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.

1783
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.

Des Plaines River and I&M Canal, Joliet circa 1890.

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, wedding 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

Railing at Canal Origins Park.

(Photo courtesy the Canal Corridor Association.)

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.

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

(Photo courtesy the Canal Corridor Association.)

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

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.

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."

(Photo courtesy the Canal Corridor Association.)

An annual youth fishing event at Lock 14.

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

1816 Treaty with Ottawa and Potawatomi; Chippewa tribes cedes land along the Illinois River to build a canal.

1818 Illinois becomes the 21st state.

1822 A federal act authorizes survey and building of the canal but provides no funds.

1825 Erie Canal opens, leading to increased immigration to Illinois.

1827 Congress gives Illinois 284,000 acres of land to finance construction of the canal.

Lock 6 at Channahon circa 1900.

1830 The towns of Chicago and Ottawa are laid out by the Canal Commissioners.

1832 Black Hawk War; treaties the following year banish Native American's west of the Mississippi River.

1836 Construction on I&M Canal begins.

1837 Panic of 1837, first major national depression.

1838 Labor violence erupts among canal workers.

1840-1844 Most work on the canal halted due to lack of funds.

1847 Canal diggers unsuccessfully strike for more wages and fewer hours.

1848 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.

1849 A devastating cholera epidemic arrives in Chicago via passengers from a canal boat.

1852 Last year of major passenger travel on the I&M; Chicago and Rock Island R.R. parallels canal.

I&M Canal at Lockport circa 1910.

1854 Chicago and Rock Island R.R. opened to the Mississippi River.

1858 State penitentiary built in Joliet.

1861-1865 U. S. Civil War.

1866 Canal brings in more than $300,000 in tolls, the most ever. Another cholera epidemic sweeps through the region.

1869 Iron and steel works open in Joliet; Chicago Water Tower and pumping works open.

1871 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.

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.

1933

Illinois Waterway opens and I&M Canal officially closes; Civilian Conservation Corps establishes camps along the I&M to make repairs.

Boat with a cargo of salt at Lock 8 circa 1912.

1935

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

1941-1945

U.S. involvement in World War II.

1942-1945

Town of Seneca builds LST's (landing ship tanks), and the Joliet Arsenal provides TNT for American troops in World War II.

1963

I&M Canal designated a National Historic Landmark.

1964

Stevenson Expressway opens in Chicago, built over the first seven miles of the I&M Canal; dedication of old canal warehouse in Utica for the LaSalle County Historical Society.

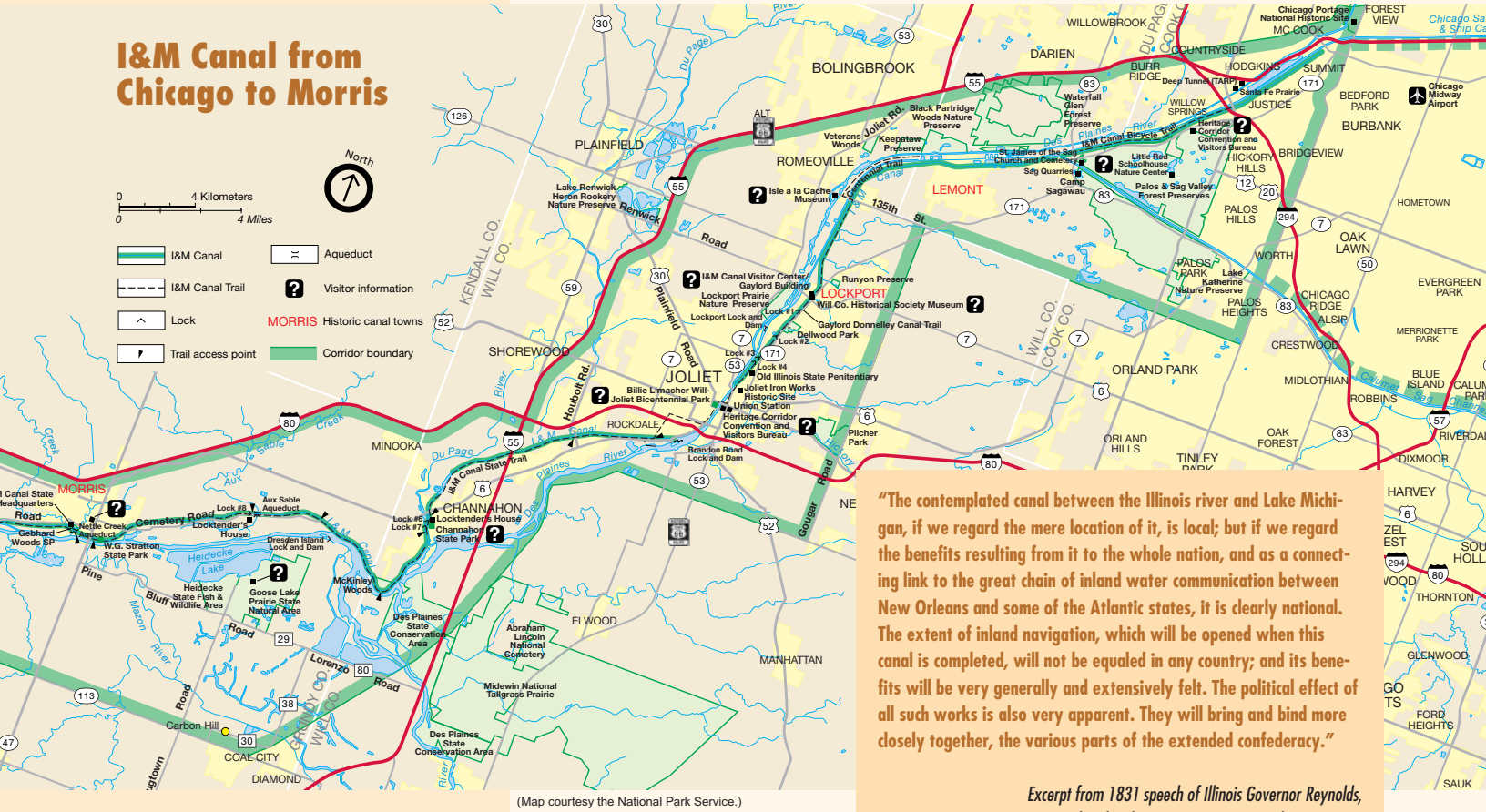
Sited adjacent to the I&M Canal at the Canalport Plaza in Morris, a replica canal boat provides visitors a sense of what travel was like down the nearly 100-mile water trail.

