

Great Lakes to Atlantic canals faded at end of an era

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When Martin Beaser arrived at the future site of Ashland in August 1854, he noted that it was an obvious location for the terminal of a Great Lakes-Mississippi River Canal.

Unfortunately for Beaser's vision, 1854 was actually the end of the great canal building era, which began in 1790, during which 5,000 miles of canals were constructed.

The most famous of these early canals were the Erie Canal, constructed from 1817 to 1825, from Albany, N.Y., 363 miles to Buffalo, N.Y., on Lake Erie, and the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal — a favorite project of George Washington — which paralleled the Potomac River, from Washington, D.C., to Cumberland, Md., and operated from 1831 to 1924.

The rapid expansion of the railroads, which in contrast to canals could be constructed almost anywhere and operate in all seasons, eventually ended the enthusiasm for canal building. But it was not anticipated that the railroads would reach the far north country of Wisconsin for many years, if ever, and the interest in canals lingered on in the Northland.

A canal connecting Lake Superior and the Mississippi River thus appeared to be obvious and feasible to connect the north country with the markets, resources, products and populations in the south. The network of lakes and rivers that had provided the historic routes for the Native Americans and fur traders offered (with improvements) several possible routes for a canal.

In November 1872, the Ashland Daily Press reported that an article had appeared in a Stillwater, Minn., newspaper, noting the feasibility and

importance of a canal from the head of navigation of the St. Croix River to Lake Superior.

Nothing was done to follow up on this idea, however. By 1934 several possible routes for a canal between Lake Superior and the Mississippi River had been proposed. One route began in Chequamegon Bay, followed by the Bad River and White River to Lake Owen and then down the Namakagon River to the St. Croix River and the Mississippi.

A second proposed route was up the Brule River to the headwaters of the St. Croix River and then to the Mississippi. A third began in Allouez Bay, near the southeast side of Superior, then east to the Amnicon River, then up the Amnicon River to the divide, six miles across the divide — assumedly a portage — then down the Moose River to the St. Croix River.

From 1896 to 1916 the Army Corps of Engineers surveyed and evaluated the different routes on four occasions. The conclusions of these professional engineers in their several reports to Congress were essentially the same: a canal was feasible from the engineering viewpoint but would be extremely costly to construct, maintain and operate. The carrying capacity of such a canal would be low and it would be unusable for four or more months of the year, and it could not possibly compete with the railroad system in convenience, reliability, efficiency or cost.

The little "ditches" that people dug between the lakes and rivers in northern Wisconsin paled compared to the project to connect the lakes to the Atlantic Ocean.

The first waterways to connect the Great Lakes to the ocean were the Erie Canal, from Lake Erie at Buffalo to the Hudson River at Albany, opened in 1825, and the Chicago Ship Canal, connecting Lake Michigan with the Mississippi River via the Des Plaines and Illinois Rivers, opened in 1900.

The first serious proposals to construct a waterway between the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean via the St. Lawrence River were made in the 1890s. In ensuing years conferences were held, resolutions were passed, engineering studies were completed, agreements were signed and promises made, but the obstacles, primarily economic and political, were not overcome for many years.

Construction of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Seaway finally began in 1954 and was completed in 1959. The seaway is 2,342 miles long from Lake Superior to the Atlantic Ocean, with numerous locks that allow vessels to transit the 600-foot water level difference between the lake and the ocean. The locks on the seaway can accommodate vessels up to 730 feet long and 76 feet wide.

However, the seaway, long anticipated as the salvation of the Chequamegon Bay communities, did not benefit them, but rather benefited Duluth, Minn., and Superior, the large ports and transshipment points at the western end of Lake Superior.



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