



The I&M Canal Shapes History

The I&M Canal changed the nation when it opened in 1848 and provided the last link in a chain of waterways that connected the eastern seaboard with the Mississippi River system. By connecting Lake Michigan to the Illinois River, the I&M extended the water highway that the Erie Canal created from New York to the Great Lakes at Buffalo. Boats could now cross the Great Lakes to Chicago, take the I&M Canal to LaSalle, and follow the Illinois to the Mississippi River south to the Gulf of Mexico. In an era when water was the most efficient way to move people and bulky goods, the I&M Canal made shipping possible all the way from New York to New Orleans, and created Chicago as the nation's greatest inland port.

Geology made it possible

Although the canal was built in the 1800s, its story began over 12,000 years ago during the last Ice Age. A sheet of ice that was up to a mile thick (the height of the Sears Tower) covered most of Illinois. This Wisconsin glacier carved the Great Lakes and flattened the prairie plains of Illinois.

As the glacier retreated, its meltwaters carved the DesPlaines and Illinois River valleys, creating a natural passageway from Lake Michigan to the Illinois River. Four thousand years ago, a subcontinental divide rose up to interrupt this passageway. This low ridge forced the Chicago River to flow east into Lake Michigan, and the DesPlaines to flow west into the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers. This divide, later known as the Chicago Portage, is key to the canal story.

The first people travel the passageway

Several thousand years after the glacier retreated, Native Americans were the first to use this passageway to hunt, fish and trade. During times of high waters, they paddled easily in canoes along the Illinois and DesPlaines Rivers, through the Chicago Portage and into the Chicago River. However, when water was low, which was most of the time, they had to carry their canoes through a 12-square-mile swamp known as Mud Lake.

The French arrive

In 1673, Native American guides led French explorers Father Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliet from the Illinois River to the DesPlaines, across the Chicago Portage to the Chicago River and Lake Michigan, providing them a shortcut back home to Canada. Jolliet immediately conceived of a canal, cut through "but a half league" (approximately 1.5 miles) of prairie to connect the Chicago and DesPlaines Rivers, allowing an inland passage from the Great Lakes down the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico.

A canal for a new nation

Jolliet's vision was not realized for another 175 years. During that time, the 13 colonies gained independence from England and George Washington was elected the first president. Fur traders and a slow trickle of settlers made their way west to the wilderness of the Illinois Country. The dream of a canal remained alive as a key to exploiting the natural resources of the continent and opening the west to trade. On

land from. In 1803 Fort Dearborn was built at the mouth of the Chicago River to protect this strategic future port site. With its northern borders established on the premise of building a canal, Illinois became a state in 1818.

From dream to reality

Gurdon Hubbard, a young fur trader who arrived in Chicago in 1818, wrote of the agonizing three-week-long journey across the Chicago Portage to the Illinois River. He later joined the ranks of other political leaders including Abraham Lincoln who advocated for a canal to cut through the Portage and make the shallow prairie rivers of the natural passageway suitable for shipping.

Starting in the 1820s, the State of Illinois tried to finance canal construction. Ultimately in 1827, Congress made a federal land grant in recognition of the international significance of a connection between the East Coast and the Gulf of Mexico. Land sales, and later, the funds of East Coast and European investors would provide the financing tools.

In 1830, the Canal Commissioners platted the towns of Ottawa and Chicago (which had a population of around 50) and began selling canal land at \$1.25/acre to finance the canal construction. The mere idea of a canal drew land speculators and settlers from the east and by 1836, Chicago's population had grown to 4,000. With great hoopla, groundbreaking for the canal began on July 4, 1836 at the canal site in Bridgeport. Canal Commissioner, Col. William B. Archer, for whom Archer Avenue is named, turned the first shovel of dirt. Chicago's meteoric growth was launched and its future as the Midwest's pre-eminent city was assured.

Digging through the passageway

Thousands of canal workers from Ireland and other countries toiled to dig the I&M between 1836 to 1848. Their basic tools were a shovel, a wooden scoop and a wheelbarrow. A dollar a day barely compensated canal laborers for the 12-hour days, diseases, and squalid living conditions they endured. It took 12 years of hard labor (including a 4-year hiatus in construction when the state ran out of funds) to build the canal.

Changing people's lives

In 1848, shopkeepers, dock workers, mule tenders, stone masons, carpenters, farmers and others joined Hubbard, Archer, Ogden, Kinzie and Chicago's other "movers and shakers" to celebrate the Canal's opening, and proclaim it a symbol of America's westward expansion.

Designed by engineer William Gooding, the 60-foot-wide, 6-foot deep canal extended 96 miles from the Chicago River in Bridgeport (Chicago) to the Illinois River at LaSalle/Peru, Illinois. It had a series of 15 locks to navigate the 141-foot elevation change from Chicago to the Illinois River, feeder canals to provide water, and four aqueducts to carry the canal across creeks and rivers. A journey that once took Gurdon Hubbard three weeks now took a single day.

The canal meant that for the first time, farmers would not have to maneuver their wagons through muddy roads to reach the grain port in Chicago. Illinois families could receive calico for clothing, woolen blankets, furniture, and other finished goods from New York and New England. Sugar, oranges and other goods from New Orleans could grace Chicago's tables. The cost of moving goods—which could now be transported by the ton, not the wagonload—plummeted. Freight could be shipped from St. Louis to New York in twelve days via

the I&M and the Great Lakes, versus 30-40 days via the Ohio River route

People flock to Illinois

After the canal opened, Germans, Italians, Poles, Swedes and many other immigrants were drawn to Chicago and the other canal towns. They plowed the tough prairie grasses and tilled some of the nation's most fertile farmland. They processed tons of corn and wheat in the grain elevators that lined the canal. In Chicago's gigantic lumberyards, they loaded canal boats with enormous boards harvested from Wisconsin's pine forests, and sent them west to build homes and towns on the prairies. They mined coal, quarried stone and made steel in canal-side blast furnaces. Some found work on the canal itself, as boat builders, canal boat captains, locktenders, toll collectors, and mule boys.

