great Lakes shall continue to come in increasing measure to the port of New York, and through it to the outside world, at rates of freight which will enable New York State and this port and city to maintain their own place in the commerce of this continent and of the world. The line of the Erie Canal, with the Great Lakes, is the natural highway of commerce from the great valley of the Mississippi to the seaboard ... I know it is said that the railways have superseded, and will supersede, the canal. I deny this proposition; and maintain that however useful and important the railways ... they by no means supersede the necessity for the maintenance of our canal.

The canal developed and called into being the great commerce by which our railways are now largely supported; and there is no antagonism between these two great agencies. Let them both work together, each doing all they can, competing together, which, at lowest tolls, shall carry the great commodities and productions of the seaboard and the East to the vast West and bring back the productions of the West to the East ... It is quite possible, it is indeed desirable, that the railways shall see it for their interest to carry, and shall carry, these freights both East and West at the lowest rates possible without loss, and in so doing they will vastly increase their own carrying power and the good which by this increase they will confer upon the country. But nothing will so surely secure that this shall be the policy of the railways as the maintenance and efficiency of the canals. Let the railways carry such freights, if they can, as cheap or cheaper than the canals can carry them profitably, and in doing this they will be repaying to this State, and to the population of these great cities at this port, tenfold the cost of the work that is now proposed in improving, deepening and maintaining in efficiency the canal. There is no greater mistake than to suppose that the maintenance of the canal in full efficiency, will injure or destroy the railway property of the State.

On the contrary, the greater the efficiency of the canal, and the lower the rates at which freights are carried, the more will all our cities grow along the line of the canal ... and larger will be the stream of commerce that shall pour out from this port to the world, and shall return from the world to us ... It is not from the mere carriage (sic) of freights for which the canal can compete, that our railways now derive, or can hereafter derive, their great profit. It is from the vast stream of travel and the immense and increasing flow of merchandise and commodities of every kind which cannot wait for the canal that the railways derive their profits. The amount of these profits depends directly upon the

population, the growth, the activity of the cities developed along the line of the railway, and upon the great foreign commerce which must also flow through this port to the interior, not over the canals, but, from the necessities of that commerce, over the railways. I cannot doubt that the time has already come when the railway management of our State shall see there is no antagonism between the canal and themselves.

Let it not be forgotten that railways can never wholly supersede the canal. When railways have absorbed all the business which they can do profitably ... there will still remain in the heaviest freights and gross commodities and raw materials for building ... a field for permanent and increasing usefulness for the Erie Canal, which will employ it beneficially and profitably, while the great cities at its termini and the cities and towns along its line shall continue to increase.

... The example of the State of New York in the building of this canal and in the maintenance of it, to the other States of this Union and to the great West, which enjoys its benefits almost equally with herself, is one of the proudest pages in her history ... I could not recount to you here all the vast projects now pressed upon the General Government and waiting only for the example and lead of New York in this fatal policy to be put in operation. Among them are the Cape Cod Canal, the Delaware and Chesapeake Canal, a canal across the State of Florida, the Hennepin Canal, a canal across the State of Michigan, and a canal to unite the waters of the Lakes with the Ohio River ...