



The Illinois & Michigan Canal

And it's impact on LaSalle County

Sponsored by the Village of North Utica

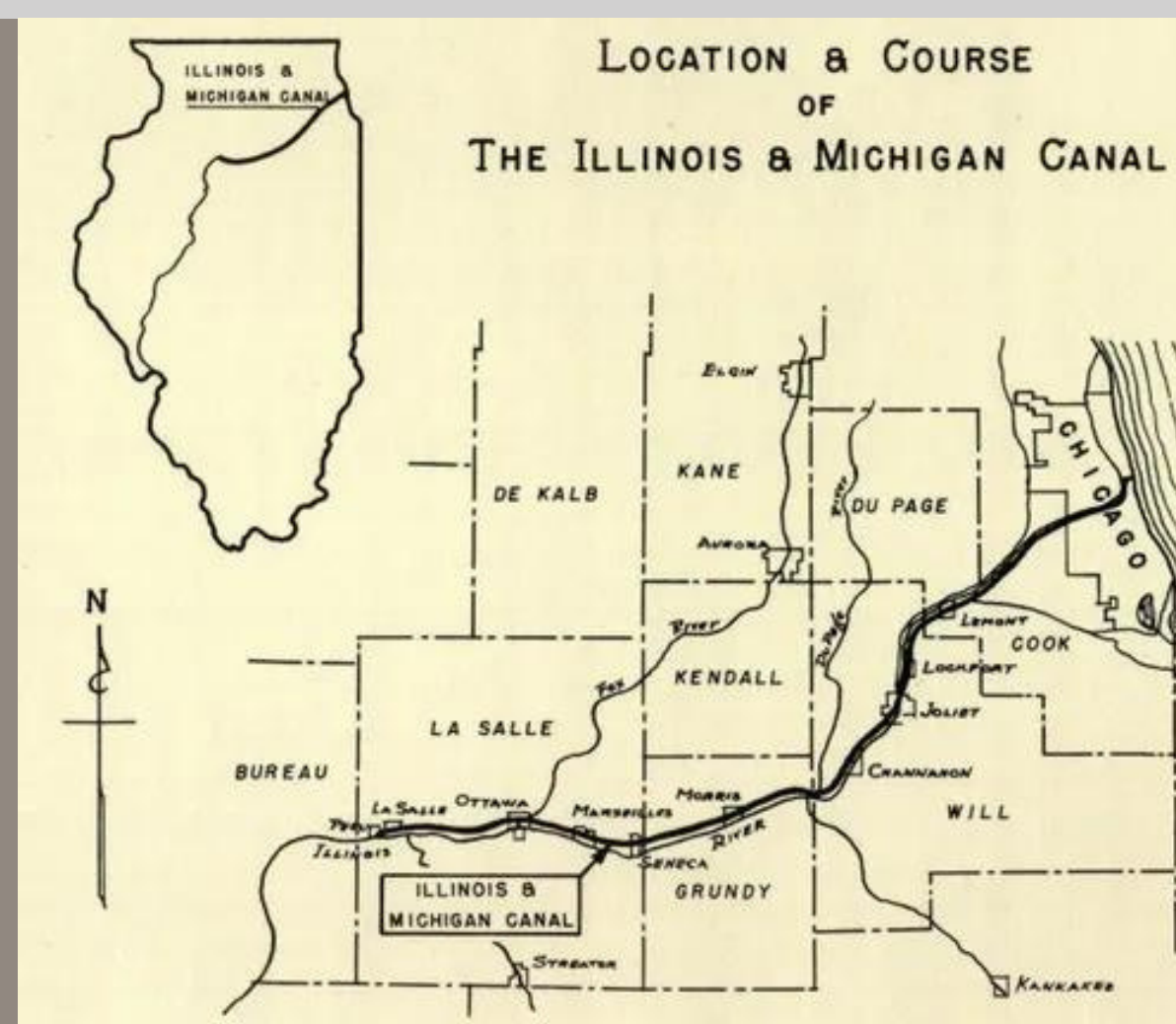
The Origin of the I & M Canal

- First written record of a suggested Canal in our area came from French Explorers Marquette & Jolliet.
- During their 1673 Expedition, Marquette & Jolliet traveled the Illinois River as a short cut back to the Great Lakes.
 - At this time much of the Illinois River had to be portaged while traveling by canoe.
- Jolliet took note that a canal from the Illinois River to Lake Michigan would help with transportation for trade.
- The area that would become the I & M Canal was first surveyed to become a canal by Steven Harriman Long in 1816.
- Long's proposal was used by Nathaniel Pope and Ninian Edwards (first and only governor of the Illinois Territory from 1809-1818) to make the Illinois Territory a State.
- Because of the canal survey done the Illinois Territory petitioned for the northern border of the proposed State be moved to include the entire I & M Canal area. This gave the state of Illinois access to Lake Michigan.
- Illinois was granted Statehood in 1818, even though the territory itself did not meet the population criteria. This was in large part due to the recently proposed Canal and its purported economic and transportation growth.



I & M Canal: The Planning Stages

- At the Illinois delegation's urging, the U.S. Congress in 1822 authorized the state to construct a canal running from the mouth of the Chicago River to a point on the Illinois River. The State of Illinois would be granted Federal Land for this project: the entirety of the planned canal as well as 90 feet on either side to use for building materials needed.
- During the 1822/23 session, the Illinois General Assembly appointed 5 commissioners to survey, plan, and estimate costs. The total amount of the project: \$713,000
- The private company entrusted with the project surrendered the charter in 1826 due to not being able to raise enough capital.
