The Illinois and Michigan Canal is a historically rich artery of travel, connecting the east coast to the Mississippi River.

Wedding of the Waters

Part One: touring the canals’ history from Chicago to Morris

12,000 years ago

The last glaciers retreat from northern Illinois, leaving a rich landscape of rivers, prairies, forests and lakes. Mastodons, mammoths and giant beavers become extinct.

1673

Jolliet and Marquette explore northern Illinois, and Jolliet recommends construction of a canal to link Lake Michigan with the Gulf of Mexico.

1682

Fort St. Louis built atop Starved Rock.

1763

The British wrest control of the area from the French.

1769

Most of the Illinois tribe are killed after one is implicated in the death of Chief Pontiac.

1770s

Portage site used as a trade route during the Revolutionary War.

1782

What is now Illinois comes into American hands.

1795

Treaty of Greenville transfers land around mouth of the Chicago River from Native Americans to U.S. control.

1803

Construction begun on Fort Dearborn in Chicago.

1812

War of 1812 with Britain begins. Battle at Fort Dearborn.

Story By Kathy Andrews
Photos By Adele Hodde

Historic photos courtesy of Lewis University Canal Collections

Nearly 150 years of dreaming, planning and negotiation led to 12 years of back-breaking work. The threat of cholera, typhoid and malaria knocked at the doors of crude shanties thrown together to provide a modicum of protection from the cold winter gales and scorching summer days of the frontier prairie.

Without the vision of its proponents—and the sweat of thousands of immigrant laborers—the Illinois and Michigan (I&M) Canal would not have been dug, wedging Lake Michigan to the Illinois River, and ultimately the Gulf of Mexico. Chicago would have undoubtedly remained a quaint lakeside community rather than becoming the keystone of transportation across the developing nation.

While veering from its original intent, today the 96-mile canal trail is managed by state and county agencies—with assistance from numerous volunteer organizations—and provides a transportation route frequented by hikers, bicyclists, joggers, kayakers, birders, photographers, and, when conditions permit, snowmobilers.

Hal Hassen, the cultural resource coordinator for the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) points out that today the I&M Canal serves as an important corridor to Illinois’ past.

“Visitors traveling the towpath are transported back in time with every step they take,” Hassen said. “Historic locks, locktender houses, a toll house and a grain elevator are interpreted and accessible to visitors. The communities that sprang up along the canal have historic properties that visitors may enjoy. Visiting the canal is like entering a time story by Kathy Andrews
Along the I&M Canal, visitors can see a variety of historic buildings, including the Locktender’s house at Channahon (left) and the Rutherford Inn and barn (above) at Dresden.

Financing for the canal project was obtained in 1827 when the U.S. government granted Illinois 284,000 acres. In 1829 the Canal Commission undertook negotiation of land sales to generate resources for construction purposes and surveying of sites for communities that sprang up from Chicago to LaSalle. Twelve years after the July 4, 1836 groundbreaking ceremony—but nearly 150 years after conceptualization of a canal—barges laden with passengers and goods pulled away from Chicago docks.

Ron Vasile, historian for the Canal Corridor Association, has conducted extensive research on the canal.

“The canal became a functional entity and played a key role in the California gold rush and the Underground Railroad and, unfortunately, was linked to a major cholera epidemic that swept across the county,” Vasile said. “The canal also became internationally significant when European investors put up $1.6 million to finalize construction after Illinois’ financial resources plummeted.”

When the Chicago and Rock Island Railroad reached LaSalle in 1853 it signaled the demise of the passenger packet boats, but for several more decades the canal continued to provide capsule and getting a glimpse of a location unlike any other in Illinois.”

“The I&M Canal is one of Illinois’ most important stories, perhaps surpassed only by Abraham Lincoln,” Ana B. Koval, president of the Canal Corridor Association claimed. “The waterway changed how people and goods were transported throughout the country. Although the canal no longer functions, it set the framework for a reliance on water-based transportation that continues today.”

Creation of a water route from the east coast to New Orleans and beyond was a vision originating with explorers of the developing new nation. Pathways that Native Americans had traveled for centuries drew explorers, map makers, fur traders and missionaries. Developing the waterway was an integral part of the creation of Illinois as the 21st state in 1818, and became a leveraging tool for setting the state’s northern boundary.

Treaty with Ottawa and Potawatomi; Chippewa tribes cedes land along the Illinois River to build a canal.

Illinois becomes the 21st state.

A federal act authorizes survey and building of the canal but provides no funds.

Erie Canal opens, leading to increased immigration to Illinois.

Congress gives Illinois 284,000 acres of land to finance construction of the canal.

The towns of Chicago and Ottawa are laid out by the Canal Commissioners.

Black Hawk War; treaties the following year banish Native American’s west of the Mississippi River.

Construction on I&M Canal begins.

Panic of 1837, first major national depression.

Labor violence erupts among canal workers.

Most work on the canal halted due to lack of funds.

Canal diggers unsuccessfully strike for more wages and fewer hours.

I&M canal opens in April. First railroad begun in Chicago and first telegraph message received. The Chicago Board of Trade founded to handle increased shipments of grain.

A devastating cholera epidemic arrives in Chicago via passengers from a canal boat.

