

# The Illinois & Michigan Canal

Can you catch a glimpse of a water-filled channel in northern Illinois between Bloomington and Chicago? The Amtrak route follows a portion of the path of a 96-mile, hand-dug waterway called the Illinois & Michigan Canal that forever changed the nation when it opened in 1848. Today it is part of the I & O National Heritage Corridor which provides recreation along with a glimpse of history for its many visitors. The town of Lockport, Illinois, served as the headquarters for the canal during its operation, and today Amtrak travelers can view its restored downtown along the Canal Corridor.

The canal was built after decades of work by businesspeople and investors. Why did they want this canal so badly? The canal connected the Illinois River with Lake Michigan, opening a shipping channel all the way from New York City to the Gulf of Mexico ports. Ships could now travel from the Atlantic Ocean, up the Hudson River, through the Erie Canal, across the Great Lakes, through the I & O canal, and then navigate the Mississippi River all the way to the Gulf of Mexico! Prior to the creation of this water highway system, people and goods traveled overland on slow, bumpy trails. The ease of transporting goods established Chicago as a trading hub of national significance, and had a huge impact on agriculture, immigrant settlements and the economy of the Midwest.

The arduous work of digging the canal by hand was done mostly by immigrants from Ireland, Germany and Sweden who were attracted to Illinois by the promise of abundant jobs. The workers lived in crude shanties and many died from accidents and diseases such as cholera and dysentery. During summer there was a great fear of malaria, and workers demanded whiskey, which they thought would protect them from the disease. For some periods of time, workers were paid one dollar and a gill (or about a half-cup) of whiskey per day for the dangerous work.

If you had been a farmer in northeastern Illinois before the canal opened, you and your neighbors would have grown food only for your families and local communities. Even though corn grew well in the rich prairie soil, it was too heavy and bulky to transport very far. Once the canal opened and shipping became easy and inexpensive, corn quickly became the new cash crop, and it has held its pre-eminent status in Illinois ever since. Corn wasn't the only commodity traveling by canal boat. Lumber, wheat, beef, pork, coal, sugar and salt poured into Chicago, then on to Eastern and Southern markets.

Passengers traveled along with the cargo. It wasn't as comfortable as your Amtrak ride, but in general, folks were grateful to be riding on a boat instead of bumping slowly along on a dusty or muddy road. During the 17 to 24 hour trip along the length of the I & O Canal, meals were served and some played cards or backgammon and watched the scenery on deck during daylight. The nights were much less pleasant, as up to 120 people were crammed into the cabin, and windows were kept closed for fear of malaria. Imagine trying to rest among strangers through a long, hot night! Just five years after the canal opened, a railway was completed which paralleled the canal, so passengers could opt for a faster and more comfortable trip. The Amtrak line still runs along the canal between Chicago and Bloomington, so watch for the famous waterway on the west side of the tracks.

If you choose to visit the canal-way, you can bike or stroll on one of the numerous trails, the longest of which stretches 61 miles. Many communities along the Corridor feature historic canal buildings and museums so that you can learn more about how the I & O Canal made Illinois the most populous inland state, and Chicago the greatest city of the American heartland.

**Source(s):**

Canal Corridor Association. (2009). Canal History. Retrieved November 29, 2010 from [http://www.canalcor.org/CCA2005/CCA\\_Hist.html](http://www.canalcor.org/CCA2005/CCA_Hist.html) .

Canal Corridor Association. (n.d.). Why was the I&M Canal designated a National Heritage Area? Retrieved November 29, 2010 from <http://www.iandmcanal.org/> .

Wikipedia. (2010). Illinois and Michigan Canal. Retrieved November 29, 2010 from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illinois\\_and\\_Michigan\\_Canal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illinois_and_Michigan_Canal)

**Author(s):**

Written by Susan G. Scott, Lecturer in the Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M University, as part of a National Park Service Trails and Rails project funded by Amtrak, 2010.