

“I & M Boatyard Saw Heavy Use.” *Lockport Free Press*. “Old Canal Days” Special, 15 June 1978.

I & M boatyard saw heavy use

This is the latest in a series on the history of Lockport by John Lamb. Lamb, a professor of history at Lewis University, is president of the Illinois Canal Society and is the newly-elected chairman of the Lockport Historic Preservation Council. He is active in the Will County Historical Society and is this year again serving as chairman of the Old Canal Days Committee.

This week’s article deals with Lockport as a 19th century boat-building center. One early Lockport industry, no longer in existence, was the Illinois and Michigan Canal boatyard. The construction and repair of wooden boats was essential to the continued existence of the

I & M Canal. Lockport was an important boat-building location on the canal. In fact, it was the only town on the line of the canal with a boatyard. Other boatyards were located in Peru and in Chicago.

In 1848 the “Gen’l Fry” was built on the canal at a location just below the present Illinois Central Gulf railroad station. It was the first boat launched on the canal and the first to travel from Lockport to Chicago, officially opening the waterway. The boat was built by Captain Charles Porter. It was 99 feet long and 17 feet wide and was mainly used to haul freight, but also carried passengers.

Isaac Nobes was caulker for the hull and decks of the Gen’l Fry. He had sailed the seven seas

with the British Navy and had also sailed on the Great Lakes. Nobes was to settle down in Lockport on the banks of the “raging canal,” and would eventually make his fortune quarrying stone south of Lockport.

The boat-building business continued to expand from that beginning. By 1850 there was a fully functioning boatyard between 3rd and 4th Streets on the east bank of the canal. This was at the point where the canal widened out to more than 100 feet to serve Lockport commerce.

At the boatyard in January 1856, there were nine boats in the stocks being built for the opening of the canal in April. These boats each sold for \$1500 to \$4280. The boatyard also built pleasure boats and row boats.

As the 19th century drew to a close, steam-driven boats began replacing mule and horse-drawn boats. This had an important impact on the boatyard. Steam-driven boats with a crew of three could load cargoes of up to 145 tons and push or tow a barge carrying 150 tons. The crew was no bigger than that on a mule-drawn barge, but the tonnage was twice as large and the mileage traveled was greater. As a result, fewer boats were needed, and fewer boats were built.

By 1880, according to a report for the U.S. Census, there were no boats being built on the canal. However, the boatyard at Lockport continued to repair

canal boats.

In 1880 one of the caulkers at the boatyard was James Flavin, father of Maurice Flavin of Lockport. After coming to Lockport, James Flavin learned the caulker’s trade from Patrick Mitchel. The caulker drove oakum--rolled-up tarred cotton--between the planks of a wooden boat to make it water tight. This was done by driving a caulking iron (a special steel chisel) between the planking by means of a caulking hammer. The hammer head was a cylindrical affair nearly as long as the handle. Caulking irons were of various shapes, some were used for opening the seam, and others were used for driving the oakum into the seam. Another tool used in repairing boats was a broad axe with a bent, off-set handle. This allowed the ship’s carpenter to shape timbers and cut out rotten planking.

By 1880 the boatyard was operated by the Western Stone Company. It had a working force of about 10 men, one of whom was foreman. The other workers were either caulkers or carpenters.

A boat that was to be repaired was moved to the banks of the canal where cables were attached to stern and bow. The cables by means of horse-drawn windlasses, drew the boat up onto steel rails that took the boat onto the shore so that it could be repaired. There was sufficient room to repair two boats.

One part of the boatyard was a large, two-story warehouse. The first story was used for storage of wood and other materials. The second story was a loft used by the caulkers to roll the oakum before it was used on the boat hull. In this building St. Dennis church held a bazaar complete with booths and a dance band. This was held in the winter when the boatyard was not in operation, as the canal was closed and the

boats tied up.

During the winter months, the caulkers, such as James Flavin, went to Chicago to caulk the flooring for the vats at the breweries.

Besides the warehouse, the boatyard had a blacksmith shop. There was a large amount of iron works on the boats, since they were used to haul stone. There was also a steam room used to

bend the planking used on the boats' hulls. The boats serviced in the boatyard were used to carry stone from the quarries in Lemont to Chicago.

In 1907 the Calumet feeder cut the Illinois and Michigan Canal between Lockport and Chicago. This meant the end of canal use between Lockport and points north. It also meant the end of the boatyard.