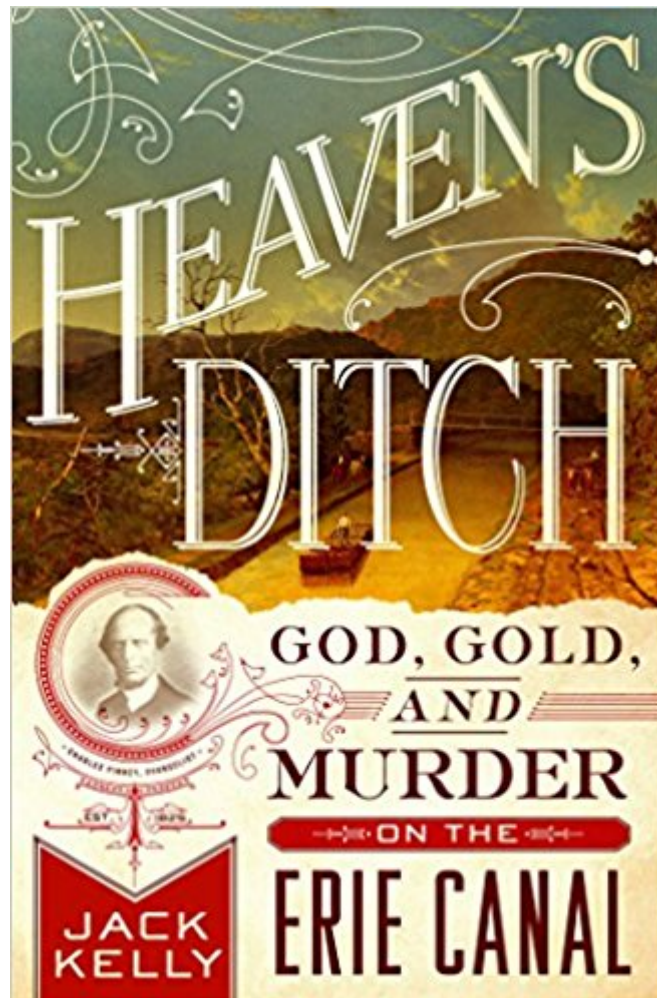




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# Heaven's Ditch: God, Gold, And Murder On The Erie Canal



## Synopsis

The technological marvel of its age, the Erie Canal grew out of a sudden fit of inspiration. Proponents didn't just dream; they built a 360-mile waterway entirely by hand and largely through wilderness. As excitement crackled down its length, the canal became the scene of the most striking outburst of imagination in American history. Zealots invented new religions and new modes of living. The Erie Canal made New York the financial capital of America and brought the modern world crashing into the frontier. Men and women saw God face to face, gained and lost fortunes, and reveled in a period of intense spiritual creativity. *Heaven's Ditch* by Jack Kelly illuminates the spiritual and political upheavals along this "psychic highway" from its opening in 1825 through 1844. "Wage slave" Sam Patch became America's first celebrity daredevil. William Miller envisioned the apocalypse. Farm boy Joseph Smith gave birth to Mormonism, a new and distinctly American religion. Along the way, the reader encounters America's very first "crime of the century," a treasure hunt, searing acts of violence, a visionary cross-dresser, and a panoply of fanatics, mystics, and hoaxers. A page-turning narrative, *Heaven's Ditch* offers an excitingly fresh look at a heady, foundational moment in American history.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Compelling ...Kelly captures the enormous excitement of these heady days. An intriguing synthesis of American cultural and economic currents in the early 19th century." *—Kirkus*

Reviews"Jack Kelly's entertaining romp across upstate New York during the early years of the Erie Canal is fascinating, shocking, and filled with surprises. From religious fanatics to murderers to

