

## Canal, a Victim of the Times and Circumstances



Soon after achieving statehood in 1837, the Michigan state legislature passed the Internal Improvement Act, providing for the construction of 3 railroads and 2 canals to open the interior of the state and provide for the convenient movement of people and material goods. One of these projects was the Clinton-Kalamazoo Canal. The canal was to traverse 216 miles across the southern tier of Michigan beginning at the Clinton River near the village of Frederick, just west of Mt. Clemens. Frederick has since disappeared. The western terminus was to have been at Singapore at the mouth of the Kalamazoo River. The project was inaugurated with much fanfare on July 20, 1838, with the governor performing the ground-breaking.

This work proceeded slowly through dense forests and swamps and the difficult construction of locks. The terrain from Mt. Clemens to Pontiac included an elevation of 200 feet, necessitating approximately 25 locks, built as required by the changes in elevation. Locks and dams were built of stone and heavy timbers to prevent erosion back into the canal. Most of the earth removed from the canal bed was placed along side, to be used as a towpath for the horses which would haul the flat-bottomed barges used to carry goods and passengers. Construction proceeded as far as Rochester by 1842 when it was halted. The principal reason for this was financial. Eventually, the state officially cancelled the canal project.

Historical records relate that only two boats ever operated on the canal. For a short time, a single small boat transported freight from Utica to Frederick. Less than \$100 in tolls was ever collected from this operation. Legend also depicts that a flat-bottomed, horse-drawn barge was built in 1844 by a Rochester carpenter named Asa Brown for an excursion. It was reported to have been abandoned during its maiden voyage in the first lock it came to because it was too wide to navigate the lock and got stuck.

Despite the passage of more than 150 years, we can still find traces of the canal. It started at what is now the foot of Canal Road in Clinton Township, where a park has been established to commemorate it. No evidence of the canal remains within the city limits of Sterling Heights, but it is clearly evident along Canal Road east of Hayes.

As you drive through Sterling Heights, you might notice two new signs stating "Clinton Kalamazoo Canal". Thanks to the efforts of the Historical Commission, signs have been placed near the northwest corner of Schoenherr and Canal and near Canal and Clinton River Roads.

The canal was clearly a victim of the times and circumstances. Fresh off the success of the Erie Canal, a canal across the Lower Peninsula appeared to be a natural success. Instead, financial problems and the coincidental development of the railroads served to undermine the project almost before it began. Time and progress have reduced it to little more than a footnote in the history books of the state of Michigan.