

“Many ‘Firsts’ Occurred in 1830s.” *Lockport Free Press*. “Old Canal Days” Special, 15 June 1978.

Many ‘firsts’ occurred in 1830s

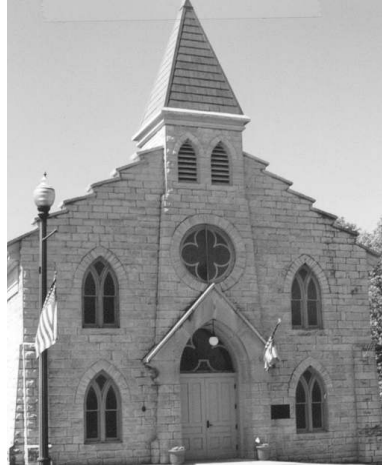
This is the third of a series on the history of the Lockport area by John Lamb. Lamb is a professor of history at Lewis University and is active in the Will County Historical Society and the Lockport Historic Preservation Council. Previous articles have dealt with the significance of the Des Plaines River Valley and John Lane, the inventor of the first steel plow.

This story deals with Lockport in the 1830s. The history of Lockport in the 1830s can be divided into the pre-canal era before 1836 and the post canal era after that date.

When the possibility of a canal connecting Lake Michigan to the Illinois River was widely publicized, settlers began to move into the area around Lockport.

In 1830 Chicago was platted by the Illinois and Michigan Canal commissioners, and in the same year the first white settler came to Lockport. He was Armstead Runyon. Runyon settled on the east side of the Des Plaines River in the northern part of the present city of Lockport.

The eastern side of the river was heavily timbered with good hardwood and watered by a number of streams, while the western side of the river was prairie and scrub growth. The Lockport area was one of the earliest settled in the county, probably because it had a good ford across the Des Plaines and plenty of timber and water.



The Old First Congregational Church, now the Lockport Youth Center, is one of the landmarks of the area

The year Runyon came to the area was one in which the snow seems to have fallen heavier and deeper than any year since. His livestock died, and in the spring he went to Danville to buy more cattle. His journey back was perilous and slow because of the snow melting and the resulting flooding. His wife and children were left stranded virtually alone in this hostile environment. They survived on salted pork and mildewed cornmeal bread.

Aside from the more mundane tribulations of breaking prairie and building a house, the next hazard to face these pioneers was the Black Hawk War. Looking back, the peril seems more imagined than real. Black Hawk and his tribe moved only through the western part of Illinois and there were only a few warriors. Although there was an attack and massacre outside Ottawa, the only

Indians around Lockport were friendly Potawatomis.

The major peril from these Indians was the ravages of smallpox that had been introduced by the White Man. The settlers feared it would be given back by the Red Man as an Indian gift. Runyon’s daughter wrote of her mother’s inhospitality to the Indians, when stories of smallpox circulated. The Indians had a large encampment between the present site of Dellwood Park and Big Run Creek.

When the settlers around Lockport heard of Black Hawk’s movements, they first fled to Fort Dearborn, near Chicago. They soon decided to go back to Lockport where they built a blockhouse on the farm of Holder Sisson.

Fort Sission was Lockport’s only military establishment and not a very formidable fort. But it was secure enough as long as military operations centered elsewhere. The commander of the Lockport forces was Sisson, who had served in the War of 1812. He was appointed captain of the Lockport Company.

The unit’s only action was to proceed to the site of the massacre in LaSalle County to bury the dead.

Holder Sisson was later to be one of the first commissioners of Cook County; before 1836 there was no Will County. Soon after the Black Hawk War he sold his

farm to Comstock Hanford and moved west of the Des Plaines.

Several 'firsts' for Lockport occurred in those early days. Lockport's first white child was Orrin R. Runyon, born in 1833. He and his father, Armstead, would leave Lockport in 1849 to seek their fortunes in the California gold fields. The elder Runyon settled and made a fortune on the Sacramento River as a fruit and vegetable grower. He is buried at Santa Rosa. His son did well as a fruit grower near Cortland, Calif.

The first death in Lockport was the sister of the first doctor, Dr. Miner, who came in 1833. The first justice of the peace was Jared Runyon in 1836. The first mill, a saw mill, was built on the west side of the Des Plaines in 1833. The first school was started in 1833.

