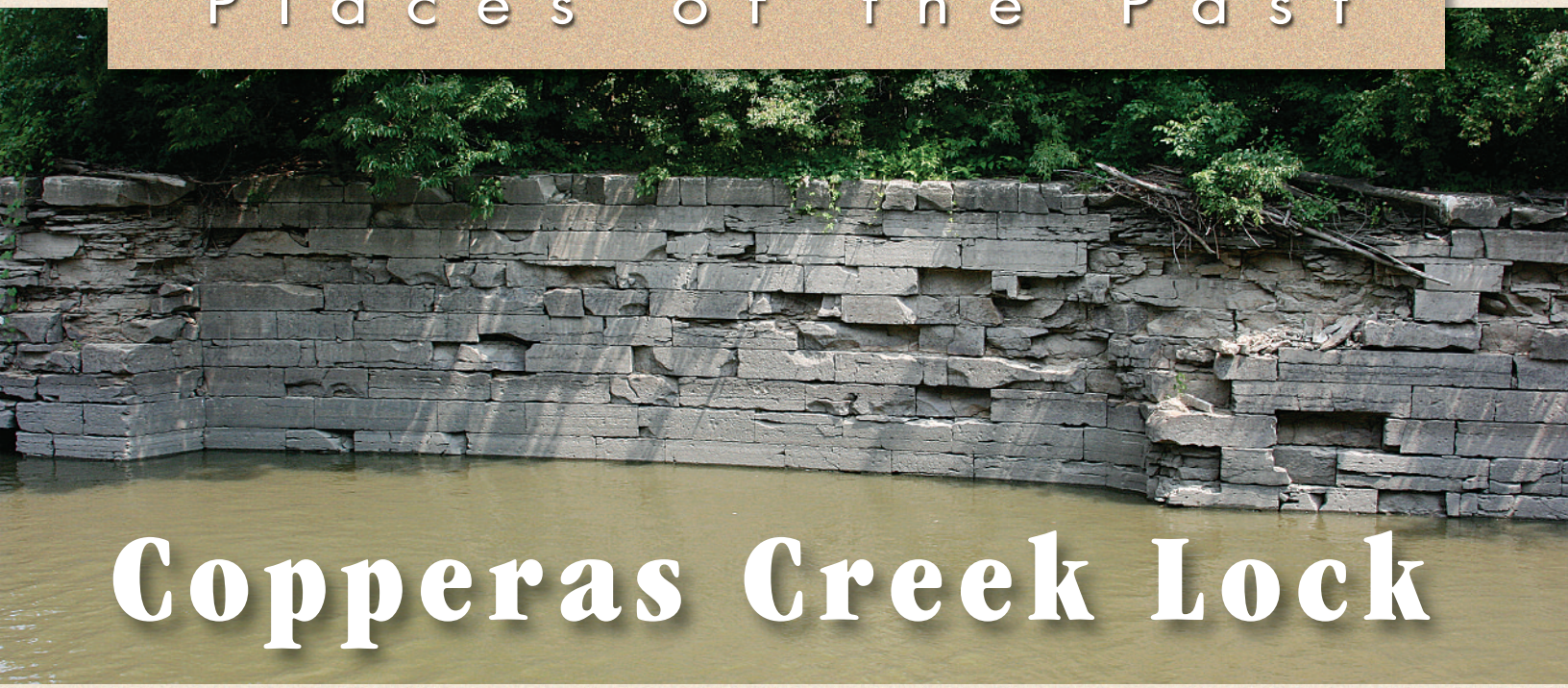

Copperas Creek Lock

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On December 22, 1846, the Illinois legislature resolved to improve Illinois River navigation by building a series of locks and dams. A survey completed the year before identified nearly 100 locations where the river was seasonally less than 3 feet deep. The first lock and dam was constructed at Henry in 1872, the second at Copperas Creek near Banner in 1876. Now 133 years old, the remarkably well-preserved Copperas Creek lock reminds us of the role of the river in Illinois' economy and how the lock and dam system changed the nature of the river.

Located on the west bank of the Illinois River, the Copperas Creek lock chamber is 350 feet long, 75 feet wide and faced with dressed limestone. Although the wooden doors used to regulate the amount of water in the lock chamber are long gone, insets in the chamber wall mark their location. Engraved in the chamber walls at the upstream and downstream entries to the lock are elevations that measure water depth.

Downstream water depth gauge at Copperas Creek lock.

In 1876, George T. Walch, a British engineer then stationed in Madras, India, visited the Henry lock and dam and wrote a detailed description of its design and construction. The Copperas Creek lock and dam were built in the same manner. The lock chamber, a wooden superstructure faced with limestone, was constructed on dry land and later connected to the river. A dam, 11 feet high and 45 feet wide at its base, stretched 650 feet from the lock chamber to the east bank of the river and raised the river level 2 feet—all the way to the Henry dam, 60 miles upstream.

This change in water depth substantially improved navigation, but it also

Inset for the upstream, riverward lock door at Copperas Creek lock.

had a profound effect on the nature of the river. Many plant and animal species adapted to seasonal variations in water depth found it difficult to survive in the equivalent a perpetual flood. But improved river transportation was the goal in the late 19th century, and it was difficult to conceive at the time that the remarkable natural vitality of the river would be adversely affected.

The Copperas Creek lock is showing its age. Some of the dressed limestone blocks have deteriorated, and repeated floods have damaged the riverward wall of the chamber. But recently, using a 20-foot-long steel probe, Dickson Mounds Museum archaeologists determined that the plank floor of the lock chamber is still intact.

Although long obsolete, the Copperas Creek lock is a place that links us to the past, one of many that today remind us of important events in Illinois history.

To see the Copperas Creek lock, travel to Banner, located on Route 24 south of Peoria, and follow the Banner Dike Road along Copperas Creek to the Copperas Creek Landing boat ramp.