With each step along the 96-mile Illinois and Michigan Canal, visitors retrace a significant path in Illinois’ history.

A Ribbon of Progress

Part Two: recreational resources and travel from Seneca to LaSalle

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The peace and relaxation the Illinois and Michigan (I&M) Canal provides is interrupted only by the occasional whirr of a passing bicyclist, the excited shout of a youngster winning the battle against a fighting bluegill, a mournful call of a river barge or the hum of a snowmobile gliding down a snowy trail.

“The I&M Canal is a great recreational destination,” claims Dan Bell, Department of Natural Resources’ (DNR) superintendent of the I&M Canal State Trail. “Whether it is a family with young children looking for a day trip with picnic grounds and easy hiking, an angler looking to pass an afternoon sitting on the tree-lined banks, a bicyclist looking for a long-distance trail with nearby camping or someone interested in observing wildlife, you can find it along the 96-mile canal.”

But it wasn’t always this way.

It was the late 1830s and a young Abraham Lincoln rode horseback surveying vast segments of the prairie frontier. Men toiled from sunup to sundown—earning $1 and a gill of whiskey for a 15-hour day—with pick, shovel, wheelbarrow and brawn to convert the marshy stretch of land into a transportation corridor connecting Lake Michigan to the Gulf of Mexico via the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers. When bedrock reached up into the 60-foot-wide by 6-foot-deep channel, explosive blasts of blackpowder filled the air. Axes rang in nearby woodlots as timbers were felled for bridges and aqueducts.

After the canal opened for commerce on April 10, 1848, a new set of sights and sounds emanated from the corridor.

I&M Canal visitors may explore remnant aqueducts, including the Nettle Creek aqueduct at Gebhard Woods State Park (top) and locks, such as Lock 14 at LaSalle (above).

Hogan Grain Elevator remains as a reminder of the canal’s importance in regional agriculture.
Barges laden with passengers and goods slipped down the prism-shaped canal, passing through the 15 locks between Lockport and LaSalle that adjusted for the 141-foot change in elevation and stopping at developing communities. Wooden aqueducts carried boats across two rivers and two streams. Warehouses and grain elevators, called “cathedrals of the prairie,” sprung up along the corridor to hold merchandise and crops.

Mule tenders walked the single towpath, guiding mules tethered to the barge by a 100-foot rope. When barges met, a carefully choreographed routine ensued, the downstream tender dropping his ropes into the water and moving his mules off the towpath while the upstream crew negotiated passage.

In good weather, packet boat passengers reclined on deck, marveling at the prairie landscape, starlit nights, dust-free mode of transport and speed of travel—passage from Chicago to St. Louis took an amazingly short 40 hours. But the weather wasn’t always good. Delays took place when mules or passengers slipped into the canal and drowned. Swarming mosquitoes brought the threat of malaria. Air became stagnant in the cramped

A walkway at Aux Sable provides visitors an overview of the lock.

Warehouses and grain elevators, where called “cathedrals of the prairie.”

Workers blasted through the sandstone and dolomite Split Rock, creating passage for the canal, and later the railroad.
communal sleeping quarters. Failure to heed the call of “low bridge” meant being knocked senseless. At each of the 15 locks, locktenders—paid $300 a year and on call 24 hours a day—refered fights between boat captains vying for position through the “water ladders.”

As the boat neared canal-side towns, travelers met the hustle and bustle associated with commerce. Shipments north from New Orleans brought sugar, molasses, coffee, oranges and lemons. The latest fashions from the East Coast traveled with lumber, stoves and wagons toward the Gulf. Mills drew water from the canal to process crops harvested from the rich prairie soils. Progress also meant posting policemen at canal landings to ward off thieves, pickpockets, prostitutes and con men.

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portation halted when the canal froze) is now covered in limestone screenings, providing full-season use.

“The footprint of the canal remains on the landscape, but time has taken its toll and much of it is dry today,” Bell said. “The only sections where permanent open water exist are from Channahon to 2.5 miles west of Gebhard Woods State Park and again from Utica to LaSalle.”

Volunteers cleared and rewatered parts of the canal in the 1970s. Anglers of all ages now enjoy fishing the I&M Canal.

Those sections receive heavy use by canoeists, kayakers and anglers. Bass, crappie, bluegill, carp, catfish and bullhead are pulled from the canal, and a catchable trout release provides additional opportunities in the Utica section of the canal. Each June, the communities of LaSalle and Peru join DNR and the Better Fishing Association to host the Lock #14 Kids Fishing Rodeo on the canal.

“The I&M Canal corridor is an amazing natural, cultural and historical resource,” Bell summarized. “Whether a visitor is interested in industrial history, a student of architectural styles or looking for a quiet place to camp or watch bald eagles or barges, you can find it along the canal.”

Only one’s imagination can limit the purpose and motivation for visiting the canal corridor. Each and every trip can be an opportunity to explore another facet of Illinois’ ribbon of progress.