

# Brief History of the Chicago River

## **The Early River**

Many different Native American tribes settled periodically along the river, they named it “Chicagoua” after the wild garlic plant that grew on its banks. Native Americans were the first to discover the portage between the Chicago River and the Des Plaines River. The portage was extremely valuable as it linked the Great Lakes water system with the Mississippi River. Native Americans would walk their canoes – called portaging – between the Chicago River and the DesPlaines River.

In 1673, Native American guides showed Jolliet and Marquette the Chicago River portage. Joliet and Marquette immediately recognized the value of the Chicago River portage, and informed other French fur traders about it, prompting Robert Cavelier de La Salle to travel through the portage in 1682. Soon, the French began to settle along the Chicago River, establishing La Mission de l’Ange Gardien in 1696 along the banks of the Chicago River, probably near where the Merchandise Mart now stands. Raids by Native Americans forced its closure by 1702.

Jean Baptiste Point DuSable, a Haitian-born farmer and fur trader, considered the founder of Chicago built his permanent home near the mouth of the Chicago River. Often quoted as being built in 1779, there is debate with some placing DuSable in Chicago only in the mid to late 1780s. Soon a community of Native Americans and Europeans was built along the Chicago River, in what is now downtown Chicago.

In 1803, Captain John Whistler brought 40 men to the growing settlement to build Fort Dearborn and facilitate America’s westward expansion. The fort drew many soldiers and their families to settle along the river. When several Native American tribes joined forces with the British against the newly-freed Americans in the War of 1812, many soldiers and their families feared violence and tried to flee the area. As they tried to escape, the Potawatomi attacked, killing 86 adults and 12 children. The Fort Dearborn massacre is one of the bloodiest events to occur along the Chicago River.

## **The Growth of a City**

As the American government lay claim to more and more territory, tensions rose between the Native American population and the Americans. After defeat in the Blackhawk war of 1832, the Native Americans signed the Chicago Treaty of 1833, ceding their rights to any territory in Illinois. As a result the United Bands of Chippewa, Potawatomi, and Ottawa agreed to were forced to move to reservations further west. After the Treaty of 1833, settlers flocked to the area, feeling the area was now safe. As a result, the Chicago expanded rapidly moving from a small outpost to a city.

Chicago’s expansion was largely due to its importance as a major port city. Shipbuilding became a major industry from around 1850 to 1875, and for a while, more ships passed through Chicago than through any other city in America. Since big ships obviously couldn’t use the portage, local government designed the Illinois and Michigan Canal, completed in 1848, which ran from the Chicago River to the Illinois River.

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Having large ships traveling down the Chicago River and through the city of Chicago necessitated the development of movable bridges. These bridges could be raised to let boats through and lowered to allow pedestrians and vehicles to traverse the river. There were so many ships and the bridges were raised so frequently, however, that traffic backups at bridges became an enormous problem. The city then decided to build tunnels under the river in order to keep traffic moving.

### **Growing Pollution**

The population growth of the 19<sup>th</sup> century led to more and more pollution. Chicago's sewage flowed directly into the river, first via trenches in the roads and later through sewers which dumped directly into the river. The river downtown was a smelly and unpleasant mess. Industries also dumped waste materials into the river, polluting it even further. The most famously polluted spot along the river was the area near the Chicago Union Stockyards called Bubbly Creek, which even caught the attention of Upton Sinclair in *The Jungle*. The river's terrible smell and appearance made the public concerned that it might be the cause of the frequent cholera and typhoid outbreaks. At the time the science of bacteria and viruses was unknown, so various theories including miasmas were put forward. Miasma is the theory, later disproved, that it was the smell and inhaling the stench that caused disease.

### **Reversing the River**

Despite the lack of complete knowledge it was clear that having the city's sewage flow into the city's drinking water supply, Lake Michigan was not a good idea. In the 1870s, several attempts were made to reverse the flow of the river using pumps, but they were all ultimately unsuccessful.

