

Aquatic History: Follow the River Teacher's Guide



Illinois waterways have been a vital resource for Native Americans, early explorers, fur traders, river boat operators, settlers and many other groups of Illinoisans. Native Americans were the first humans to utilize the resources of Illinois waterways, starting about 12,000 years ago, and examples of this early culture remain at some of the Midwest's finest historic sites.

Native Americans

Native Americans 10,000 years ago spent part of the year living along the eastern flood plain of the Mississippi River. Archaeological studies at Kampsville, on the lower Illinois River and near Prairie du Rocher, show temporary camps of these nomadic people. By 7,000 years ago, these people had changed to more permanent residents. Settlements sprung up along the Mississippi River where people relied on the abundant fishes as a food staple. Many early Native American sites have been identified by archaeologists using remains of freshwater mussel shells and burned acorns as clues. These deposits show how dependent the people were on the river environment.

Hopewell Indians were mound builders who lived 2,220 to 1,700 years ago along the bluffs of the Mississippi, Illinois and other major Illinois rivers. These mounds were sometimes used as burial sites for the tribes' important members and contained intricately designed pipes, jewelry and copper ornaments. Some objects found in burial mounds can be attributed to the vast trade network established with other tribes along the rivers. The Hopewell used pottery to cook and store food, and they cultivated specific wild plants along the rivers, one of the earliest forms of agriculture. While plant cultivation did not replace hunting and gathering as a method of obtaining food, it did become a valuable resource. The Hopewell relied on small game, fishes and cultivated plants for nourishment. They thrived and their population increased substantially. Experts estimate that one Hopewell settlement along the Illinois River supported 50 people per square mile, a population denser than the one that presently occupies the same area. Dickson Mounds Museum near Havana educates visitors about a Hopewellian burial mound and ancient village site. Another resource on the mound builder tribes is Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site, located in Collinsville, which has the largest earthen mound in the United States.

French Explorers

French traders had an important role in Illinois aquatic history. As the first known Europeans to set foot on Illinois soil, the French traveled mainly by canoe because it was an easy form of transportation and allowed them to locate, establish and operate trade routes. It also provided them a means to transport beaver pelts and served as protection from the wilderness. Louis Jolliet and Father Jacques Marquette were two of the first explorers who left their mark in Illinois. On June 20, 1673, they paddled their supply-laden canoes past the hills of present-day Galena in search of a trade route to the Orient. Meanwhile, fur traders, frontiersmen and others settled into what was to become the "Prairie State."

During this stage of settlement, several forts were constructed along Illinois waterways. Fort St. Louis (Starved Rock State Park) and Fort Creve Coeur (Creve Coeur) were built along the Illinois River. Fort Massac (Metropolis) was constructed on the Ohio River. Five forts were built along a relatively short stretch of the Mississippi River—Cahokia, Prairie du Rocher, Fort de Chartres, St. Genevieve and Kaskaskia. Forts served as trading posts and military and governmental centers.

Early Pioneers

Early pioneers utilized river corridors as a means to move west because rivers often were a faster, more efficient method of transportation. Traveling along rivers and streams provided settlers some of the fundamental needs of survival—water, fuel and shelter. Concentrations of wildlife along these corridors contributed something else settlers needed to survive—food.

In the early 1800s, thousands of Americans traveled down the Ohio River, which was known as the "Great Westward Flowing River" because it ran from West Virginia to Illinois before it joined the Mississippi River. Settlements developed along big

rivers according to geography and safety factors, such as where a river joined with one of its tributaries or where a U.S. military fort was located. A commonly used mode of travel was the large flatboat. Many pioneers traveled downstream with their belongings strapped to these large, awkward, floating decks. To return upstream required barge-like keelboats which were propelled by pushing long poles into the river bottom. Eventually, entrepreneurs utilized the flatboats as large, floating stores, transporting dishes, silverware, clothing items and some tools between settlements. When Illinois was granted statehood in 1818, most of the population resided in the American Bottoms of southern Illinois. Settling of the inland prairie areas was considerably slower than along the waterways.

By the 1830s the Great Lakes were used as an additional route to the west. The advent of steamships in the 1800s provided a means of carrying huge shipments of essentials, including meat, alcohol, dairy and grain products.

Construction of the Illinois and Michigan Canal was initiated in 1836. Intended to be a link between the Great Lakes and Illinois River, the canal was perceived as a safe and cheap way to transport goods and passengers; however, use declined because it proved to be a slow means for moving goods and was not able to compete with the newly constructed railroads. A series of additional canals (including the Hennepin and Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal) was constructed to improve transportation and for sanitation purposes.

Rivers and canals proved an important means of transportation that led to the creation of trading settlements, which often then developed into communities. Streams, lakes and ponds provided water supplies for daily consumption and farming, as well as a source of food through fish and the wildlife that congregated around the water.

Current Uses

Today, we use Illinois bodies of water for recreational purposes as well as commercial fishing and the transportation of goods and materials. All of these activities are, however, subject to the conditions of the rivers. The Great Floods of 1993 and 2011 brought virtually all water activities to a halt as communities focused on protecting

homes, businesses and croplands from rising flood water. Companies lost millions of dollars a day as barge transportation was first delayed, and then stopped completely due to the high water. Highways were flooded and bridges were closed due to water over their entrance roads. People could not reach their jobs, and businesses could not transport their products. The ensuing cleanup costs led to a public debate on flood plain management and local, state and federal policies regarding the construction of homes or businesses in a flood plain.

Illinois has a wealth of aquatic resources, each with its own history and role in the development of this state, providing students with an opportunity to research a local stream or body of water and determine its role in the history of their own community.

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