

# The I&M Canal Shapes History

The I&M Canal changed the nation when it opened in 1848 and provided the last link in a chain of waterways that connected the eastern seaboard with the Mississippi River system. By connecting Lake Michigan to the Illinois River, the I&M extended the water highway that the Erie Canal created from New York to the Great Lakes at Buffalo. Boats could now cross the Great Lakes to Chicago, take the I&M Canal to LaSalle, and follow the Illinois to the Mississippi River south to the Gulf of Mexico. In an era when water was the most efficient way to move people and bulky goods, the I&M Canal made shipping possible all the way from New York to New Orleans, and created Chicago as the nation's greatest inland port.

Although the canal was built in the 1800s, its story began over 12,000 years ago during the last Ice Age. A sheet of ice



the I&M and the Great Lakes, versus 30-40 days via the Ohio River route

After the canal opened, Germans, Italians, Poles, Swedes and many other immigrants were drawn to Chicago and the other canal towns. They plowed the tough prairie grasses and tilled some of the nation's most fertile farmland. They processed tons of corn and wheat in the grain elevators that lined the canal. In Chicago's gigantic lumberyards, they loaded canal boats with enormous boards harvested from Wisconsin's

and lawsuits of communities downstream as far as St. Louis, the canal was opened in the dark of night in 1900.

Intended originally for sanitation purposes, the new channel was soon improved