In 1889, the State Legislature created the Sanitary District of Chicago to manage wastewater and come up with a solution to the polluted river and lake. It proposed the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal, a newer and larger canal which would stretch between Damen Avenue on the South Branch and the town of Lockport on the Des Plaines River. By building the canal deeper and deeper as it progressed west, the canal would reverse the Main Stem and South Branch of the the Chicago River, drawing its waters away from Lake Michigan. Completed in 1900 the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal not only kept sewage out of the city's drinking supply, it flushed the filthy Chicago River with clean Lake Michigan water.

The water from Lake Michigan only flowed into the Main Stem and the South Branch, however, and did nothing to ameliorate the pollution in the North Branch. The solution was the North Shore Channel (completed in 1910) which brought in Lake Michigan Water at Wilmette and flushed it down the canal and down the North Branch beginning just south of Foster Avenue. In order to make the channel operational, the Sanitary District also had to straighten the North Branch, which they did in 1907.

The last channel built on the Chicago River was the Cal-Sag Channel which was completed between 1911 and 1922. Its construction fueled the growing debate over use of Lake Michigan water and Chicago's attempt to treat the river by dilution. The completion of the Cal-Sag in 1922 coincided with a dry period and record low lake levels in the 1930s. Fingers pointed at Chicago as the culprit and Great Lake states upstream of Lake Michigan, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, New York, and Michigan, sued the Sanitary District of Chicago for diverting too

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much of Lake Michigan's water to clean the Chicago River. In the end, the Sanitary District of Chicago was allowed to continue diversions, but at a reduced rate, and was required to finish construction of sewage treatment facilities, construct locks at the river's mouth in order to keep too much lake water from going into the river.

### **People and the River in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

Although the water in the Chicago River was not clean enough to drink in the early 1900s, people enjoyed boating, fishing, and swimming in the river. The Chicago River was even used for swimming marathons! Cruise ships also went up and down the Chicago River, transporting people to vacation spots on the beaches along Lake Michigan. One very famous cruise ship was the Eastland, which overturned while docked on the Chicago River, killing 844 people in 1915. The Eastland Disaster is Chicago's most deadly tragedy.

In the 1920s, 30s and 40s, a variety of people took up residence in houseboats in the Chicago River. Some to avoid paying real estate taxes, others to avoid the permanence of neighborhood living. The most famous river resident was Captain George Wellington Streeter, who took up residence along the river after his ship crashed into a sandbar, founding the neighborhood that is now known as Streeterville.

### **An Inspirational Waterway**

During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Chicago River served as an important inspiration for some of Chicago's most famous architects and architectural monuments. In 1909, Daniel Burnham wrote his *Plan of Chicago*, which made several recommendations to make Chicago the "Paris of the Prairie". Some Chicago landmarks that were based on the Burnham Plan are the Michigan Avenue Bridge and Wacker Drive. The river also awed the young architect Frank Lloyd Wright when he visited the city for the first time.

The wild areas around Chicago, including the banks of the Chicago River, helped inspire the creation of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County and the preservation of hundreds of acres of natural area. In 1904, the Municipal Science Club (later renamed the Special Park Commission) headed by prominent Chicago architects, Jens Jensen and Dwight H. Perkins concluded: "Instead of acquiring space only, the opportunity exists for preserving country naturally beautiful. The bluffs and beaches along the Lake Shore, the Skokie, the North Chicago river valley, the Des Plaines Valley, Salt Creek, Flag Creek, Mt. Forest, the Sag Valley, Palos Heights, Blue Island Ridge, the Calumet River and Lake...all of these should be preserved for the benefit of the public in both the city and its suburbs, and for their own sake and scientific value, which, if ever lost, cannot be restored for generations. Another reason for acquiring these outer areas is the necessity of providing for future generations, which will extend to the borders of Cook County and intervening areas."

