

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, and especially of the city 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 and of this great city and of our neighboring city of Brooklyn 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. It was given to this State by the munificent hand of the Creator for our development and use. If we are true to ourselves, it will continue to be the great highway of commerce from East to West upon this continent in the future as it has been in the past. I know it is said that the railways have superseded, and will supersede, the canal.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 (and no man holds their agency in advancing civilization in higher estimate than I do), 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; and in this competition they will work out the highest good which can be secured by these agencies to both these great sections of our country. 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, the more and the faster will these great cities of New York and Brooklyn grow, 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. Our city, already the leading manufacturing city in the country, will continue to increase her manufactures, and in about the proportion in which the necessities of life shall be furnished here at low cost to her great population; and all the other cities from here to Buffalo will be advanced in prosperity and population by the same causes. 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, however liberally conducted, there will still remain in the heaviest freights and gross commodities and raw materials for building, especially such as require distribution to docks and wharves throughout the whole water-front of these two great cities of New York and Brooklyn and to other seaboard or river towns and cities in the vicinity, 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.

It is an equal mistake to suppose that the work now proposed in improving the canal, is inimical to the farming interest and to the real property of the State. The value of our lands and our houses and warehouses, whether in city or country, depends upon the growth of our great cities and their commerce and business. Whatever shall blight these cities and their commerce, whatever shall check their development and growth, will in equal or greater measure injure and destroy the farming interests throughout the State, and the value of real property in all our cities. As one having whatever I possess in real property situated mainly in this city, but being also considerably interested in farming, I have no hesitation in saying that there are few things more important to farmers and to real-estate owners throughout the State, and especially in the great cities of New York and Brooklyn, than that the work you now propose of deepening the canal and lengthening the locks and putting them in a state of efficiency, shall be entered upon and carried forward to its consummation without delay.

I cannot stop without saying one word more. It is proposed by many throughout our State, and has been to some extent indorsed (sic) by one of the great political parties of the State, that we shall call for aid from the General Government in the improvement and maintenance of our canal. For one, I can take no part in this work. The Erie Canal was built and has been maintained by our State for the purpose of taking and holding the place in the commerce of the continent and the world to which we were and are entitled. It has vindicated the wisdom of its projectors, and conferred constantly a volume of immeasurable benefit upon the whole State. It is ours. Built by our fathers, maintained and made free by ourselves, let it be ours still to maintain, to support, and to reap its benefits. 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. We cannot, we must not, expunge or blot it now. By that example New York has proclaimed, at the head of the column of States, the great truth that the States, each in their own place, self-reliant and self-sustained, are to be the living pillars of support and strength to the nation, and never to become burdens or charges upon other portions of the country. When the great State of New York shall be found with imploring hands asking from this nation that,

through taxation upon the people of the other States of this Union, it shall furnish the means to maintain our canals or our railways, she will cease to be the New York of the past. No policy could be more fatal to the prosperity and welfare of this country and to the growth and development of all the States than the policy now threatened of carrying forward these great works within the State by the General Government through taxation. No State can gain anything by this policy. Such works carried on by the General Government will cost, as all national works cost, many times what they will if executed by the States themselves.

If the Government is to furnish the means for these works, it may, of course, decide upon the time, the extent, and the manner of the works; and thus the control of these great interests will be delivered from ourselves to the General Government. Instead of being self-reliant, progressive, self-supporting States, we shall kneel at the feet of a central power asking it to do the works that have hitherto been done by us, and in doing which we have grown manly and great; we shall become little more than dependent States, depending for our prosperity and our progress and development, not upon our own strength, but upon the grace and favor of a government over whose decisions we have no control. The State of New York pays one-seventh part or more of the taxes which support our Government. Under this policy, if inaugurated, she will pay many fold more. 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. There are many more; sufficient altogether, if this policy is entered upon, to remove from this generation all hope that national taxation shall be reduced or our foreign commerce revived. This policy, if entered upon, will lead in the end to the surrender of the great object to secure which our Government was formed — self-government by the States, and by the people of the States. While it will destroy our manhood as a people, and our pride and self-reliance and ambition as self-supporting States, it will wither and destroy our liberties, for, in the vast employment which it may inaugurate throughout the country under the auspices of the General Government, the Central Government will have easy and sure control of elections in the States where these great works are carried on. Beware, I beseech you — beware of being seduced into taking the first step in this direction.