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

I&M Canal from Chicago to Morris



(Map courtesy the National Park Service.)

"The contemplated canal between the Illinois river and Lake Michigan, if we regard the mere location of it, is local; but if we regard the benefits resulting from it to the whole nation, and as a connecting link to the great chain of inland water communication between New Orleans and some of the Atlantic states, it is clearly national. The extent of inland navigation, which will be opened when this canal is completed, will not be equaled in any country; and its benefits will be very generally and extensively felt. The political effect of all such works is also very apparent. They will bring and bind more closely together, the various parts of the extended confederacy."

Excerpt from 1831 speech of Illinois Governor Reynolds, reprinted in the Chicago Democrat, November 26, 1833.

In Evergreen Cemetery at Morris, a large boulder marks the grave of Potawatomi Chief Shabonna.

day or several long weekends to exploring the trail on bike or foot, or opt for all or part of the 75-mile driving tour from Lemont to LaSalle-Peru, the I&M Canal 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.

1969 I&M Canal office in Lockport closed and turned over to the Will County Historical Society.

1974 I&M Canal transferred to the jurisdiction of the Department of Conservation (now Department of Natural Resources).

1981 National Park Service releases concept plan for I&M Heritage Corridor.

Lock 8 at Aux Sable circa 1930.

1984 I&M National Heritage Corridor named the nation's first Heritage Corridor.

1998 150th anniversary of the opening of the canal; dedication of the Joliet Iron Works Historic Site.

2000 Corridor driving tour signs installed.

2002 Joliet Area Historical Museum opens.

2004 I&M Canal Heritage Corridor Commission sunsets.

Timeline courtesy of the Canal Corridor Association.

I&M Canal Partners

- The Department of Natural Resources owns and manages the I&M Canal and the various state parks within the Heritage Corridor. Call (815) 942-0796 or visit www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/parks/i&m/main.htm.
- The Canal Corridor Association is a private, not-for-profit organization dedicated to community economic development, historic preservation and conservation within the Heritage Corridor. Phone (815) 588-1100 or visit www.canalcor.org.
- The Heritage Corridor Convention & Visitors Bureau is the certified Convention and Visitors Bureau for the Heritage Corridor, and all of Will, Grundy and LaSalle counties. Phone (815) 727-2323 or visit www.heritagecorridorcvb.com.
- The Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor Civic Center Authority is a state agency committed to the historic, recreational and economic development of several communities in the Heritage Corridor. Call (708) 352-4110. For information on the Santa Fe Prairie Nature Preserve call (708) 598-6139, or visit www.civiccenterauthority.org.
- Forest Preserve District of Will County facilities are open 8 a.m.-8 p.m. April through October and 8 a.m.-5 p.m November through March. Visit www.fpdwc.org for information on Lockport Prairie, Isle a La Cache Museum and McKinley Woods.
- Cook County Forest Preserve District. Canoe access to the I&M Canal is available at the Willow Springs area (enter at Willow Springs Rd.). The FPD website also has a Chicago Portage Canoe Trail Map identifying launch sites and canoe route distances from Stonyford to Lemont. Visit www.fpdcc.com or write Forest Preserve District of Cook County, 536 North Harlem Avenue, River Forest, IL 60305.

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 headquarters, 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.