### **Water Treatment Plants**

A Supreme Court decree forced the Sanitary District of Chicago to complete construction on its planned water treatment plants. The first water treatment plant was the Calumet Water Reclamation Plant, built in 1922, and was followed by the North Side Water Reclamation Plant in 1928, the West Side Water Reclamation Plant in 1931, and the Southwest Side Water Reclamation Plant in 1939. Shortly thereafter, the West Side and Southwest Side plants were

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joined together to form the Stickney Water Reclamation Plant, which is the largest water treatment facility in the world.

### **A Man-Made River**

During the 1920s and 1930s, the last major changes to the Chicago River were made. The City of Chicago began to discuss the possibility of straightening the South Branch of the river in the early 1920s, and the project was finally begun in 1928. The straightening of the South Branch was done mainly for purposes of transportation, but it had the side effect of making Chicago a more beautiful place. During this time, the North Branch was also changed when the Forest Preserve District bought 1,100 acres of land between Lake Avenue and County Line Road to construct the Skokie Lagoons. Initially suggested by the Burnham Plan, the Skokie Lagoons provided floodwater drainage for the northern suburbs and also provided a beautiful destination for Chicago residents. Originally the area was an extensive marsh, but drainage by farmers turned the area into dry peat by the early 1920s which alternately flooded and caught fire depending on the weather.

### **Changing Riverside Residents**

Beginning in the 1840s and 1850s, Chicago's poorest residents lived along the river. Wealthy residents preferred the lakefront, and since the riverfront areas had more exposure to industrial pollution, they were left to the poor. This trend continued throughout the Great Depression, when many Chicago residents moved onto houseboats in order to avoid paying rent and property taxes. In the 1930s and 1940s, two Chicago public housing developments, Cabrini Green and the Julia Lathrop Homes were built along the Chicago River's banks.

In the 1960s, the perceived property value of the riverfront first began to change. One of the first architects to use the Chicago River as an amenity like the lakefront was Bertrand Goldberg, who built two luxury apartment complexes, Marina City in the early 1960s and River City in 1987. In the 2000s a plethora of new home and condo development sprouted up along the river, even along the infamous Bubbly Creek.

### **The Clean Water Act**

In the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the river began to get much cleaner. In 1972, the federal government passed the Federal Water Pollution Control Act Amendments, commonly known as the Clean Water Act, which made it unlawful for any person to dump pollutants into water without permits. It also gave the Environmental Protection Agency the authority to set wastewater standards for industry and implement pollution control programs.

### **River Possibilities**

After the Clean Water Act was passed, Chicagoans became interested in the potential of a cleaner Chicago River. In 1966, the City of Chicago published the *Comprehensive Plan of Chicago*, which vaguely outlined the river's possibilities. The *Chicago 21 Plan* in 1973 stated the potential of the river in more definite terms, aiming to make the river visible from streets and buildings and allow for continuous public access along the river's edge. In 1974, Mayor Richard J. Daley and the Department of Development and Planning put forth *The Riveredge Plan of Chicago*, which set up guidelines to ensure that future development along the river would make it more accessible to the public.

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The city's planning led to corporate involvement. In 1975, in celebration of their newly-completed riverside building, IBM donated money to construct parks along the south bank of the river between Wabash and Dearborn. Many other corporations followed suit, and the parks were completed in the late 1970s and are a popular lunch spot for local office workers.

### **A Friendless River?**

Corporate concern for the river was joined by citizen concern. In a 1979 *Chicago Magazine* article entitled "Our Friendless River", Robert Cassidy called out for concerned citizens to come together on the behalf of the Chicago River. Shortly after the publication of his article, Friends of the Chicago River was formed to foster the vitality of the Chicago River for the plants, animals, and humans that live within its watershed. Within a year of its formation, Friends of the Chicago River had 1,000 members, and that number continues to grow every year.

In its early days, Friends of the Chicago River faced enormous challenges. Although the city had published guidelines that encouraged riverbank development that provided access to the river, they were difficult to enforce. One of the most controversial proposed riverside developments in the early 1980s was a Wolf Point heliport. Defeating the plan for the heliport was one of Friends of the Chicago River's first victories.

