

Landscape, Townscape and Canalscape on the I. & M. Canal Corridor.” A paper read at the Illinois State Symposium, December 1988.

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on the I. & M. Canal Corridor**

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Modes of transportation are bound to have an impact on the landscape they cross. Although it may not be so obvious, different methods of transportation have differing impacts on the landscape. This can be seen in the landscapes of two 19th ^{o 19}

in Chicago, was a permanent part of life on the Western Frontier. The form and the peculiarities both silly and

By 1840 seventy-six purchasers of Chicago lots, such as W.B. Ogden, were petitioning the Canal Commissioners for not only a moratorium on payments, but a reduction of the 1836 original price at auction.¹³

To obtain maximum prices for lots in the newly founded towns laid out by the Canal Commissioners, and in addition to older towns it was

few to throw obstacles in the way of building up State towns, and creating manufacturing power, which they view and denounce as an opposition to individual enterprise. But the true policy of the State, like that of her citizens, is to sell her property to best advantage, and where she has improved it to claim the benefits of improvement, without regard to selfish complaint....¹⁶

Another source of discontent with this policy was the almost inevitable rivalry and jealousy between towns. This is seen from letters and editorials in the Joliet Signal between 1847 and 1850. In 1847 "Justice" of Hickory Creek complains that Gooding says a fall of twenty feet at Lockport will supply sufficient water power for 30 run of stone, while ten feet of fall at Joliet will only supply power for twelve run of stone, which he claims is just propaganda for the state town, Lockport, where Gooding resides.¹⁷ Another letter in 1847 from "Jake Utica" of Kankakee says Gooding and others working for the canal build up, "...Lockport, the El Dorado of all their fond hopes."¹⁸ "Long Jimmy" of Thorn Creek has a similar complaint in 1848.¹⁹ In 1850 an editorial in the Joliet Signal goes back to Lockport's thirty run of stone and Joliet's 12, adding "...true, the canal officers, most of them residents of Lockport, have squandered thousands to build a basin so that they might have waterpower there; yet anyone who is acquainted with such matters must see by examination, that the power here is much the surest and the best."²⁰

The pressure on the Canal officials to sell off land and quickly raise money was always resisted even though the financial difficulties faced by the state and the canal between 1839-1848 intensified the demand for quick sales. The law stated that most of the lots and lands were to be retained until the canal was completed. In 1845 because of financial difficulties, control of the canal shifted from the State to a Board of three Trustees. Two were appointed by the bond holders, and one by the Governor. The Board borrowed sufficient money to finish the canal. One of the first things the Board did in 1845 was to hire a land agent, E.S. Prescott. Prescott was able to increase the sale of town lots after the canal was completed in 1848.²¹ The Trustees insisted that the lots be sold at or above their confirmed valuation. In the 1850s when sales were brisk in and around Chicago, if the other town lots didn't come up to snuff, they were withdrawn.²²

By the 1850s another transportation development with a large government land grant came upon the Illinois scene. This was the Illinois Central Railroad. It was natural that they would turn to I. and M. Canal personnel to help in selling their lands and lots. In 1853 Prescott was approached by David Neal, a leading figure in the railroad and subsequently in the railroad land sales. Prescott reported: "...Mr. Neal is as desirous as anyone that I should relieve him of the perplexities of town making, for he doesn't think he has the 'knack' at the business."²³ Prescott would eventually turn the offer down because the railroad, he felt, was trying to bring too much land on the market before the railroad was completed. His experience with the canal made him mistakenly believe this couldn't be done.²⁴ Interestingly, Neal soon acquired the 'knack' of town making putting together a plot on a north-south axis with common street designations split down the middle by the railroad. The plot was used for thirty-three towns on the Illinois Central line planned by David Neal's Land Associates.²⁵ In contrast to the railroads, canal towns were shaped by geographic features and by the changes in landscape made by the canal builders. In addition, there was no rush to sell lots, and their sale continued at a varying rate throughout the 19th century. The railroad tended to have uniform town plans and quick sales.

That the canal was wise in its lot sale practice is indicated by some figures of 1852. Since 1845, 62% of the 6,384 lots then laid out had been sold. The amount received was \$1,015,000, yet the total lot evaluation was \$974,364. The sale of town lots had brought in more actually and comparatively than the land sales, of which less than 50% had been sold by that year.²⁶

In order to appreciate the varied townscapes of the canal towns along the Illinois and Michigan Canal, I will look at four towns: Lockport, Joliet, Ottawa and La Salle. Two of these towns were plotted by the Canal

officials in 1837, while Joliet and Ottawa were laid out in 1833 and 1830 respectively. However, in both of these latter towns the canal made significant

Michigan Canal. The disagreeable odor has been widely talked of as a menace to health.”³¹

The writer went on to urge that the old canal be converted into a pathway for the latest thing, the automobile. It should be made into a scenic drive from Chicago, she assured her readers, which would bring in business and tourists.

