



New York State Archives

**New York State Engineer and Surveyor Western Division
Letter Books B0690**

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Overview of the Records

Repository:	New York State Archives
Summary:	This series is comprised of letter books used by the Western Division Engineer's Office to record copies of letters sent by division, resident, and assistant engineers. The letter books cover a wide variety of topics ranging from repairs and improvements of the Western Division of the Erie Canal, contracts with workers, repairs of lift bridges, estimates, and progress reports.
Creator:	New York (State). State Engineer and Surveyor
Title:	Western Division letter books
Quantity:	4 cubic feet
Quantity:	32 volumes
Inclusive Date:	1854-1899
Series:	B0690

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Arrangement

This series is arranged chronologically.

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Administrative History

The passage of Chapter 274 of the Laws of 1835 on May 11, 1835 authorized the canal commissioners to enlarge the Erie canal and to construct a double set of lift-locks, as soon as the canal board believed that public interest required such improvement. By the terms of Chapter 169, Laws of 1862, the first enlargement of the canals of the state was officially declared completed. Despite the enlargement process being declared finished, there was still enlargement work to be completed in the western division of the canal. Earlier volumes in this series have correspondence that is relevant to this enlargement project as well as projects related to the enlargement.

Chapter 79 of the Laws of 1895 proposed enlargement and improvement of the canals. Work was to be done by contract and in accordance with plans, specifications, and estimates prepared and approved by the State Engineer and Surveyor that stated the extent of each piece of work and the materials to be used in doing it. Succeeding legislation in 1896 and 1897 amended that law, regulating the making of contracts for work on the canal, reapportioning unexpended balances, and appropriating funds for carrying on canal improvements. The volumes in this series from 1895 to 1898 mainly deal with the improvements done under this law.

Chapter 15 of the Laws of 1898, as amended by chapter 327 of the Laws of 1898 stated that a commission be appointed by the governor in order to investigate the nine million dollar improvement project. This commission investigated the work done on the canal enlargement, whether contracts were properly made, how much money was expended for enlargement, the proportion of the enlargement included in contracts, and whether any extra money would be required to complete the enlargement. Correspondence related to the commission to investigate the nine million dollar improvements is included in the later volumes of this series.

The act to provide for the improvement of the public highways, Chapter 115 of the laws of 1898, states that the board of supervisors in any county must pass a resolution that public interest demands the improvement of any public highway or section within the county as long as the road is not in the boundaries of any city or incorporated village. The State Engineer then reviews the resolution and make recommendations as to what sort of road would be best suited to the climate, soil, materials and nature of traffic likely to be on the road. Later volumes in this series contain correspondence related to the construction of roads.

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Scope and Content Note

This series was used by the Western Division Engineer's Office to record copies of letters sent by division, resident, and assistant engineers. The letters mainly deal with the Western Division of the Erie Canal which ran from Buffalo to the Wayne County line in Clyde, New York. Most of the books are indexed, although there are a few that do not contain one. The pages in these volumes are thin, onion skin copying paper but are generally in good condition. Due to the letter copying process, some of the letters are blurry, faded, or otherwise difficult to read.

The letter books cover many topics ranging from the enlargement of the Erie Canal, repairs and improvements to the canal, estimates of work to be completed, issues with landowners, sketches of projects, contractor and labor issues, maps, civil service rules and regulations, the Good Roads Movement, cement tests, progress reports and histories of projects, and routine office matters.

Letter books from 1895 to 1899 cover the "Nine Million Dollar Improvement" of the Erie Canal, which was authorized by legislation enacted in 1895. The funds appropriated by this

act were meant to enlarge, deepen and otherwise improve the condition of the canal. By 1898 funds for the improvements were running low and letter books from this year cover the cessation of all canal work, leaves of absence for employees, and money required to complete unfinished work. On July 30, 1898, a commission was appointed by Governor Frank S. Black to investigate the nine million dollar improvement project. Correspondence regarding the canal investigation commission is included in these letter books.

New civil service requirements are also a topic covered in the correspondence of the engineers of the Western Division office. Civil service reform was enacted on a federal level by President Chester Arthur on January 16, 1883. This federal law was quickly followed by civil service reform in New York State. The act to regulate and improve the civil service of the state of New York, Chapter 354 of the laws of 1883, was passed on May 4, 1883. The letter books from this time period deal with some of the difficulties the office had with the new civil service regulations.

This series also documents the improvement of roads in western New York, inspired in part by the Good Roads Movement which began to take hold throughout the state by the late 1880s. Advocates began to push for better roads in rural areas where many of the roads were unpaved. The State Engineer and Surveyor's office oversaw many of these civil engineering projects. Several letter books in this series include contracts or other correspondence with contractors hired to work on "Good Roads" projects.

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Related Information

Related Material

A0834Series A0834, Printed Material, Correspondence and Photographs from the Canal Investigating Commission (1898)

B0687Series B0687, Contract specifications, engineers' estimates, and related documents pertaining to the nine million dollar canal improvement

B0328Series B0328, General Inspector's Office Letter books and

B0681Series B0681, Histories of various canal projects on Western Division of the Erie Canal all contain related records.

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Use of Records

Access Restrictions

There are no restrictions regarding access to or use of this material.

Access Terms

- Roads--Design and construction
- Monitoring
- Erie Canal (N.Y.)
- Supervising
- Roadside improvement
- Letter books
- New York (State)
- Canals
- Civil service
- New York (State). Department of Transportation