

“Lockport Viewed by 1840s Visitor.” *Lockport Free Press*. “Old Canal Days” Special, 15 June 1978.

Lockport viewed by 1840's visitor

This is the fourth in a series of articles on the history of Lockport by John Lamb. Lamb is a professor of history at Lewis University and active in the Will County Historical Society and the Lockport Historic Preservation Council. This article deals with Lockport in the early 1840s.

By 1840 Lockport had become a settled village, expanding rapidly because of the promise of water power from the canal.

In 1837 the first sale of lots in Lockport had occurred, yielding \$6000. By 1840 there were a number of buildings in Lockport such as the Canal offices and the Congregational Church, now the Lockport Youth Center. General Fry, a veteran of the Blackhawk War and a canal commissioner, had built a fine residence on the present site of the Heritage First National Bank. The house was part of the old library building which was torn down in the 1960s. Next to Fry's house was one built by General Thornton, another canal commissioner.

The stonework for the canal was completed at Lockport, though nowhere else on the canal. As a result, there was a great deal of stone quarrying going on. It had been discovered that Lockport stone made a high quality hydraulic cement necessary for canal structures such as Lock Number 1, near present-day Division Street.

Joe Buckingham was an Englishman on his way to Chicago

in 1840. After fording the Des Plaines River, he entered Lockport and first noticed the canal works. He then noted that about 200 homes were built and "...the greater number were large, commodious, in good taste and ornamented with surrounding gardens."

Buckingham further noted that the site of Lockport was "...remarkably beautiful as here the prairie changed to woods and the hills had occasional trees and small groves." This gave the town the appearance of a park, wrote Buckingham. "It was all in all one of the prettiest towns we had seen along the way."

An 1840 visitor would arrive in Lockport after first crossing the boulder-strewn Des Plaines Valley. He would then find the canal works, a well laid out and immense engineering project in the midst of the Northern Illinois Wilderness.

The walls of the canal were nine feet high and built from local stone. The canal was 100 feet wide. The canal had very little water in it, making the structure even more impressive. To the south of the village lay Lock Number 1, the only lock as yet completed. It was a massive, stone structure. One eastern observer called it, "A very beautiful lock."

The village lay several hundred feet east of the canal, and behind the large houses and lots rose the wooded ridge of the Des Plaines River Valley. It made quite an

attractive scene.

Having arrived, the visitor could put up at one of the local public houses. Generally, these establishments had a bad reputation. Public houses in Lockport, however, were never so characterized.

John Davis, a renowned Massachusetts Whig governor and senator, came to Lockport on canal business in December 1844. He stayed in the town one month at Rucker's Tavern, a temperance house. Such places were common in Illinois at the time and were preferred because they were not patronized by the heavy-drinking Irish canal workers.

Gov. Davis described Rucker as an "old, fat, good-natured man" and described the lodgings. "He put me into a small chamber with a rag carpet, two beds and a pine table, one plank chair. There was a thin board door about an inch and a half from the floor, with no catch to latch it. It was warmed by a small stove."

It was December and central heating was unknown, so Davis sent for the landlord. Together they stopped up the crack under the door and put a catch on the door so as to make the room more comfortable.

The next night was very windy, wrote Davis. The sky was lighted up by prairie fires. "While I am writing," he noted, "the horizon is brightly illuminated in almost all directions with the streaming flames of the fire upon the

prairies. They all appear to be some miles distant, but to one accustomed to such scenes, it is a little startling to witness the bright reflections from the sky....”

The modern equivalent of this effect would be the flare at the Texaco refinery which on certain winter nights seems to light up the whole sky, but is neither so dramatic nor romantic as the prairie fires.

Prairie fires could be a problem. In the 1830s Holder Sisson’s farm buildings and livestock on the west side of the river were wiped out by a prairie fire two days after he moved in.

On Dec. 10, Davis went to

church not once, but twice. In the morning he went to the Congregational Church. Seated on wooden benches, 200 members of the congregation heard a Methodist preach the sermon. Davis noted, “The closing prayer by the regular minister was excellent.” The latter was probably the Rev. Jonathan Porter. In the afternoon, Porter attended Episcopal services held in the school house. The 40 members present listened to a denunciation of Roman Catholicism and High Church attitudes by a rector from Joliet, who called such practices “sinful and heresy.”

Davis’s Sunday ended with a

musical program performed by the Ruckers in the evening. “The daughter of our landlord entertained us with singing accompanied with the accordion,” wrote Davis. “They evidently had a good natural taste for music but there is not a very good opportunity for cultivating it here.”

On other evenings during his stay, Davis was entertained at General Fry’s residence with coffee and conversation. Gov. Ford, the present chief executive of Illinois, was staying at Fry’s and took part in these sessions along with Canal Engineer William Gooding.