



THE SOO LOCKS

On June 18, 1855, the steamer *Illinois* became the first boat to pass through the Soo Locks. The trip past the St Marys River rapids took less than an hour. Although difficult to build, the Soo Locks soon played an important role in America's industrial growth.

Iron and Copper Change Everything

For years, Michigan urged the U.S. government to support building a canal and locks at Sault Ste Marie. Michiganians argued it would benefit both Michigan and the nation. Not everyone agreed. During one congressional debate, a southern senator said that the Upper Peninsula was "beyond the remotest settlement of the United States" and digging a canal there would be like placing one on the moon.

This attitude changed in the mid-1840s with the discovery of copper and iron ore in the western Upper Peninsula. The minerals had to be shipped to Cleveland and Detroit for processing. Because of the rapids, all goods had to be removed from the boats and portaged around the rapids. This process took time and cost money.

In August 1852, the federal government gave Michigan 750,000 acres of land to finance the building of the canal. Digging began during the summer of 1853. At the height of operations, the canal builders employed almost 1,700 men. The men worked 12-hour days and received \$20 a month.

Winter made the hard work more difficult. On some wintry mornings, workers had to look for tools that were covered by the previous night's heavy snowfall. A cholera epidemic also killed many workers.

A Good Job Done

Workers completed the Soo Locks in May 1855. To bypass the rapids, boats went through two locks. Each lock spanned 350 feet long, 70 feet wide, and had to lift 9 feet. The locks were connected to a one-mile canal.

During the first summer, boats carried almost 1,500 tons of iron ore through the locks. Five years later, boats carried 120,000 tons to Detroit and Cleveland.

When boats got larger, authorities built bigger locks. The newest lock opened in 1968. It is 1,200 feet long, 110 feet wide and 50 feet deep. Construction on a new lock is currently taking place and is set to be completed in 2030. The Soo Locks continue to be the busiest locks in the world, averaging 7,000-10,000 ships coming through during a nine-month shipping season.