

“Ill Wind Blew Down Early Canal.” *Lockport Free Press*. “Old Canal Days” Special, 15 June 1978.

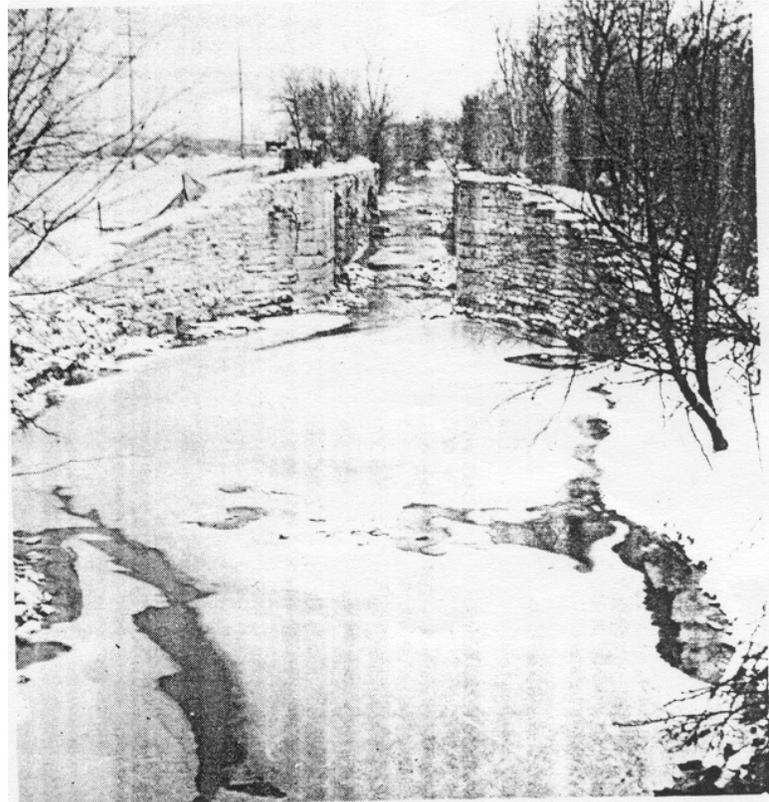
### Ill wind blew down early canal

*This is the sixth in a series of articles on the history of Lockport by John Lamb. Lamb is professor of history at Lewis University and is active in the Will County Historical Society and the Lockport Historic Preservation Council. This article deals with Lockport’s early relations with a neighboring city to the south.*

Have you noticed that Lockport seems to have disappeared from the pages of the newspaper printed in the County Seat? This seeming inattention to Lockport’s affairs is not merely myopia because we are so close; rather, it is part of a historic pattern going back more than 140 years. It began with the building of the Illinois and Michigan Canal.

It seemed to some that the development of effective water power at Lockport would somehow undermine Joliet down stream. Since Lockport was higher, it would be able to take full advantage of this water power. But a correspondent from the ‘*Joliet Signal*’ wrote in 1847 that if Lockport were to take full advantage of water power, it would not be because of the natural fall of water, but rather because of a conspiracy in Lockport.

Chief Canal Engineer William Gooding had submitted his report on water power at Lockport, and the *Signal* wrote: “These statements of the chief engineer which he sends with his annual report seem to be tinged with too



On a snowy day in 1978, the long unused lock of the Old Canal looks very much different from the days when it was a center of activity and the spot for occasional brawls between Lockport residents and residents of that town to the south. [Staff photo by Rick Etheridge]

much partiality towards the place of his residence.”

In August 1847 Jake Utica wrote that plans to expand water power at Lockport were a plot by the canal engineer and others to boost Lockport at the expense of Joliet. The county seat’s inferiority bump was sensitive in those days; perhaps it was fearful it would become the county behind.

Animosity toward Lockport is further illustrated by incidents that occurred during the cholera epidemic of 1849. In late June the

*Signal* reported that nine persons had died in Joliet, with 30 other cases reported. The ‘*Lockport Telegraph*’ reported that Lockport had been free of the pestilence, though Chicago had hundreds of cases and the disease had made “alarming ravages” in Joliet, only five miles distant.

The *Signal* responded by claiming these claims were lies and showed Lockport’s hostile feelings toward Joliet. The paper went on to say, “Taken in connection with the canal

superintendent's act in having the basin drained, there certainly is displayed a most unwarrantable policy on the part of a few in Lockport to injure a neighboring town." The paper claimed that the epidemic was being caused by the low level of the basin between Jackson and Jefferson Streets. Actually, the water level was low because of a lack of rain.

These comments stirred up a hornet's nest in Joliet. The canal superintendent went to Joliet to explain; a delegation of Jolietans went to Lockport to complain, and finally a mob descended upon the lockkeeper at Joliet.

On July 14 Superintendent Ed Talcott reported, "Several of the citizens of Joliet have interfered to prevent the lockkeeper from a proper discharge of his duty by closing the gates and recently by forcibly throwing him into the canal when he was in the act of opening the gates. In short, they

have so intimidated him that he says he dare not discharge his duty."

In a word, the good citizens were determined not to let the canal operate at all as their actions prevented passage through Lock Number 5.

The next issue of the *Signal* returned to the charge. "We reiterate again that we are more strongly convinced that the act of drawing off water was premeditated and intended for the injury of our town. That the people of Lockport approve of such conduct we cannot persuade ourselves to believe. In conclusion we assure you that we do not feel the slightest jealousy toward Lockport but at the same time we will not submit in silence to be trodden upon by a few canal officials who hold property in that village."

Well, maybe they felt no jealousy but they certainly felt

something. Joliet historian George Woodruff wrote in 1878, "We had o n e c o m m o n enemy—Lockport—and like the Jews during the siege of Jerusalem, we temporarily forgot our domestic quarrels and combined to fight the common foe. The canal authorities seemed, at least to our jaundiced eyes, to throw their influence to favor and build up a rival city. We used to delegate largely against the Archer Road and the canal basin and the canal office, etc., etc."

He finished by saying there was a map drawn by the canal authorities and widely distributed that showed all sorts of towns and settlements along the canal but excluded Joliet.

It is fairly clear that no such map was ever printed or distributed. Just another fantasy conjured up by the paranoid vision of the county seat.