- “In 1827 at the behest of Daniel P. Cook, the lone Illinois delegate in the U.S. House of Representatives, Congress made a better offer. An act offered the state alternate sections of land extending five miles out from each side of the proposed canal. In all this amounted to some 284,000 acres of federal land. In Illinois, the General Assembly passed an act in January of 1827 which provided for a board of canal commissioners who were to lay out the route, select the alternate sections donated, and commence land sales to raise the funds required to finance the undertaking.” (ilsos.gov)
- In 1833 Congress allowed federal land granted for canal use only now could be used for either a canal or railroad. This caused much debate in the Illinois General Assembly, but in 1835 they chose to finance \$500,000 to the canal project.



I & M Canal: The Construction Period

- A ceremonious ground breaking occurred near Chicago on July 4, 1836. The first year of construction was plagued by bad weather and limited man power. Much of the work completed in the first year was acquiring man power, building access roads and other preliminary work.
- The Panic of 1837 proved to have a crippling effect on the long term construction of the I & M Canal. Construction did progress between 1837-1841, but by 1841 the financial crisis had reached Illinois and it was apparent that the State would not be able to meet their financial burden. Construction halted on the project in 1841.
- “The General Assembly agreed and passed enabling legislation on February 21, 1843. By this new plan the canal was to be governed by three trustees, one appointed by the state and a majority of two elected by subscribers to a \$1,600,000 loan. The loan was fully subscribed to by American and European investors after an independent investigation pronounced the project sound and canal work resumed in late July 1845.” (Ilsos.gov)
- Weather and man power again slowed construction during the years of 1845-1846. But by 1847 progress could be seen and completion of the project was in sight.
- The completed canal was: 96 miles long, consisted of 17 locks, 4 aqueducts, and at total cost of \$6,170,226.



