

“Illinois Waterway: Its 310 Year History.” *The Waterways Journal Weekly*. (August 27, 1983): 8.

The Illinois Waterway: Its 310 Year History

By John Lamb



Although 1983 is the 50th anniversary of the completion of the Illinois Waterway, that date represents just one major step in achieving an idea that is now 310 years old. For it was in 1673 that Joliet first put forward the concept of a waterway to connect the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River by cutting through the low ridge that separated the Chicago River from the Des Plaines. His plan called for digging a small canal of a few hundred yards to connect these two rivers. Louis XIV of France and his finance minister, Colbert, were informed of the plan, as it was supposed to enable a ship to sail from Niagara Falls to the Gulf of Mexico

without unloading its cargo.

Fired by the discovery, the French concentrated upon trade and settlement in the Illinois and Mississippi valleys. The weakness of Joliet's plan was pointed out by La Salle when he visited the Chicago area in 1682 and noted that the Des Plaines River (which joins the Kankakee some 50 miles from Lake Michigan to form the Illinois River) was too low during most of the year to carry much of a cargo, even in canoes. But the Chicago portage, where the canoes and cargo were carried between the Chicago River and the Des Plaines, remained the principal route between the Midwest and

Canada, until the Sioux Indians successfully gained control of it in the early 18th century.

Fell into Disuse

After that neither the French nor the British, who in 1763 took over the French possessions, used the route much. It was not until the area came under the control of the United States that the interest in the Lake Michigan-Illinois route revived. In the late 18th century, the trader Du Sable showed the economic value of the Chicago location. In 1795 the Treaty of Grenville forced the Indians to give up an area at the mouth of the Chicago River where a fort was built in 1803 to protect this link between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi. The fort was named Fort Dearborn. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, various federal officials wrote of the importance of this connection for the development of the Northwest Territories, particularly the western part. The first practical step towards the construction of a canal came in 1816 when the Pottawatamis Indians ceded a strip of land along both sides of the Des Plaines and Illinois rivers. This was specifically for building a canal that would allow the Indians to sell their goods in the East.

Illinois Becomes Interested

In 1818 Illinois became a state and the new state's most ambitious project was a waterway to connect Lake Michigan to the Illinois. In

1822 representatives of the state got the federal government to grant a strip of land from the Chicago River to the Illinois for a canal. As a result of this grant in 1824, the first survey to find a route for the canal was done by Rene Post and Justus Paul. In 1827 the state was granted additional land consisting of alternate sections on either side of the proposed canal for the purpose of financing the canal. The state then organized a canal commission that sought to exploit this gift of land by developing towns and selling lots. In 1830 Chicago was laid out in streets and lots, as was Ottawa at the junction of the Fox River and the Illinois. The purpose was to sell lots to speculators to finance the construction of the canal. The 1830 lot sale in Chicago were disappointingly insignificant. But the prospect of a canal connecting the Great Lakes to the Mississippi brought in a large number of settlers and speculators. In 1833, as a result, Chicago was chartered as a village. In 1836 construction began on the Illinois and Michigan Canal. Although it would be 12 years before this project was completed, its completion, despite financial difficulties, was pushed by the chief engineer, William Gooding. Before 1848 a number of towns sprang up along the canal, and river towns below it prospered, most of all, the City of Chicago.

Gone But Not Forgotten

Although traffic on the I&M is a thing of the past, it has certainly not been forgotten. Its history is preserved in the I&M Canal Museum, operated by the Will

County Historical Society at 803 South State St., in Lockport (open 1-4:30 p.m. daily).

The Illinois Department of Conservation gained title to what remained of the canal about 1972, developed some areas for recreation and a 60-mile Illinois-Michigan Canal State Trail between Morris and Channahon. The 15-mile stretch between Channahon and the Gebhard Woods State Park (near Morris) is available for both hiking and cycling, while the 10 miles between Gebhard to Seneca is best for hiking only. (We thank Mrs. Ralph Emerson, Chicago, for sending items on this.

An Historical Corridor

A more recent development has been the introduction of legislation to create an Illinois and Michigan Canal Heritage Corridor. Sens. Charles Percy (R-Ill.) and Alan J. Dixon (D-Ill.) Introduced S.746, and Rep. Thomas Corcoran (R-Ill.) H.R. 2014. The latter was cosponsored by 21 other members of the Illinois delegation. Similar legislation in the last session died, although the Senate Subcommittee on Public Lands did hold a hearing on Sen. Percy's bill.

The legislation would establish an Illinois and Michigan Canal Heritage Corridor Commission within the U. S. Department of Interior, with the aim of stabilizing structures and preserving historic buildings. And to establish intermittent recreational trails from Summit to La Salle, Ill. There would be visitor orientation displays at eight locations along the corridor from Chicago to Peru. The Senate Subcommittee on

Public Lands held a hearing on the Percy bill last November 30, but neither bills cleared before the end of the last session. Everyone is not happy, however, with the corridor idea. A letter in the Illinois press by Dr. Robert Whalen, stated he objected particularly to Section 13 of the bills which would release to the state of Illinois all remaining rights of property associated with the I&M except "as to the canal prism and towpath." Dr. Whalen wrote, "Does anyone doubt that big business or special interest groups who have had land adjoining the canal will not succeed in buying and dealing for canal land from the state and thus remove it from the public ownership? The original legislation creating the canal stated that it should stay in public use, and a reverter clause has caused the state of Illinois to lose title to the canal when it started to dispose of parts of the canal."

A picture and a full description of the City of Pekin ran in the February 14, 1981, WJ. She was built as the City of Henry at Chicago in 1875, with hull dimensions of 99.2 by 17.4 by 6.9 feet. She burned below the U. S. Highway 6 bridge at Channahon in 1941; the state had planned to make her into a display boat, but this was not done.

Work Planned on Canal

The Illinois Department of Conservation has applied for two permits from the Rock Island District for work on the Illinois and Michigan Canal. In one project, 4,000 feet of the canal would be dredged to allow water flow in the channel. The excavated

material would be placed along the river-ward edge of the towpath. The work would be at the mouth of Pecumsaugan Creek, about mid-way between La Salle and Utica.

The other work would be the construction of a 10- to 12-foot

pilot channel 1-2 feet deep along 23,000 feet of the canal near the mouth of Crotty Creek and between North Kickapoo and Rat Run creeks. The purpose of the channel would be to facilitate drainage from the Village of Seneca.

Old Canal Days is observed at Lockport the third weekend of June. Our thanks to Rose Bucciferro, curator of the society museum and archives, for the picture and canal material.

(To be continued September 3.)