

THE ILLINOIS AND MICHIGAN CANAL (I&M CANAL)

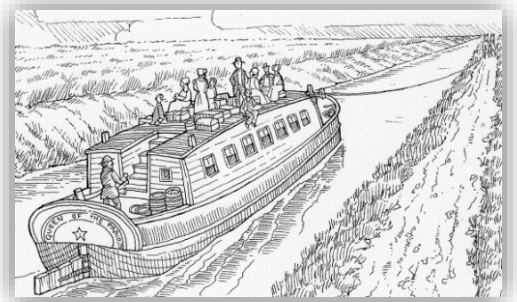
The vision of what the canal could be for America was first thought of by French Explorers Lewis and Clark in the early 1800's. They wanted a waterway to connect Lake Michigan to the Illinois River.



The work on the canal became a reality when construction broke ground in 1836 and was finished in 1848. For 12 long years, Irish immigrants HAND-DUG the canal. It was 60 feet wide and about 6 foot deep. It stretched 96 miles from Lake Michigan (near present day Chicago) to the Illinois River (near present day LaSalle, IL). The canal cost \$6,170,226 to complete. Work on the canal was hard, and much of the dig areas were low-lying, infested with leeches, mosquitos, and snakes. Thousands of people died of disease during its construction. The workers earned about \$1/day and were sometimes given a gill (about 4 ounces) of whiskey. Tow paths were also constructed next to the canal, so that the LIVE MULES and MULE-TENDERS could walk along and “drag” the boats. James Butler Hickok, more famously known as “Wild Bill Hickok”, was born in nearby Troy Grove, IL in 1837 and was hired as a mule-tender on the canal before he headed out west and became famous. Many churches were built along the canal, and some of the workers set up homes along the banks. There is a 140 foot (42m) height difference from Lake Michigan to the Illinois River, so 17 locks and 4 aqueducts were included in the plans. Its completion meant that people and goods could easily be transported from New York to New Orleans using a system of waterways. Farming in the Midwest, especially along the canal, became a lucrative business, as farmers could put their harvest to markets faster. You have to remember, back in those days, there were NO AUTOMOBILES and NO SUPER HIGHWAYS. Before the canal, all that you could carry in your boat or wagon was all that you could take to market. Plus, roadways were muddy and unpaved, making travel difficult by land, so having a waterway had opened up the opportunity for MORE freight to be transported, and thus making a richer tradesman. The I&M Canal had opened up an influx of new people, commodities and ideas.

Towns were planned out along the canal at intervals so that mules could rest as they hauled the boats and barges. Chicago did not even exist before the canal, but in the first 10 years the canal was open, Chicago's population grew 600%. The canal had its peak year in shipping in 1882, and remained in use until 1933. After the canal closed, most of the towns that had sprung up along the banks had lost their revenue. Most of the original canal is preserved as part of the Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor, established by the U.S. Congress in 1984.

People also traveled much more due to the opening of the canal, and the 24 hour ride from Chicago to LaSalle cost about \$4. Although it was considered a more comfortable trip than riding in a stagecoach on unpaved trails, many passengers described the packet boat experience as unpleasant due to the overcrowded spaces. These packet boats often had an open-air (top deck) and an enclosed lower deck with windows. The windows would be closed at night to help cut down on the mosquitos, but that just made the interior very hot and muggy, especially on humid summer evenings. There were no railings on these packet boats, and children were often tied to the boat with a rope, so that they wouldn't fall into the canal.



Walk, Run, Bike, Fish & Ride on the historic I&M Canal!

RENT ELECTRIC BICYCLES! – UTICA, IL – uticaebike.com – 815-228-4960 (seasonal)

TOURS ON A REPLICA OF THE HISTORIC PACKET BOATS! – LASALLE, IL – iandmcanal.org – 815-220-1848 (seasonal)