One of the early preachers used to hold services in the school house before there was a church. He used to attract the attention of his listeners by wiping his nose on his coat tail during the sermon. His flock was apparently so moved by Christian charity that it is recorded that he bought him a red bandana.

Some of the firsts of the 1830s are recorded; others are not—some are probably better left unrecorded. A listing of all those recorded would be too tedious to dwell upon.

The year of 1836 was a crucial one for Lockport. In 1836 the county of Will was created. On July 4, the first shovel was turned in the long-promised Illinois and Michigan Canal.

Armstead Runyon, anticipating a land boom, laid out an area in the northern part of town called Runyon Town. However, his plans were to be superseded by the canal commissioners, who had decided to make Lockport the headquarters for the canal. The reason for their action was that between Lockport and Joliet, the largest fall in elevation on the line of the canal occurs. It seemed that Lockport's site would be a natural location for the most important town on the canal.

The first plat by the canal commissioners was mapped in December 19, 1836. It was done by a Mr. Wampler, but evidently not filed in the court house. It shows an interesting symmetrical town laid on an axis formed by the canal. On Washington Street between 2nd and 3rd and between 11th and 12th, two half-blocks were reserved for markets. Halfway between the markets was the public square. There was land to be reserved for a college.

These sites were changed when the map was filed in 1837, but the town would still pivot around the canal.

The promise of the canal was central to Lockport's development in the 1830s. At that time, it was planned to construct a deep water canal that would draw water via the Chicago River from Lake Michigan. As a result, the potential energy from water power would be greatest at Lockport.

In 1837 a travel guide for settlers coming to Illinois titled *A Gazetteer of Illinois in Three Parts*, said there would be a 20-foot fall on the canal at Lockport

and that this would be enough to supply enough power to run 234 pairs of mill wheels or enough for about 20 mills or other factories that used water power.

W.B. Archer, a canal commissioner, platted some land in the northern part of the town and advertised in the *Chicago American* in April 1837, that Lockport "...is surrounded by one of the richest agricultural sections of the state commanding the trade of the Yankee settlement on the east and Plainfield and the surrounding country on the west and is supported by a heavy body of water, timber, stone and springs of the purest water. There is now in operation within a quarter mile a first rate saw mill and a flouring mill of stone is contracted to be built at the same place."

The prospects for Lockport seemed so great in the 1830s that though the original town laid out by the canal commissioners didn't advertise, various additions such as Archer's were constantly brought to the attention of settlers arriving in Chicago.

On July 15 an ad appeared for more lots for Lockport, noting, "Lockport, extensively known as the best commercial point between the commencement of the canal and its termination is the center for the best improved country on the line of the canal. The canal to this point is calculated for steam boat or ship navigation and is to be fed from Lake Michigan."

So it seemed that Lockport would be the pre-eminent town on the canal. These hopes founded upon the abundance of water power were to be dashed in the

1840s when it became apparent that the state could not afford the cost of the deep cut necessary to drain Lake Michigan water.

The fabric of Lockport was set though. In 1837 the first substantial structure in town was built. It is the north wing of the present canal museum. It was to serve as canal headquarters, land office. For a few months in 1839 it served as the branch of the Bank of Illinois. In that capacity, the canal commissioners issued a number of notes in various denominations to be used as currency. It was hoped that these would be accepted throughout

Northern Illinois. However, since they were backed by nothing but the state's name, not a byword for fiscal integrity at the time, they were never accepted.

The first good road out of Chicago was built to Lockport and the canal offices. It was known as Archer's Road and survives to this day as Route 171.

Under the impact of canal construction and its promised benefits, Lockport prospered in the 1830s, to the extreme discomfort of neighboring Joliet, or Julliete, as it was called at the time.

Lock 1, near modern-day Division Street, was completed before the end of the decade. The Congregational Church in 1839 built the stone Greek Revival structure that survives today as the Lockport Youth Center. The building had a fine portico that was removed in the late 19th Century and replaced with a stone facade.

In 1839 things seemed very promising for Lockport, but the succeeding decade would see many of these hopes brought to naught.