

Exploring the History of the Illinois and Michigan Canal



SUGGESTED GRADE LEVELS: MS

SUBJECTS: Social Science

SKILLS: research, analysis, critical thinking, comparative reasoning

CORRELATION TO

ILLINOIS LEARNING STANDARDS: Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts - Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies: Key Ideas and Details 1, 2; Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies: Text Types and Purposes 2.a, 2.b, 2.c, 2.d, 2.e, 2.f; Research to Build and Present Knowledge 7, 8, 9 Social Science – SS.H.1.6-8.LC., SS.H.1.6-8.MdC., SS.H.4.6-8.LC.

Objective

Students will research the lives of individuals who played a key role in the development of the Illinois and Michigan (I and M) Canal.

Method

Students will collect research information and develop a broad time line of the development of the I and M Canal including the role of the I and M Canal in the development of Chicago as a major trade center and Illinois as a state.

Background

Native Americans used the low divide between the waters of the Chicago River and the Des Plaines River as a natural portage, or transfer point, between the Great Lakes and the Illinois and Mississippi rivers. This low divide was only a few miles wide and was so flat and swampy that during rainy times people could travel by canoe from one river to the other without portaging.

Louis Jolliet, an early French explorer, recognized in 1673 that a canal connecting the Des Plaines and Chicago rivers could be very important to French trading opportunities and was anxious to develop the area based on that canal. By 1679, however, Robert Cavalier de La Salle was involved in the corridor. He had expansion ideas for “Illinois Country” but did not approve of the canal plan. He wanted to concentrate instead on a series of forts that would encourage settlement in this new area. The forts offered protection from hostile tribes including the Iroquois Nation.

By the end of the 17th century, the Jesuit mission in what was to become Chicago closed. That mission had offered protection to settlers, but now various Native American tribes controlled sections of the corridor. For much of the 1700s, people bypassed the corridor in an effort to avoid the unrest.

After the American Revolution, the newly created federal government took control of the area at the mouth of the Chicago River

and later established Fort Dearborn in 1803, a move that would seal Chicago’s fate as an early gateway to the west.

After the War of 1812, interest in the canal was revitalized. In 1816, the first substantial Native American surrendering of land in northern Illinois occurred when the Potawatomi ceded land 10 miles on either side of the Des Plaines and Illinois rivers from Lake Michigan to the Fox River. The Native Americans were persuaded to do so by the promise of a canal that would improve transportation for them.

The canal area was not highly populated with humans, but the potential economic and strategic benefits were too positive to ignore. The federal government wanted to see the project through but proposed that the state of Illinois be responsible for the construction of the actual canal. The bill making Illinois a state expanded the northern boundary so that the state would have enough Lake Michigan shoreline to ensure that the canal would be enclosed within the state.

Shadrach Bond, Illinois’ first governor, was faced with the prospect of how the state was going to pay for this large construction project. He petitioned the federal government for assistance and received 90 feet of land on each side of the potential canal route. With this paltry show of support, the state was discouraged but not dissuaded. Construction on the canal progressed through the early 1800s. By 1830, thanks to the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, an increased number of immigrants moved west via the Great Lakes and many settled along the canal.

Also in 1830, Chicago was surveyed as the potential terminal of the I and M Canal. At this time, Chicago was a small fur-trading settlement and military outpost. Construction of the canal helped initiate Chicago’s emergence as a major marketing and processing center and served as the catalyst for settlement and development of the northeastern section of Illinois as businesses and employees settled there.

The original financing problem became an ongoing obstacle to the canal as work stopped, started, stopped and started again. The “Panic of 1837” set the stage for the eventual halt of all canal work in 1841. The panic was a nationwide recession. At this time, Illinois had sponsored one of the greatest public works projects in its history and counted on receiving money from land sales. Because the rest of the country was in a financial crisis, people did not move west at the rate anticipated by state planners and so did not invest much money. After four years, however, investors from England and the east coast poured money into the project, and it was officially completed in 1848.

Upon opening, the canal was 60 feet wide at water level, 36 feet wide at the bottom and six feet deep along the entire 96-mile route. Fifteen locks lifted or lowered boats along the canal as water levels changed. Chicago’s population soared more than 600 percent in the decade following the canal’s completion.

Chicago was not the only community to reap the benefits of the canal. During construction, the canal sparked the growth of towns including Joliet, La Salle, Lockport, Morris, Seneca, Ottawa and others. Illinois underwent a tremendous increase in population as immigrants moved into the northern part of the state.