Those who built the I & M Canal

- At its peak, the I & M Canal employed 1,700 workers that hand dug the Canal. A mule drawn scoop was used to dig the Canal, and a broad Ax was used by the workers to clear the trees and vegetation along the banks of the I & M Canal.
- Workers were paid \$1 per day and were made to work 16 hour days. They were provided rustic homes for their families. Many workers contracted illness and disease, often perishing, during the construction of the canal. In 1847 the workers tried to mobilize and demand \$1.25 a day and a work day that consisted of labor hours from 6am to 7pm with two hours off for lunch and dinner. This measure failed and the workers were forced to complete the project with their standing wages and work hours.
- Work along the I & M Canal was very strenuous and was often done by immigrant workers. Workers included Native Americans, freed slaves, and immigrants of German and Irish decent. The Irish made up a large portion of the labor force. The Irish immigrants were often thought of as second class citizens.
- In 1840 a Scotch traveler wrote the following about some Irish canal workers near Utica:
"We had scarcely got beyond the edge of town before we came to a colony of Irish laborers employed on the Illinois Canal, and a more repulsive scene we had not for a long time beheld. The number congregated here were about 200, including men, women and children, and these were crowded together in 14 or 15 log huts, temporarily erected for their shelter. I had never been in the south of Ireland and cannot say how far the appearance of this colony differed from that of villages there, but certainly in the north of Ireland, over which I have traveled from Dublin to Londonderry, I never saw anything approaching the scene before us in dirtiness and disorder."



Those who built the I & M Canal

- **The War of Kerry Patch:** The I&M Canal was the epicenter of feuds between clans. Economic and religious differences between the Irish Catholics, or the “Corkonians”, and the Irish Protestants, often referred to as the “Far-Downers”, kick-started the War of Kerry Patch. In May 1838, the Corkonians flexed their power in numbers to drive the Far-Downers away from working on the canal. After a bloody confrontation, the Corkonians celebrated their victory by traveling to Ottawa and LaSalle-Peru, where they continued their assault on the Far-Downers. Led by labor boss, Edward Sweeney, the Corkonians numbered 500.

In Ottawa, sheriff Alson Woodruff formed a posse with Gen. D. F. Hitt and M. E. Hollister as commanders. A group of Far-Downers joined them. With a failed first confrontation at Buffalo Rock, the posse would secure the upper hand at Kerry Patch, next to Split Rock and Pecumsaugum Creek. The posse opened fire, which dispersed the Corkonians. With 60 arrested and 7 dead, the war of Kerry Patch ended.

- After this incident it was decided that churches needed to be established to quell the violence and interject "morals" into the newly established canal towns. The first Catholic Church in LaSalle County was located in LaSalle. "The priests began ministering to LaSalle's Catholic residents immediately after their arrival. Mass was celebrated at the Byrne residence, at a downtown boarding house, and outside beneath an elm tree when weather permitted. Construction of a log cabin church, located on land loaned by the Canal Commissioners, was completed by early August of 1838. The church, Holy Cross, was blessed August 5, 1838. The log cabin church served the needs of LaSalle's Catholics until the completion of the permanent stone church, St. Patrick's, in 1851. (*Bill Johnson via LCHS Newsletter Winter 2019*).



Opening and early Years of the I &M Canal

- The I & M was first opened to navigation on April 10, 1848 when the canal boat General Fry, towed by the propeller A. Rossiter, arrived in Chicago from Lockport amid much fanfare. Each canal boat was pulled by 4 mules.
- With the opening of the I & M Canal, the United States now had waterways that connected the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico via New York City and New Orleans. Passengers and cargo were unloaded from steamboats in LaSalle and transferred to waiting canal boats.
- The opening of the I & M Canal also created many new jobs in the community. Lock tenders were needed to collect tolls and hand operate the locks. They were paid \$300 dollars a year and were given a locktender's home. Mule drivers were needed to take care of the mules. Wild Bill Hickok served as a mule driver on the I & M Canal for a short period of time before he traveled to the West.
- The first five years of operation on the I & M Canal saw much passenger transportation. The entire 96 mile trip from LaSalle would take 24 hours to complete with the canal boat moving at 5 miles per hour. Canal boats were not luxurious accommodations. Passengers were often swarmed by mosquitos, slept standing or by laying on the floor, and were very crowded with many boats carrying up to 100 passengers.
- The I & M Canal was in operation 8 1/2 months out of the year.
- The I & M Canal generated funds via: sale of lands near the Canal, tolls collected from passengers and cargo, and leases for water power.
- The I & M Canal paid off all debts and started turning a profit in 1871.



