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**Franklin D. Roosevelt — “The Great Communicator”**  
**The Master Speech Files, 1898, 1910-1945**

**Series 1: Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Political Ascension**

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**File No. 478**

**1932 June 7**

**Opening of the Port of Albany, NY**

Nature and Man as contributing factors in the creation of the  
Albany Port, at the opening of the Port of Albany, Tuesday,  
June 7, 1932

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It has been well said that today marks the fifth great milestone of the  
progress of civilization in the history of Albany and of this section of the  
great Empire State.

The first was of course the advent of Henry Hudson in the *Half Moon* when the North River came definitely to the knowledge of Europe.

The second was nearly two centuries later, in 1807, when Robert Fulton established steam navigation on the seas through the voyage of *The Clermont* from New York to Albany.

The third, in 1825, marked the connecting of the Great Lakes with the Hudson River by the opening of the Erie Canal.

The fourth, in 1831, was the inauguration of the first railway passenger service in America, from Albany to Schenectady.

Today we celebrate the bringing of the seven seas to this same historic spot.

May I dwell today briefly on three principles which I believe are worthy of remembrance. The first of these is that Nature herself has created certain great avenues and certain great barriers which encourage or limit the activities of mankind into geographical paths. We know, for example, that migration through all the ages and the consequent settling and intermingling of peoples have followed natural courses, such as great valleys or great rivers. We know also that mountain ranges have had the contrary effect—limiting migration and preventing intercourse between those who have lived on either side.

It was therefore wholly natural that when the first settlers of what is now the United States, sailed to our shores, they should choose the Chesapeake Bay country and the Hudson River as the logical arteries into the wilderness. In a very true sense the character of the Hudson River was more that of a fjord or estuary of the ocean itself than a mere stream flowing into the sea.

And when the first colonization of its banks had been completed, Nature again pointed out that westward expansion was more practicable through the Mohawk Valley and thence to the Great Lakes than by any other possible route south of the St. Lawrence River itself. The vast chain of the Appalachians extending all the way from southern New York to the Colony of Georgia, gave to the Hudson-Mohawk route an early advantage which it has ever since maintained. Reason fortified by history proved the argument that so long as the transportation of man and his goods and chattels continues to be through the medium of water and land, this part of the Eastern Seaboard will remain the natural and logical gateway to the West.

The second thought which I would emphasize is that civilization can supplement but never wholly change the facilities afforded by Dame Nature. There is a limit to the capacity of human beings to overcome natural handicaps. We cannot make water run up-hill, we cannot level mountains, we cannot dig canals across continents, unless the task falls within the limitations imposed by what we call wealth and what we call labor. It is true that these limiting factors vary with the progress of science and the needs of the day; but even here, whatever our dreams may be, we are faced by the limits of practicabilities.

We knew, for example, in the days of DeWitt Clinton, that a canal from Albany to the Lakes was a practical possibility if it followed rivers and valleys which Nature had already provided. We knew at the beginning of this century that this canal could be enlarged to conform with the needs of a later day. And the engineers have told us today that a canal along the same course provided by nature can be built for ocean-going vessels from the Hudson to the Lakes. Such a canal connecting the Atlantic Seaboard with the valley of the Mississippi would be wholly impossible at any other point within our national borders.

These lessons learned over many generations teach us today that we can improve on nature so long as we follow the lines of nature, but that if nature sets up barriers which man cannot overcome with his present resources of wealth and science, we must accept the limitations of nature.

Finally, I believe that this great project—the Port of Albany itself and the ship channel which connects it with the ocean—will stand forth for many years as a splendid example of how to carry on public works through the co-operation of many units of government and many organizations of citizens.

In Washington, in state capitals, in cities and in counties we have often been careless in the methods we have used to create public betterments for our citizens. We have undertaken vast projects which would have a useful life of many years, without thought of how future generations would pay for their maintenance. We have taxed our citizens for these projects, in many cases at such an increasing rate that today we are paying the penalty. We have started too many new public works for political reasons; we have started too many without adequate planning for the future; we have started too many because of the insistence and noise of some organized minority. This does not mean in the least that at a time of distress like this we should not use the method of public works, properly planned and definitely useful, to give employment to many who are out of work. This inauguration of the Port of Albany has been well planned, properly financed, and will give employment to even more people in the future than it has in the past.

It is worth stressing the fact that the work of the Federal government with that of the State, through its agent, the Albany Port District Commission, has been marked by splendid team work; and I take this occasion to thank the Assistant Secretary of War and his department for the fine co-operation which has been given by the Federal government to the State of New York in this great task at all times.

In the same way the Albany Port District Commission, acting as an agent of the State, has had noteworthy assistance from the cities and counties which comprise the Capitol District. And to you, Chairman Ten Eyck, and the other members of your commission, and with you to the mayors of Albany and Rensselaer and the officials of all the Capitol District, I extend my congratulations and thanks for what you have so greatly accomplished.

So also in the financing of the work, we have proceeded along sound lines. Because the Hudson River is an estuary for the free use of the tonnage of the world, the work of deepening the channel by the Federal government has properly been paid for out of current funds. On the other hand the actual development of the port, for the practical reason that adequate port charges over many years will reimburse the expenditures here made, has made the issuance of bonds and the spreading of the construction cost over a generation both sound and to the interest of the taxpayers. I might add for the benefit of those who are not conversant with the method adopted by this State for the financing of permanent, revenue-producing improvements, that I am satisfied that the creation of responsible authorities, as in the case of the Port Authority of New York, the Albany Port District Commission, and several bridge commissions, has not only been wise but has saved the citizens of this State from a larger State debt and also from higher annual taxes than we now pay.

It is our firm belief that these great wharves, warehouses and elevators will instead of being an annual expense to the State government, be paid for by the actual users of the facilities and paid for over a period of years, as is wholly proper.

We are still a young nation and in many ways a people immature, in comparison with civilizations either of the Old World or of the East. Only three centuries have elapsed since the permanent white colonization of the Hudson River; only one century has elapsed since the hay and grain sloops and schooners were replaced by the canal boat under steam tow.

I myself remember well my boyhood days when at Hyde Park I used to sit by the hour, watching the great fleets of canal boats bearing the produce of the Middle West and the western part of our own State, the ice from the Upper Hudson, and the coal from the Delaware & Hudson Canal on their slow journey to the city of New York. Through these latter years I have realized with perhaps a note of regret the passing of the old-fashioned canal boat. I have noted the new steel barges which are replacing them; but I do not think that any event has startled me quite so much as what I saw two years ago as I was driving down the River Road between here and Castleton. We came around a turn and there close to the highway

was an ocean-going steamship gliding along on its way to the Capital City. It signified that at last the modern carriers of the ocean had reached the center of our State. It meant that again civilization had helped out old Dame Nature. It meant that another dream had come true.

In the fulfillment of this dream I congratulate you who are here and indeed all of the citizens of our State.

May the future justify the enthusiasm of this day. May the use of the Port of Albany bring to us not alone material advantages, but also a deeper understanding of our responsibilities to our fellow-citizens and to the generations that come hereafter.