Canal towns including Lockport, Joliet, Morris, Ottawa and LaSalle boomed with the canal's construction and its opening drew settlers and created markets for their natural resources. Nowhere was the canal's effect more dramatic than Chicago. During the 12 years it took to build the canal, the city's population grew from 4,000 to 20,000. From 1848 – 1860, it quintupled again to 112,172.

Connecting producer to market, canal boats pulled by mules shipped grain and livestock, stone, coal, and foodstuffs like sugar, salt, molasses and whiskey to fuel the region's growth. By 1869, Chicago was the busiest port in the United States. More ships called at the City's harbor than New York, San Francisco, New Orleans, Boston, Baltimore and Philadelphia combined.

Because of the canal, Chicago would outstrip St. Louis as the Midwest's major port and transportation hub. Soon the newest form of transportation, railroads paralleled the canal route. While faster trains replaced

packet boats for passenger traffic, the canal remained the least expensive way to ship bulk cargo like grain, coal, lumber and stone.

The cost of growth and the canal as a solution

Building a huge city on a swamp almost overnight was bound to cause problems. Increased population meant increased waste—most of which ended up in the Chicago River, which ran “backwards” into Lake Michigan—the source of the city's drinking water. Thousands died of waterborne diseases like cholera and typhoid. To resolve this crisis, the I&M Canal was deepened to reverse the river and carry the sewage and filth away from Lake Michigan. In 1871, a few months before the Great Chicago Fire, the “Deep Cut” was completed and temporarily restored the city's health.

Chicago's population continued to grow at an unprecedented rate, reaching one million by 1890. The narrow I&M Canal was unable to keep Chicago's waste out of its water supply. Outbreaks of typhoid, cholera and dysentery continued – in 1885 12% of Chicago's residents (over 100,000 people) died. Clearly, the Deep Cut plan no longer worked, and a more dramatic solution was needed. In 1892, the digging of a larger canal that ran parallel to the I&M, from Chicago (at Bridgeport) to Joliet began.

The new canal

The new Drainage Canal (now known as the Sanitary & Ship Canal) was 160-foot wide and 25-foot deep, 2.5 times the width and 3 times the depth of the old I&M. Like the I&M, construction of the Sanitary Canal brought a new wave of immigrants—this time thousands from Eastern Europe as well as African-Americans from the south. However, unlike their Irish predecessors, they had the help of steam-driven machinery to cut the new channel. Despite the protests

and lawsuits of communities downstream as far as St. Louis, the canal was opened in the dark of night in 1900.

Intended originally for sanitation purposes, the new channel was soon improved and by 1906 supplanted the I&M Canal from Chicago to Joliet as an artery of commerce.

Modern waterways through the passage

As Chicago grew, port traffic could not compete with the increasingly congested downtown, and industries began to lobby for improvement of Calumet Harbor. From 1911 to 1922, the third of Chicago's man-made waterways, the Cal-Sag Channel was constructed. First intended to carry waste away from the lake, the modern channel, like the Sanitary and Ship Canal, soon became a shipping route. With its opening, the city's port moved south to Calumet Harbor.

The Sanitary and Ship Canal and Cal-Sag Channel made shipping possible as far west as Joliet, but the deep waterway ended there and the DesPlaines and Illinois Rivers were too unpredictable for reliable shipping. The I&M remained the only connection to the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers, yet it was too small to accommodate 20th-century freight loads. In 1933, the federal government completed a massive project initiated by the State of Illinois to channelize the Illinois River all the way to the Mississippi. That year, the I&M was officially closed.

The most recent chapter of the inland waterway link across the Chicago Portage occurred in the 1950s, when the St. Lawrence Seaway made it possible for oceangoing ships to travel from the Atlantic Ocean to the seaway's terminus at Calumet Harbor. Today, freight still travels from Calumet Harbor on the Illinois Waterway to reach the Gulf of Mexico.

From economic highway to recreational trail and national treasure

The I&M Canal and the people it brought to Illinois shaped the towns and landscapes from Lake Michigan in Chicago to the Illinois River in LaSalle/Peru. By 1933, larger man-made waterways, the railroad, and highways had eclipsed the I&M Canal's role as a commercial thoroughfare. Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) workers built a canal trail, but in the following years, government officials overlooked the canal and it fell into disrepair. In the 1950s, the canal bed provided a convenient right-of-way for the Stevenson Expressway, known in planning stages as the I&M Canal expressway. Completed in 1964, construction of the Stevenson destroyed almost all traces of the I&M Canal in Chicago.

Starting in the late 1960s, citizens began to advocate for the preservation of the remaining segments of the canal. In 1973, the State of Illinois created I&M Canal State Trail from Channahon to LaSalle. In the early 1980s, the organization known today as the Canal Corridor Association mounted an extraordinary preservation campaign to create the first linear heritage area in the nation. Citizens, advocates, and government officials in 49 municipalities and 5 counties came together in a 450-square-mile region to celebrate, protect, and make use of their shared history. As a result, today the Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor, a new kind of national park, welcomes travelers to the parks, trails, canal towns and landmarks along this historic passageway.