



Prairie Pages

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Education Services

Illinois Historic Preservation Agency

Transportation in Illinois

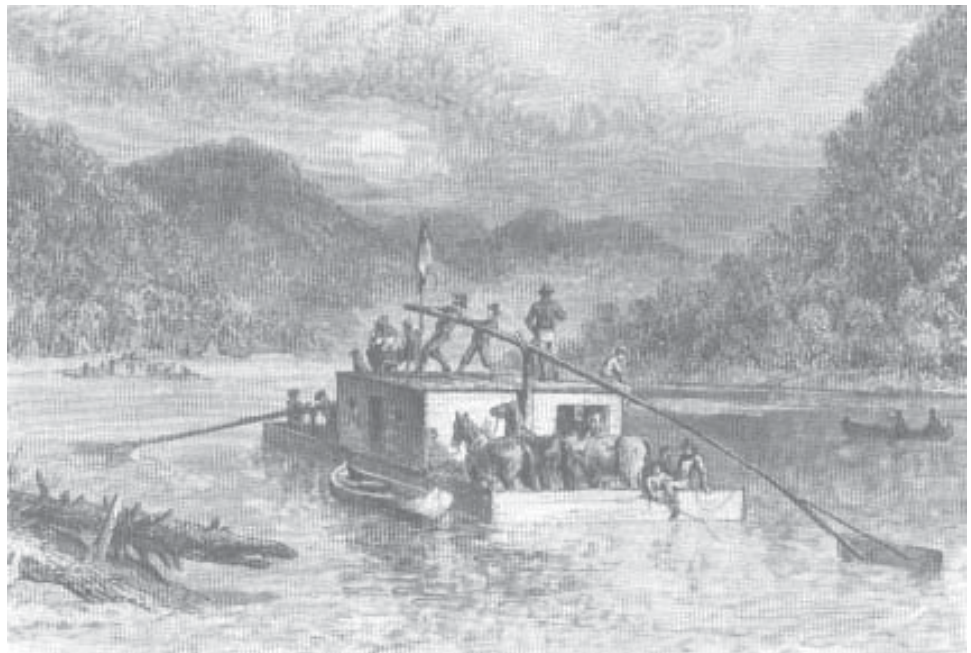
Rivers

Glossary

flatboat—a boat with a flat bottom and square ends used for carrying heavy loads on inland waterways, especially canals

transportation—a way of carrying goods or people from one place to another

Illinois has one of the most extensive river systems in the United States. The Illinois, Mississippi, Wabash, and Ohio Rivers all brought people, goods, and services to and from the state. Many settlers from the east arrived in Illinois on the Ohio River, traveling on large **flatboats** with all their belongings. The mighty Mississippi River was a major transportation route for north and south travel, while the Illinois River was used to move people and goods northeast and southwest across the middle of the state. **Transportation** on the eastern border with Indiana was provided by the Wabash River.



Flatboat loaded with livestock and settlers heads downriver. Courtesy Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

Glossary

canal—a manmade waterway

trading post—a store in an area of few settlements established to exchange goods for things such as furs from trappers

metropolis—a major city

portage—a route for carrying boats or goods overland from one body of water to another

Location and course of Illinois & Michigan Canal. Courtesy Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.



Traveling by water was usually easier than land travel. The invention of the steamboat, which harnessed steam to power a paddlewheel, created even more traffic on the nation's rivers. Traveling upriver was now easier. The large steamboats filled with people and goods could be powered with engines against the current of the Mississippi River. **Canals** such as the Erie Canal and the Illinois & Michigan Canal linked rivers to make better use of the river system. In the first half of the nineteenth century, these rivers and canals as well as the Great Lakes were the best routes to Illinois.

How important was the Erie Canal to Illinois? Two counties in the state are named in honor of New York Governor DeWitt Clinton, the man responsible for the construction of the canal, which gives an indication of what the canal meant to Illinois' growth. The canal stretched 363 miles from the Hudson River to Lake Erie near Buffalo, New York. Completed in 1825, the Erie Canal was the fastest and easiest route to travel from the northeastern United States to the Great Lakes. Chicago was a sleepy little **trading post** when the canal opened for business, but it soon became the site of a great city. The Erie Canal helped Chicago become a booming **metropolis**. When the Black Hawk War ended in 1833, the rush to northern Illinois was underway, and the Erie Canal was a big part of the system that moved people and goods to Chicago.

Equally important to the Erie Canal was the Illinois & Michigan Canal. Louis Jolliet, the French explorer, was the first person to see that a continuous waterway from the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River would be useful. During his return trip in 1673, while traveling the **portage** to Lake Michigan, he saw the possibility for a future trade route. This route did not become a reality until much later. On July 4, 1836, a celebration in Bridgeport, Illinois, kicked off the construction of the manmade waterway. When completed, the Illinois & Michigan Canal extended ninety-six miles, starting west of Chicago at Bridgeport and ending at LaSalle, Illinois.

Glossary

revolutionize—to change in a big way

hub—a center

Many of the canal workers came from Ireland. They helped build the canal and the towns that sprang up next to the Illinois & Michigan Canal. The canal was not completed until 1848, but the impact on Chicago and northeastern Illinois was immediate and positive.