genius engineers, they're all here, transforming America in their wake." ~ Lauren Belfer, New York Times bestselling author of CITY OF LIGHT and AND AFTER THE FIRE "It was a fun read and very informative. The book is a wonderful read and really captures much of the transformation that was occurring culturally, politically and religiously in the first half of the 19th century and around the canal." ~ David Brooks, Education Coordinator, Schoharie Crossing State Historic Site "Well researched work showing Kelly's deft ability to bring to life the strong and pivotal characters who, by will or grace, moved American History forward." ~ Susan Fargione at Merritt Bookstore in Millbrook, NY "An adventure story disguised as the history of the Erie Canal, Heaven's Ditch is compelling reading, fascinating history and a character driven chronicle of a lost America. Highly recommended." ~ Chris Morrow, Northshire Bookstores "In this bright, breezy, and immensely informative account, Jack Kelly interweaves the saga of one of the nation's greatest engineering feats, the Erie Canal, with the stories of Joseph Smith and a half dozen other colorful figures who peopled upstate New York in its most creative period." ~ Richard Bushman, preeminent scholar of Mormonism and author of Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling, the definitive biography of the church's founder "Kelly's study of upstate New York is a compelling history of ambition and religious fervor in early 19th century America." ~ Dick Hermans, owner of Oblong Books in Millbrook and Rhinebeck and a past president of the New England Independent Booksellers Association "Jack Kelly has a whole new take on two old creations ~ the Erie Canal and the Second Great Revival ~ deftly synthesizing familiar separate stories into a timeless interplay of technological and religious fervor, speculation and salvation. Heaven's Ditch reminds us how man and God have long mingled in the psyche of America where strong, deep, competing urges for commercial and spiritual uplift give us destructive chaos and astonishing progress. Heaven's Ditch is beautifully written and masterfully told: intelligent and insightful new history." ~ Gerard Koeppel, author of Bond of Union: Building the Erie Canal and the American Empire "Heaven's Ditch is the fantastic story of a fantastic undertaking through a fantastic country, the wild, turbulent, sometimes murderous construction of the greatest engineering project since the pyramids, built through an America bubbling with religious revivals, get-rich-quick schemes, and manifest destiny. It's all true! Stranger than fiction but just as entertaining." ~ Kevin Baker, author of The Big Crowd "The Erie Canal was the most audacious public works project of its day, a game-changer in American history, and the stage for some wild and intriguing characters and events ~ including daredevils, zealots and Mormons. Who knew? Jack Kelly's Heaven's Ditch tells a not-to-be-missed story in a reader-friendly style. Sure to be a hit, this thought-provoking book will

definitely spark discussion." —â€œErica Freudenberger, Director, Red Hook Public Library, Best Small Library in America Award finalist

JACK KELLY is a journalist, novelist, and historian, whose books include *Band of Giants*, which received the DAR's History Award Medal. He has contributed to *The Wall Street Journal*, and other national periodicals, and is a New York Foundation for the Arts fellow. He has appeared on The History Channel and been interviewed on National Public Radio. He spent his childhood in a town in the canal corridor adjacent to Palmyra, Joseph Smith's home. He now lives in New York's Hudson Valley.

The Erie Canal is not the focus of this book narratively, just temporally. If you're hoping for a volume that really delves into the politics and mechanics of the canal, you will be disappointed. Instead, this is a book about just about everything else going on near the canal during the time it was envisioned and built. Religion, politics, social movements, agriculture and economics, etc. But mostly religion, because western New York was a hotbed of revelation and revival back then, and if that's your thing then you'll find this fascinating. Alas, i'd been hoping for a little more ditch in the story. Really, it's just a temporal anchor, a background force that shifts people's lives in unexpected ways. I had some trouble with the organization of the book, which features a fairly broad cast of characters and leaps between them sometimes at random. For example, the first section of the book ranges from the guy who first published the suggestion of a canal across the state all the way to the victim of the titular murder, which happens years after the canal is finished. It jumps from the political quagmire of funding the canal, the complications of the war of 1812 thereon, the financial standings of various families that will be relevant to the story, the surveyors laying the path for the canal, and probably a few other factions i'm forgetting, plus a whole lot about religion, revivals, calvinists and presbyterians, conversions and epiphanies, and all the other related shenanigans. It all comes together eventually, but by the end of the first section you'd be forgiven for wondering if you're supposed to pay more attention to surveyors and their degree of error or men having religious experiences in wooded areas.

What a fascinating book! For those of us who grew up anywhere near the Erie Canal there is so much we were never taught. The narrative is amazing and loaded with info on the origin and building of the canal, the towns near it, the spiritual awakening in New York State and some of the strange happenings....like murder and strange forms of amusement.... that accompanied the

building of the canal. In the late part of the book the narrative slows down and some of it could probably be left out, but this is a great read for the history buff as well as anyone interested in religion, building, and an engineering marvel.

I loved this factual book about the history of the Erie canal which was started in eastern New York state in the early 1820s. What a monumental undertaking it was at the time. The canal changed the world! Jack Kelly is a wonderful writer. The portion about mormon "prophet" Joseph Smith's early life and adulthood growing up in New York state, Evangelist Charles Finney, Presbyterian minister Lyman Beecher, Governor DeWitt Clinton and many others are featured in this book. Pages and pages of footnotes. Also appreciated was the large map from eastern New York state across to Lake Erie at Buffalo, NY. Great read. Highly recommended -- Amoret

Historical, religious, but the descriptions of the engineering behind the Canal and the people and communities that built it and lived around it are what held my interest. Started reading for the history, kept reading to understand that little nitch of America and its people so much better...

I am from upstate NY, Rome, to be exact, the site of the groundbreaking for the Erie Canal. The history was particularly interesting to me. There are still small sections of the Erie Canal that are visible and are hiking trails for the locals. I have always heard it called Clinton's Ditch; Heaven's Ditch was new to me. Very good book.

Far too much on the history of American religious revivalism but the canal construction is a great yarn and well narrated.

Boring, confusing, disjointed. Gave up and didn't finish it. Good topic but book had very little to do with Erie Canal

Really enjoyed reading this detail packed book that moved along quickly. A great way to learn the history of an area and era.

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