

Kankakee River and Inland Canoe Routes

Watch for the wide, beautiful Kankakee River near Wilmington, Illinois. Can you imagine paddling a canoe downstream on a beautiful summer day? Now imagine paddling a canoe full of furs upriver on a cold, rainy day with just a hand-drawn map to guide you to a trading post at the edge of the wilderness.

Until the advent of the railroads in the mid-1800's, rivers like this one were the main travel routes for Native Americans, explorers, fur traders and European settlers. The Kankakee River was an important link in the inland network of canoe routes, connecting Lake Michigan and the Illinois River, which flows on to the great Mississippi.

The French explorer Robert de LaSalle paddled the Kankakee through Illinois, on to the Mississippi River and down to the Gulf of Mexico in the 1670s. With the cooperation of the Illinois Indians and many other tribes, he set up fur trading posts and settlements, and claimed the entire Mississippi River basin for France. He called this enormous territory Louisiana in honor of King Louis XIV, forming a French colony several times larger than the nation of France.

During the time of the fur trappers, the Kankakee was a shallow river which meandered through the largest wetland in North America. Travelers could navigate through the swamp, but it was a long, slow trip. During the 1800s and 1900s, people dug deep channels for straighter, faster passage, and also constructed drainage ditches to convert the swamp to agricultural land. The channelization reduced the river to less than half its original length, but made it highly prone to flooding. Since the 1980s some levees have been widened to restore part of the original floodplain.

Today parts of the Kankakee River are straight channels lined with cement banks, but other areas are natural and wild. Many trading posts and towns sprang up along the river when it was the major transportation route in the region. Some of these communities have continued to flourish, including the city of Kankakee, Illinois, which is located east of the Texas Eagle train route and serviced by the Amtrak City of New Orleans train. The river is a popular destination for fishing and recreational canoeing.

Source(s):

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