Roads and Railroads

Some newcomers to Illinois traveled overland routes. Many settlers to Illinois reached the Prairie State by following the National Road. In 1815 work on this road started in Cumberland, Maryland. Progress was very slow, and the road did not reach Indianapolis, Indiana, until 1840, then construction stopped. By the 1840s trains were **revolutionizing** travel and support for the National Road was lost to the railroads. Even though some work had already been completed on the next stretch of the road into Illinois, the National Road was never finished. However, many families made their way into central and northern Illinois on the completed sections.

At this time Illinois, like the rest of the United States, was experiencing growth in both population and commerce as the railroad system began to crisscross America. By 1855 Illinois had 2,005 miles of track —the most of any western state. By 1857 eleven main lines of track entered the city of Chicago,

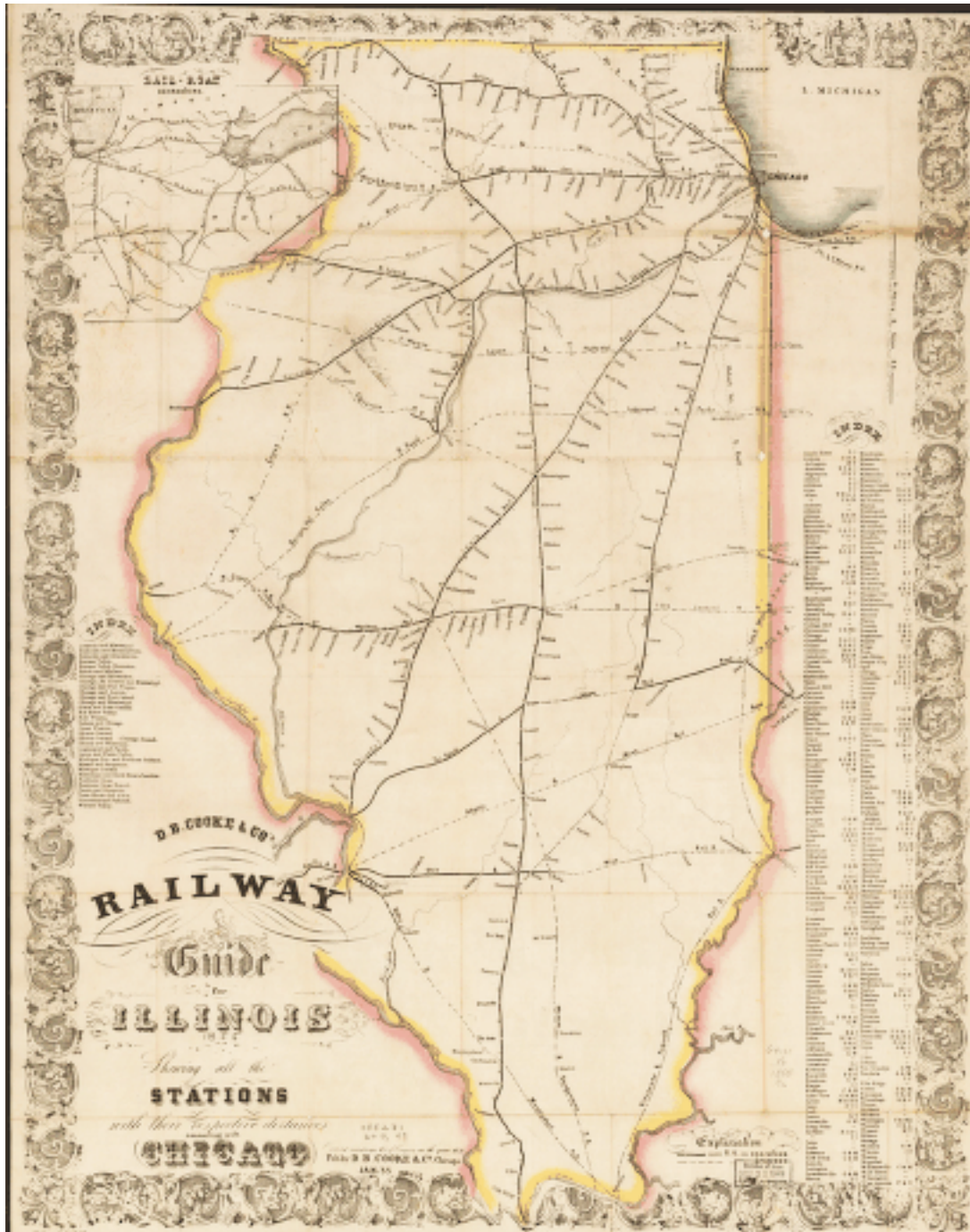
Building a Railroad.
Courtesy Abraham
Lincoln Presidential
Library.



soon to be a major railroad **hub** for the entire United States. The Illinois Central Railroad is the best known of the hundreds that were built in the state during this wave of construction. It was begun in 1851 and extended 705.5

Illinois railroads, canals, and rivers in 1855. Courtesy Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

miles from Cairo to East Dubuque, Illinois. Another line, connecting Centralia to the rapidly growing Chicago, was completed in 1856. It was twice the length of any other railroad line in the world at that time. By 1873 the Illinois Central Railroad had a continuous line of track from Chicago to New Orleans. Towns and farmsteads sprang up in the rural areas of eastern Illinois along the lines of the Illinois Central. With the rail lines came increased prosperity for Illinois' people.



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