Last year of major passenger travel on the I&M. Chicago and Rock Island R.R. parallels canal.

Chicago and Rock Island R.R. opened to the Mississippi River.

State penitentiary built in Joliet.

U.S. Civil War.

Canal brings in more than $300,000 in tolls, the most ever. Another cholera epidemic sweeps through the region.

Iron and steel works open in Joliet; Chicago Water Tower and pumping works open.

I&M Canal deepened and the flow of the Chicago River reversed, allowing Chicago sewage to be sent down the Illinois River; Great Chicago Fire; debt on the canal paid off.

Along the I&M Canal, visitors can see a variety of historic buildings, including the Locktender’s house at Channahon (left) and the Rutherford Inn and barn (above) at Dresden.

An interpretive panel in the Gaylord Building National Trust Historic Site.

An annual youth fishing event at Lock 14.

(Photos courtesy the Canal Corridor Association.)
1882
Greatest tonnage shipped on the canal in a year, more than 1 million tons.

1900
Sanitary and Ship Canal opens.

1911
Texaco oil refinery opens in Lockport; Starved Rock designated a state park.

1914-1918
I&M experiences a brief resurgence during World War I.

1922
Cal Sag Channel opens.

1923
I&M Canal officially closes; Civilian Conservation Corps establishes camps along the I&M to make repairs.

1925
Designation of Illinois and Michigan Canal State Park from Joliet to LaSalle.

1941-1945
U.S. involvement in World War II.

1963
Town of Sycamore builds a lock (landing ship tanks), and the Joliet Arsenal provides TNT for American troops in World War II.

1964
I&M Canal designated a National Historic Landmark.

Sited adjacent to the I&M Canal at the Canaltown Plaza in Morris, a replica canal boat provides visitors a sense of what travel was like down the nearly 100-mile water trail.

an economic means of shipping freight, especially bulk items such as coal, stone and timber. It was the 1900 opening of the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal that signaled the end of the canal, a fate sealed when channelization of the Illinois River was completed in 1933, providing a wider and deeper shipping lane to the Mississippi River.

Learning the history of canal communities that stood the test of time, and those that faded into near oblivion with canal commerce, has been made easy by technological advances. A course of travel that at one time took days can now be made in a few hours.

Websites produced by DNR and the Canal Corridor Association (see sidebar) provide detailed descriptions and photographs of historical landmarks, natural features and community services. And after taking these virtual tours, who wouldn’t itch for a chance to see the canal first hand? Whether you dedicate a
presents a chance to trace a significant portion of Illinois' history. “The I&M Canal is one of Illinois' most unique resources,” Hassen concluded. “The canal transformed Chicago into a transportation crossroads, setting into motion a system that continues to serve the people of Illinois.”

Today, no matter your mode of travel, the I&M Canal will take you on a trail of discovery of a land shaped by Native Americans, French explorers and thousands of immigrant laborers. You’ll pass through communities once frequented by mule tenders, frontier businessmen and pioneers with a dream of carving out a life on the prairie.

Join us for next month as our trek down the I&M Canal continues from Seneca to LaSalle-Peru.

### Places to See and Things to Do

To learn more about the natural and historic resources located along the I&M Canal, and associated recreational activities, visit www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/PARKS/I&M/Main.htm or www.canalcor.org. Both sites offer virtual tours of some of the canal structures. Highlights of offerings are listed below.

#### Natural
- Prairie habitats: Santa Fe Prairie Nature Preserve (Hodgkins), Lockport Prairie Nature Preserve (Lockport).

#### Historic
- Canal locktenders house: Aux Sable, Channahon.
- Canal locks: Aux Sable, Channahon.
- Canal aqueduct: Aux Sable, Gebhard Woods State Park.
- Replica canal boat: Canalport Plaza (Morris).
- Diagonal bridge: Gebhard Woods State Park.
- Native American sites: Briscoe Mounds (1200 A.D., Channahon).
- Civilian Conservation Corp structures: Channahon, Gebhard Woods State Park, Aux Sable.
- Cemeteries: Evergreen Cemetery (Chief Shabbona), Dresden Cemetery.
- Rural structures: Dresden (Rutherford Inn, barn and warehouse).
- Museums: Isle a la Cache Museum (Romeoville), Gaylord Building National Trust Historic Site (oldest remaining commercial building in the canal corridor, Lockport), Will County Historic Society (housed in the original canal headquaters, Lockport), Grundy County Historical Society.
- Interpretive centers/features: Canal Origins Park (Chicago), Gebhard Woods State Park.
- Industrial ruins: Iron works (Joliet), brewery and furnace (Morris).

#### Recreation

Recreational opportunities available on the I&M Canal State Trail and the state and county facilities in proximity to the trail include picnicking, camping, hiking, bicycling, hunting, fishing, canoeing, kayaking, boating, snowmobiling (when 4 or more inches of snow is present on the canal trail), wildlife observation, nature photography and more.

For detailed information on programs offered at state sites (Gebhard Woods State Park, Heidecke State Fish and Wildlife Area, Goose Lake Prairie State Natural Area, Des Plaines River Conservation Area) visit www.dnr.state.il.us/lands.

For information on properties managed by the Forest Preserve District of Will County (McKinley Woods, Lockport Prairie) visit www.fpdwc.org.