The I & M Canal and early Industry

- With the construction of the Illinois & Michigan Canal it's importance to regional transportation brought many new opportunities to LaSalle County, including the expansion of many different industries.
- One of the first industries to expand was the agricultural industry. Before the completion of the I & M Canal many farmers were sustainable farmers, only using their crops to feed those in their immediate area. But the ability to ship and profit off of the land was made available once larger markets in Chicago and New York were accessible. Many of the immigrants that worked on the building of the canal purchased surrounding farm lands and used their knowledge of irrigation to drain the swampy lands in Wallace and Waltham townships. The irrigation of these lands would prove to be priceless because rich soil would emerge.
- The first mention of coal in the area was noted in the writings of the early French explorers. The appearance of commercial coal mining followed shortly after the completion of the I & M Canal. Soon coal mining operations popped up in LaSalle, Utica, Oglesby, and Ottawa.
- Zinc mining would also become established in LaSalle and Peru. The Hegler and Matthiesen families chose to establish their zinc operation in LaSalle in part due to its proximity to the Illinois & Michigan Canal and the newly constructed railroads.
- Concrete and Sand mining also benefited and flourished due to the areas access to the Illinois & Michigan Canal and the newly constructed railroads.



I & M Canal Towns of LaSalle County

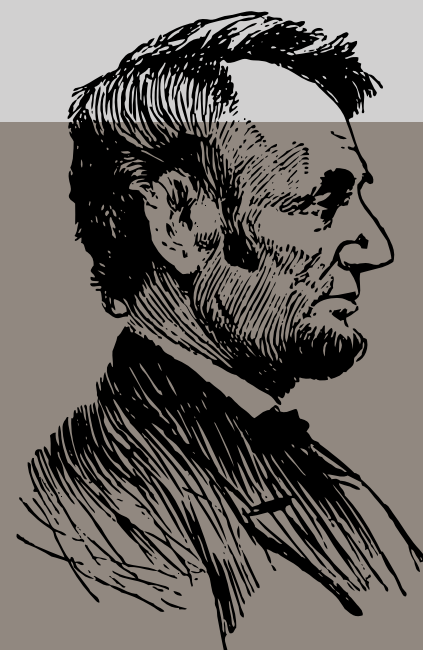
- **LaSalle:** The City of LaSalle was platted by Canal Commissioners in 1837. Steamboats were able to make their way north from St. Louis and New Orleans and arrive at the port of LaSalle, which connected to the start of the I & M Canal. LaSalle is now home to the replica canal boat the 'Volunteer'. The only fully restored lock along the canal is also located in LaSalle.
- **Utica:** Before the Village of North Utica was established, there was a town called Science established on the north banks of the Illinois River near Starved Rock. This town soon disappeared after the platting of the I & M Canal. The village was moved north and built along the banks of the I & M Canal by Canal Commissioner James Clark. This building here was constructed alongside the I & M Canal.
- **Ottawa:** Ottawa was established in the early 1830's, and with the construction of the I & M Canal, its commerce and population flourished. Ottawa today is home to the only remaining complete aqueduct, and one of the few locktender's homes left along the I & M Canal.
- **Marseilles:** Marseilles was officially platted on June 3, 1835; the plat was revised twice for railroad and canal right-of-ways.
- **Seneca:** The village was originally named Crotty after the I & M Commissioner, Jeremiah Crotty, that founded and laid out the town along the banks of the I & M Canal. The village was later established as Seneca in 1865.
- **Gibraltar, the Ghost town of the Canal:** Commissioners were allowed to lay out towns along the route of the canal. One of the sights chosen was the top of Buffalo Rock. The town was to be named Gibraltar, but due to financial problems caused for the state by the Panic of 1837, the town was registered, but never built or settled. The town of Gibraltar is listed on the Illinois - tax list from 1844.



