

“Lack of Funds Dashes 1840s Hopes.” *Lockport Free Press*. “Old Canal Days” Special, 15 June 1978.

Lack of funds dashes 1840s hopes

This is the fifth in a series of articles 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. This selection deals with Lockport in the late 1840s.

In the early history of Lockport, the Illinois and Michigan Canal was predominant, and the town dominated the history of the canal.

At first it had been anticipated that with a “deep cut,” water from Lake Michigan would flow directly down to give Lockport a high amount of waterpower. Also it was felt that large boats could come directly down from the lake to Lockport.

By 1845 it was obvious that these prospects would not be realized. The State was nearly bankrupt and anxious to get the canal opened as swiftly and cheaply as possible, making the “deep cut” out of the question. This considerably reduced the prospects for Lockport’s development, and the hope that she would be the principal town on the canal quietly faded.

Still, Lockport and the canal were closely bound together. The canal office seemed to be the center of town activities. In 1839 the first Fourth-of-July celebration centered at the canal office. First, there was a barbecue, then a Fourth-of-July oration, followed

by a reading of the Declaration of Independence and a grand procession.

The day ended with a dance in the canal office, music provided by a fiddler from Kane County, who had to be paid \$60 in advance. This windfall enabled the fiddler to drink deep of the wine, and he supplied the dancers with but a taste of his talents before he passed out.

This was the last recorded use of the canal office for dancing, but in 1847 Canal Engineer Gooding was concerned that the center of canal operations would be entirely rented out for other purposes. He notes in a letter to the canal trustees: “I mention this because one room is already a law office, a magistrate infects another, and it is hinted that another still may be in demand for a grocer.”

By 1846 there was increasing difficulty in the rush to complete the canal. The state seemed unconcerned with it. The state trustee, Col. Oakley, was more interested in attacking the engineers and contractors and stirring up trouble among the Irish workers than in speeding the completion of the canal. The prominent legislators from this area, such as Sen. J.A. Matteson of Joliet and Sen. Reddick of Ottawa, saw more profitability to themselves from helping the railroads than in helping the canal. Governor French joined these forces and threw every available obstacle in the way of Gooding

and the eastern trustees who were determined to see the canal finished.

As soon as it was completed, Oakley was able to get Gooding fired, and the aforementioned state senators set about getting charters so that railroads, such as the Rock Island, could undermine the canal’s profitability.

However, in April of 1848 the canal that had been 12 years in building was finally opened. In Lockport at 13th Street and the canal, the final touches were being put on the boat that would open the canal. This was the “Gen’l Fry,” built by Capt. Charles K. Porter, assisted by Isaac Nobes, himself an experienced sailor in the British Navy and on the Great Lakes.

On the last day of March she was launched, sliding sideways into the canal. On April 1 she made her maiden voyage to Joliet. A few days later she made her first official voyage to Joliet laden with notables and non-notables. The principle speaker from the deck of the boat was the Lockport lawyer, G. D. A. Parks. On April 10 the “General Fry,” filled with passengers, set sail for Chicago, where she was greeted with a great celebration. On arrival at Bridgeport there were a large number of people waiting. As the boat appeared, drawn by horses down the canal, a contemporary accounts says: “A volunteer escort dashed off (carriages, ladies on horseback and horsemen) to meet

her as she came on, crowded to her utmost with ladies and gentlemen from the interior.”

At about 5 p.m. the “Genr’l Fry” was locked from the canal into the Chicago River. After the orator Parks had delivered himself of a reply to the oratorical trumpet blast of the mayor of Chicago, the boats proceeded from Bridgeport to Chicago, where the festivities continued on dry land with toasts and merrymaking.

The “Genr’l Fry” was basically a freight boat, and she soon was at work hauling a more prosaic cargo. Although the canal would not carry a full head of water until the summer of 1848, boats carrying cargoes of up to 100 tons were plying the canal by late April.

After the canal was opened and

Lockport settled down to the routine of a more circumscribed life, many of the first pioneers got itchy feet. The announcement of the California gold discovery allowed them to scratch their feet by heading west to seek a fortune.

In 1849 a Lockport group was organized called the “Lockport Company” to take the overland route to the presumed golden west. It was led by J. A. Gooding, a brother of the canal engineer, and it included Armstead Runyon and many others. Gooding returned in 1850 enriched by his western adventures, which encouraged more to move by whatever means, west. Some went by foot, some by horse, and some by canal.

In 1850 the following advertisement appeared in a local paper: “To Calif. Emmigrants [sic] for St. Louis direct. The

staunch and superior freight Packet ‘Governor Davis’ L. D. Norton Master will leave Lockport on Tuesday, March 19 at 3 p.m. The ‘Gov. Davis’ has ample capacity for freight or wagons, baggage etc. and her accommodations for passengers are unsurpassed by any boat on the Canal.”

In 1850 Mancel Talcott, brother of the canal superintendent, summed up the feelings of many. “You will naturally ask me what I think of the Gold Emmigration [sic]. I feel that it is one of the greatest humbugs the American people ever got into their heads.” While some of Lockport stayed in California, others came back to the area resolved to settle down and let the frontier move west without them.