### **A Cleaner Greener River**

In 1975 the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago began construction of the Tunnel and Reservoir Plan (TARP), which installed a series of huge tunnels connected to massive reservoirs under the city and suburbs. TARP was to provide storage for the billions of gallons of combined sewer and stormwater that overwhelmed the sewer system during rainstorms. Instead of untreated sewage flowing into the river when it rained, the sewage would be shunted to TARP to be stored until the rainstorm passed and the sewer system could handle the excess. By the early 1990s, the water quality and habitat quality of the Chicago River had shown major improvement. However, TARP remains unfinished and as such sewage still reaches the river during rainstorms, though much less frequently than before.

Federal laws and city projects were not the only things that contributed to a cleaner river. Many concerned individuals in Chicago and the suburbs worked very hard to improve water quality. In 1992, Friends of the Chicago River began the annual Chicago River Day, where thousands of volunteers meet at sites all along the river, cleaning up litter and debris and improving habitat. There are also many ongoing cleanup projects along the river through Friends of the Chicago River's Adopt A River Program. At sites such as the Lathrop Homes, Prairie Wolf Slough, and Gompers Park, dedicated volunteers have turned neglected, litter-filled portions of the riverbank into thriving habitats and beautiful public places.

In 1999, Friends inaugurated the innovative North Branch Watershed Project, which addresses river restoration and stormwater management in a whole new way by allowing Friends to allocate money from the Environmental Protection Agency to local projects. In 2003, Friends also began a mussel survey on the North Branch after a freshwater mussel, previously unknown to live on the Chicago River, was discovered. In 2005, in order to test the effects of the North Branch Watershed Project, Friends installed lycimeters at locations along the North Branch in order to scientifically determine the benefit of native plantings.

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Friends has also done innovative work in downtown Chicago with the construction of a Fish Hotel in 2005. The fish hotel is the first of its kind and has been installed near the Michigan Avenue Bridge in downtown Chicago in order to provide habitat for fish in a very urban stretch of the river.

### **A More Active River**

As the river has gotten cleaner, more people have started using it again for recreation. The first private boat club along the Chicago River was the Chicago River Rowing & Paddling Center, which was founded in 1979. In 1995, Friends of the Chicago River launched Urban Canoe Adventures, the first organized canoeing program on the Chicago River. Friends of the Chicago River celebrated a real victory for public access in 2000, when the first canoe launch on the Chicago River was opened at Clark Park. In that same year, Friends of the Chicago River began the annual Flatwater Classic, which is the largest urban canoe race in the Midwest. In 2001, the first canoe rental service, Chicago River Canoe & Kayak, was opened on the Chicago River.

At the same time, people were working hard to make the dream of a continuous river walk closer to reality. In 1998, the City of Chicago worked with Friends of the Chicago River to release a plan for the development of the Chicago Riverwalk, a continuous river trail that will allow people to get close to the river and enjoy it. In 2004, enough of the downtown riverwalk was completed for Friends of the Chicago River to organize Art Connects: The River, a walking tour of sculptures along the Chicago River's banks.

### **River Education**

The Chicago River is one of the most historically and environmentally important resources that Chicago has. As a result, Friends of the Chicago River has organized several programs that promote river education. In 1995, Friends formed the Chicago River Schools Network, which provides K-12 teachers with river-related resources to use the river as a context for learning and as an outdoor learning lab. Three years later, in 1998, Friends organized the first annual Chicago River Student Congress, which provides students with an opportunity to showcase their work on river-related topics.

Friends also educates residents of the North Branch watershed through the Riparian Residents Outreach and Education Program, which involves local homeowners in the restoration process by educating them about native plants and providing them with materials.

Opened in 2006, the Michigan Avenue Bridgehouse Museum, located in one of the historic Michigan Avenue bridgehouses on the site of the first settlement in Chicago, provides a place to learn the colorful story of the Chicago River, see a working moveable bridge, and experience the beautiful views of the river and city from its many windows.