The next town, below Lockport, was Joliet, which became the largest town on the canal after Chicago. Joliet was first plotted on the east side of the Des Plaines River on a grid street pattern on a north-south axis. This was done by James B. Campbell in 1833. He called his speculative venture ‘Juliet’ after a hill located near the town named by Joliet for himself, but called ‘Juliet’ in 18th century maps for some incomprehensible reason. In 1833 the west side of the river was plotted also, but its grid pattern paralleled the river, which forms the dominant feature of the town.³² Since in 1837 these two areas were outside State-owned land, the canal officials plotted an area west of the river and north of West Joliet. A ten-foot dam raised the level of the river, and a wide basin was constructed on the canal, running northeast of the dam. The dam, located on Jackson Street, also had a 10-foot, lift lock on its west side. Since this was on the State’s addition to Joliet, most of the water power was here. South of the dam the river and the canal were the same for about a mile. There a smaller dam and a guard lock of two-foot lift, enabled the canal to leave the river entirely. The State had made Joliet a canal town in spite of itself. Though much changed, to this day the waterway divides the city, and frazzles the nerves of its motorists when tows and barges block east-west traffic with raised bridges. Though four railroads and one Interstate Highway cross the town, the waterway dominates it.

Fifty miles west of Joliet is Ottawa, like Joliet, a county seat. This town was laid out originally in 1830 by the same surveyor as Chicago. The original town, like Chicago, had a public square in the center of the plot. In Ottawa the court house is located there and in Chicago’s Public Square, the Cook County building. In 1836 as in Chicago, the Canal Commissioners were requested to redraw the original plot which was lost and to certify it. Outside the original town, in 1837 the canal officials made additions that would make Ottawa a canal town. They succeeded in supplying water power to their addition by a number of engineering arrangements. The canal entered the town at a higher level than the town because it crossed the Fox River by means of an aqueduct. In about the middle of the town a feeder from the Fox River entered the canal; also at that point a south running Lateral canal moved south, then north, to flow into the Fox River at its mouth. The Lateral canal had one lock with water power facilities.

There were also mills at a hydraulic basin where this Lateral canal ended and emptied into the Fox River. This State addition had two public squares and two public landings on the Lateral canal. As Canal Commissioner Thornton wrote in 1838:

“Strengthened and cultivated as her natural advantages now are, it is admitted by all intelligent observers that Ottawa must soon become an important manufacturing city, creating a vast amount of business for the canal, defusing incalculable benefits through an extensive scope of country, and remunerating the State, by increased value of

The last town on the canal is La Salle. It, like Lockport, was to be a key town on the canal. It was not to be principally a manufacturing town, but a canal port and a railroad link. The railroads were to be the Illinois Central connecting the town to the northern part of the State and the southern part, and the Rock Island going from La Salle west to the Mississippi. The town lies above the canal. On the canal were two locks in close proximity that lowered the canal boats into a steamboat basin dug back from the Illinois River. From there boats could be towed down to the Mississippi River. Between these two locks was a basin whose banks were designed for warehouses so that goods could be moved to the railroads.³⁴ The plan was that the railroad would come down almost to the canal. Suffice it to say that when the Illinois Central and the Rock Island were bui

19. Joliet Signal, February 22, 1848.
20. Joliet Signal, July 30, 1850.
21. Swift Letter of June 3, 1848, Swift Mas. Chicago Historical Society.
22. E. S. Prescott to Captain Swift, November 21, 1852, Swift Mas. Chicago Historical Society.
23. E. S. Prescott to Captain Swift, October 29, 1853, 1853 to 1855. Autograph Letters to Captain Swift, Swift Mas. Chicago Historical Society.
24. Gates, Paul W., The Illinois Central Railroad and Its Colonization Work, Johnson Reprints Corp., New York, 1968, pp. 149-150.
25. Ibid., Rees, John, The Making of Urban America, Princeton University Press, 1965, p. 127; 389-393.
26. Report of the Trustees of the Illinois and Michigan Canal for the Year Ending November 30, 1852, H. R. 13, pp. 99-100.
27. Will County Directory for 1859-1860