

# The Chicago Portage

## Background:

In 1673, French-Canadian explorers **Jacques Marquette** and **Louis Jolliet** passed through the area known by trappers and traders as “Checagou.” The Chicago Portage is a water gap that connects the Mississippi River and Lake Michigan, and is one reason Chicago became a strategic point in the continent.

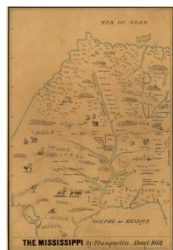
1848 saw the arrival of a major rail connection to Chicago, as well as the opening of the **Illinois and Michigan Canal (I&M)**, creating a waterway connection between the Mississippi River and Great Lakes for the first time in history. The I&M Canal would serve the Chicago area for nearly fifty years, facilitating the rebuilding after the Great Chicago Fire in 1871.

However, the canal soon became too small for the growing demands of the region and so the **Sanitary and Ship Canal** was opened in 1900. Not only did the Sanitary and Ship Canal increase waterway capacity, but it also reversed the flow of the Chicago River to its current direction, away from Lake Michigan. This canal, part of the Illinois Waterway System under control of the US Army Corps of Engineers, is still used today.

## Maps referenced in this activity:



Marquette (1673)



Franquelin (1682)



L'Isle (1718)



Arrowsmith (1814)






IL Waterway (HABS)

## Links:

<http://www.loc.gov/item/2004629031/>  
<http://www.loc.gov/resource/g3700.ct000666/>  
<http://www.loc.gov/resource/g4042m.rb000005/>  
<http://www.loc.gov/resource/g4042m.ct000784/>

For the 17<sup>th</sup> Century French explorers, much like during the expeditions of Lewis and Clark, the interior of the American continent was an unknown territory. Examine the Franquelin map (1682). What is unique about this map compared to others? How accurate is the map to what we know today?

List three features that Franquelin put on his map and why you think they were important:

1.	
2.	
3.	

With what you know about early American settlement, why would a connection between the Great Lakes and Mississippi River be desired in the first place? What sort of difficulties would explorers and traders have experienced in the 1600s?

Although the Chicago Portage is the only direct link between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River, it was not the only option for a connection. Examine the map by Marquette (1673), a contemporary of Franquelin. What are the main differences between the portage at Chicago and the one farther up the coast of Lake Michigan? What are the differences between this map and the Franquelin map?

Marquette (1673)	Similarities	Franquelin (1682)

Examine the other maps of the interior from the 1700s (L'Isle) and 1800s (Arrowsmith). As more sophisticated surveying techniques were invented, and thus more became "known," do you think the portage at Chicago was still the most logical link? Why do you think Chicago was the better choice?

Compare the Arrowsmith map (1814) to the others you have examined. What is different/similar?

Similar	Different

How accurate do you think the Arrowsmith map is compared to what we know today?

Using the Arrowsmith map, plot and list two more connections from the Mississippi River to the Great Lakes. Including the existing connection at Chicago, which do you think is the best and why?

Connection	Route
Via Chicago	Lake Michigan, Chicago River, Des Plaines River, Illinois River, Mississippi River

One of the biggest challenges of creating a waterway from Lake Michigan to the Mississippi River is the change in elevation. Lake Michigan sits nearly 160 feet higher than the Mississippi River. The canals that created the waterway raise and lower boats using pound locks, used in most canals around the world (first used in China in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century).

Examine the "Illinois Waterway Map and Profile" (HABS) map. How many locks are on the waterway?

If you took a boat at 5mph from Lake Michigan to the mouth of the Mississippi River, waiting 20min at each lock, how long would the trip take?

Water will not naturally flow away from Lake Michigan due to the watershed. A watershed is the area of land where all the water that drains off it goes into the same place. In other words, the water from the Chicago River flows *toward* Lake Michigan.

What are some of the benefits of changing the direction of the river? Problems?