

The Canal

In its early construction, the Ohio and Erie Canal connected Akron, in Summit County, with the Cuyahoga River near its mouth on Lake Erie at Cleveland, in Cuyahoga County.

A few years later, it connected with the Ohio River near Portsmouth, Scioto County, and then began connections to other canal systems in Pennsylvania and Ohio.

In 1784, George Washington had written an early letter to Benjamin Harrison suggesting a commission be formed to conduct a survey for a canal system to connect the Ohio River with Lake Erie. It was reported that Portsmouth presented a “favorable situation for the termination of the canal as the water was deep and the shore line stable”.

On February 4, 1825, the Ohio legislature passed a law providing for the internal improvement of the state with navigable canals. It was hoped that this event would begin a new era of vitality and prosperity for the state. This was realized at the completion of the Canal when officials began to see prosperity and growth to Ohio.

On June 4, 1825, the work began to construct a canal. The Licking- Summit County line in central Ohio was to be the starting point. The plan was for work to proceed north to Cleveland and south to Portsmouth, simultaneously.

The first laborers consisted of farmers living along the canal, Ohioans in nearby areas and Irish and German Immigrants. A work day was from sunrise to sunset.

On October 13, 1832, the opening of the canal to Portsmouth was planned to be celebrated.

Col. William Oldfield was to be Marshal, Dr. Hempstead was to receive the guests and William V. Peck was to deliver the oration. All Revolutionary Soldiers were invited to join in the ceremony. However, the opening of the canal was delayed in Scioto County due to an outbreak of Cholera. The opening ceremony for the canal was in December of that year.

Prior to 1830, the Scioto River came within 350 feet of the Ohio River at the end of Second Street. With a wide sweep, it then turned and ran parallel to the Ohio, flowing into the Ohio a mile below Portsmouth near Carey's Run. The river changed its bed to follow the ditch the canal workers had made. The 'cutting' of the land, or isthmus, for the Canal caused the change in the location of the mouth of the Scioto.

The team of animals, usually 2 to 4 mules or horses, were hitched to the canal boat with a 150-200 ft. rope or "towline" and walked along the canal on the towpath. Portions of State Route 104 were built along the former towpath and many in the area still refer to the road as the towpath yet today.

The Union Mills area was a beehive of activity during the heyday of the canal with several mills, a distillery, post office and many shops located there. There were a series of three canal locks in the Union Mills area while the canal was in operation with Lock 50 opening on December 1, 1832.

In 1833, Portsmouth began to realize its commercial importance. Portsmouth farmers transferred their goods from the canal boats to the Ohio River steamers and from the steamers back to the canal to send their goods onto other markets. Ohio became the third most prosperous state in the U.S. during the 1840's. The canal's golden age lasted from 1832-1860.

General lack of maintenance and design flaws led to the disuse of the entire southern part of the Ohio & Erie Canal by the late 1880s.

Despite the rise of railroads in the 1840s and 1850s, the Ohio Canal Commission remained in operation to oversee Ohio's canals until the early 1900s. As canals became abandoned, the Ohio government eventually disbanded the Canal Commission.

By 1911, most of the southern portion of the canal had been abandoned. In 1913, storms dumped an abnormally heavy amount of rain on the state, causing extensive flooding. This caused the reservoirs to spill over into the canals, destroying aqueducts, washing out banks, and devastating most of the locks. This was the end of the Canal era.