Near Split Rock, Utica, Il

I & M Canal and Abraham Lincoln

- Abraham Lincoln's involvement in the I & M Canal is a lesser known story of the famous 16th President. Before Lincoln was a lawyer or made his way into politics, he had one fascination, and that was transportation.
- Lincoln grew up transversing the Ohio River, and at one point even ran a ferry that brought passengers from Indiana to Kentucky via the Ohio River. He knew the importance of waterways for commerce and growth of a community, and this knowledge steered his political career making him staunch supporter and backer of the I & M Canal.
- During his first legislative session Abe voted to issue \$5,000,000 in state bonds to finance the completion of the Canal. Even during the financial downturn in 1837, Lincoln was a steadfast supporter of financing and completing the I & M Canal project.
- Lincoln was known to have traveled the I & M Canal two times in his lifetime: The first time was in 1848 on a return trip to Springfield from New England. On October 6, 1848 the Lincoln family boarded a packed boat on the I & M Canal. They made the day's journey and arrived in LaSalle on October 7, 1848. The second documented trip occurred in 1852, as Lincoln was appointed to a commission to investigate claims against the State of Illinois concerning the I & M Canal. Lincoln boarded in LaSalle and made the 15 mile journey to Ottawa for the December 3 hearing held at the courthouse.



The I & M Canal: After the Railroads

- By 1853 the Illinois and Michigan Canal was no longer used for passenger travel. Railroads were being constructed throughout the region and, because of the speed of the railways, it made travel by rail more ideal for those traversing a great distance.
- The I & M Canal was still used for transportation of commerce throughout the tenure of the canal. Agriculture, mining, and trade flourished during the 85 year operation of the canal.
- In 1871 it was decided that the I & M Canal again needed commissioners to oversee the running of the canal. These commissioners had to be approved by a majority of the Illinois Senate. When the Great Fire of October 8 and 9, 1871 destroyed much of Chicago, the General Assembly responded on October 20 by making an emergency appropriation of \$2,955,340 to the city as reimbursement for the canal's "deep cut." (ilsos.gov)
- With Chicago's growing population, more than a "deep cut" was needed to control the contamination of the water. In 1889, the Chicago Sanitary Commission was created and construction on the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal was begun. It was completed in 1900. This reversed the flow of the Chicago River.
- By 1900, only the portion of the Canal west of Joliet was still functioning as a mode of transportation for goods.
- During World War One the Joliet to La Salle part of the I & M was rejuvenated with federal dollars for then-perceived defense purposes. This was to be the last major outlay made to sustain the I and M as a working canal. (ilsos.gov)



Retirement and Rejuvenation of the I & M Canal

- The I & M Canal was retired from the Illinois Waterway System with the completion of the Lock and Dam system constructed by the Army Corps of Engineers in 1933.
- In March of 1933 President Franklin D. Roosevelt had signed the New Deal and created the Civilian Conservation Corps. These teams of young men were tasked with conservation of land during the Great Depression. Three camps were stationed near Starved Rock, and frequently did work and performed improvements along the I & M Canal to make it into history park area.
- In 1974 the State of Illinois designated the "I & M Canal State Trail" which extended from LaSalle to Rockdale with 61.5 miles of trail.
- In 1984 President Ronald Reagan designated the I & M Canal as a National Heritage Area. This was the first National Heritage Area in the United States. This makes the I & M Canal part of the National Parks System.
- The Canal Corridor Association is the not-for-profit coordinating agency that has been given authorization by Congress and works closely with the National Park Service to oversee the I&M Canal National Heritage Area.

