



# “Musing from the Hill” by Susan Crossett

as seen on the *Dunkirk Observer* on Fridays  
and the *Jamestown Post-Journal* on Saturdays



## Following the Erie Canal

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Suspecting I was being whisked away for a longer stay, I grabbed a book as I packed.

Well, naturally when the immediate future seems a bit iffy, it makes sense to plan big. In this instance, that meant the 922-page “Three Stalwarts” by Walter D. Edmonds. I had already enjoyed “Drums Along the Mohawk” so this time chose “Erie Water.” It's not a title I'm particularly fond of, my only complaint with a magnificent novel.



I intentionally scheduled it as a suggestion for an ideal Christmas gift for any in your family. Amazon has/had my volume for \$10.41 with prices zooming up to over seven hundred dollars. Reviews are all five stars.



“Erie Water” follows the building of the Erie Canal through the eyes of a young man, twenty-one and away from home for the first time, who works on the canal from start to finish. “Ho, hum, dull?” Never for a minute! The plot is excellent with unexpected twists while the characters (never hard to follow) come alive on every page. That said, it's by far the easiest way to increase one's knowledge and appreciation of a vital project almost next door.

Come, meet Jerry Fowler. “I've got ninety dollars. I aim to use fifty for a down payment on fifty acres and take out articles to pay the other two hundred. They say you have eight years' time from the Company.”

On a cross-river ferry in Albany Jerry sees a brig loaded with “Passengers: At the sloop dock, April 15, 1817, at half after eleven, who are willing to defray the expense of their passage by engaging themselves for a limited time, consist of persons of the following occupations, besides women and children; viz: – 13 farmers, 1 baker, 1 butcher, 1 whitesmith, 2 shoemakers, 1 brewer, 1 wheelwright, 2 barbers, 1 cabinetmaker, 1 stocking weaver, 1 coalburner, 2 coopers.

“Apply on board Honeyman's sloop, Lady. Henry Fearon, master *Bubona*, present at that time.”

Another observer speaks. “Poor things. I feel sorry for them. It's not so bad for the men. It's the women and children. The young ones. They don't know what's in store for them and they can't choose. Fearon signs them on to any that meets his price.”

Just up the dock [Jerry] saw the sloop load of redemptioners. He had a clear view of the girl in the blue shawl now. Some of the spirit had slipped out of her attitude. Her shoulders were drooping a little. Her eyes had ceased their restless wandering and were bent down-river with a passive, hopeless stare.



“But the girl was afraid. She did not talk to the others; she kept to herself. A sailor, rolling down the deck, spied her and hailed her. The sloop hands laughed. And the girl, with a swift lift of her head, noticed him, her color deepened, and she bit her lips and moved indefinitely closer to her others, as if she meant to conceal herself. As she stared round, her eyes met Jerry's.”

“All at once he found himself retracing his steps. He would take another look, he said to himself, and if the girl were gone, that would settle it. He felt like a fool, but he was his own man to do as he liked.”

Which in this case means buying the girl. Forty dollars was a good deal, he thought. I'll have to hire out a winter and make it up.

Only the captain wanted more because her mother died on the voyage and thus there had been two. “The bills in his hands fluttered. He had not meant to bargain, but he felt the girl's eyes on him. Without a word he counted out thirty more dollars. It left him a pitifully flimsy sheaf.”



The girl “regarded Jerry quietly a moment. The captain handed over the papers. He blew a dip of ink from the point of the quill and wiped it on his trousers, gave Jerry a brief grin, turned to the baker.

“‘Agreed, mister?’

Jerry tied up the papers in his bundle.

“‘Come on,’ he said to the girl.”

And we're just ten pages into the story. (Yes, it is about the Erie Canal and, yes, you will enjoy it.)