By 1854, railroads offered serious competition to the canal, and their routes mirrored the canal’s route. Railroads provided a cheaper and quicker means of transporting goods and passengers. Canal traffic declined and by 1900, two other canals, the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal and the Illinois Waterway, were at the forefront. Thus began the deterioration and decline of the I and M Canal as businesses chose other routes to ship their goods.

Today, local communities have realized the historic importance of the I and M Canal to Illinois and area history. They have worked to restore bridges, canal buildings and other historic structures. Parks have been created along the canal. The Illinois Department of Natural Resources operates the canal areas from outside Joliet to La Salle as the I and M Canal State Trail.

Literature Cited

- Brule, K. 1996. *Making Connections: What the Illinois and Michigan Canal is All About*. National Heritage Corridor Commission, Lockport, Illinois. 71 pp.
- Lamb, J. 1987. *I and M Canal: A Corridor in Time*. Lewis University, Romeoville, Illinois. 30 pp.

Materials

Copy of “List of Important Individuals in the History of the I and M Canal” for each student or group; reference materials; writing materials

Procedure

1. Tell students that they will be learning about some of the people who were early settlers in the region and about some of the people who played an important role in the development of the I and M Canal.
2. Distribute copies of “List of Important Individuals in the History of the I and M Canal” to the class. Randomly assign one name from the list to each student. Students should research the individual’s life and importance to the canal. Provide students with time to complete their research. Resources that may help you are listed below.

Aquatic Illinois Resource Trunk, Illinois Department of Natural Resources, available for loan – <http://www.dnr.illinois.gov/education/Pages/aquatictrunk.aspx>

I and M Canal Web Site, <http://dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/PARKS/I&M/Main.htm>

Isle a la Cache Museum, Romeoville
<http://www.reconnectwithnature.org/visitor-centers/icm>

La Salle County Historical Museum, Utica,
<http://www.lasallecountymuseum.org/>

Illinois Waterway Visitors’ Center, Ottawa,
<http://www.mvr.usace.army.mil/Missions/Recreation/IllinoisWaterway.aspx>

Lemont Area Historical Society Museum, Lemont,
<http://www.lemonthistorical.org/>

Joliet Area Historical Society, Joliet,
<http://jolietmuseum.org/>

3. Have students write a description of the person’s role in the development of the I and M Canal.
4. Students should compile the information into a time line, highlighting the contributions of each individual researched

Extensions

1. Students will locate old county and township plats and determine where water has been in your community. Identify a specific stream, river or other body of water important to your area in the past and present. Divide the class into two groups. Have one group research the history of this body of water. What was it used for 100 years ago? Have the other group conduct a current events project. What is this body of water used for today?
2. Invite speakers to visit the classroom to elaborate on the importance of water to the community. A local historian can provide an important perspective on the role water played in the location or advancement of your community. A water district engineer can discuss the process of keeping the water clean for human consumption and how we can help to protect our water supply.

Evaluations

1. Students present and discuss the I and M Canal time line elaborating on their individual topics.
2. Students write an essay about the individual they researched.



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STUDENT ACTIVITY PAGE | List of Important Individuals in the History of the Illinois and Michigan Canal

Elsie Strawn Armstrong – from Morris, wrote *Life of a Pioneer Woman*

Louis Jolliet – French explorer

Father Jacques Marquette – Jesuit missionary

Robert Cavalier de La Salle – French explorer

Stephan Long – explorer and surveyor

Gurdon Hubbard – canal commissioner

Watseka Hubbard – Native American, wife of Gurdon Hubbard

Juliet Kinzie – Chicago pioneer

Lovell Kimball – founder of Marseilles

Shadrach Bond – first governor of Illinois

Justus Post – canal engineer

Rene Paul – mapmaker

Jean Baptiste Point du Sable – fur trader in what is now Chicago

James Thompson – first surveyor of Chicago

William Gooding – chief engineer for the I and M Canal

John Lane – Lockport blacksmith who created first steel plow

Hiram Norton – Lockport businessman

Joseph Foster – operator of canal boat, “City of Pekin”

Helen Foster Poole – daughter of Joseph Foster

Chief Shabbona – Native American leader

Abraham Lincoln – supported development of the canal when he was a state representative

John Armour – built grain elevator along the canal in Seneca

Judge Benjamin Wright – premier canal engineer in the United States