

## TRAVEL

### Canal leads to yesterday

**QUICK TRIPS | Bikers, families and history buffs get a kick out of mule-drawn boat ride on the I & M**

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**Mule tender Matt Jury guides Moe as the animals pull the new boat along the I & M Canal, just like they did in the 19th century.**

*(Rich Hein/Sun-Times)*

LASALLE, Ill. -- Abe Lincoln did it. Now, you can too. I'm not talking about becoming president.

I'm talking about taking a trip in a mule-drawn boat along the I & M Canal, a national landmark that helped make Chicago what it is today.

A new, full-size replica of a 19th century canal boat takes visitors on an hourlong, round-trip journey on a small segment of this historic waterway. The boat gets pulled by mules who trudge along on an adjacent tow path -- just like when Abraham Lincoln and his family traveled on the canal. (Wild Bill Hickok even worked here as a mule tender.)

Through Oct. 31, guides dressed in pioneer garb will lead daily cruises from downtown LaSalle, a 10-minute drive from Starved Rock State Park. The rides cost \$12 for adults, \$10 for seniors 65 and older, \$6 for kids between 3 and 17, and free for children 2 and under.

The wooden boat and nearby visitor center -- a great place to get some homemade pie and a history lesson -- are the culmination of more than three decades of planning and \$1.8 million in funding, nearly half of which came from private donations.

"The LaSalle Canal Boat and Lock 16 Visitor Center could be just the catalysts we need to make LaSalle the next Galena," said LaSalle Mayor Art Washkowiak, shortly before officials christened the "Volunteer" by smashing a bottle of champagne on its bow.

"This is exactly the kind of place more and more people want to visit. It's part of the trend toward heritage tourism," said Ana Koval, head of the Canal Corridor Association. The nonprofit group owns and operates the boat. "With gas prices skyrocketing, people are looking for nearby destinations."

Illinois Valley's newest tourist attraction was once a practical way of getting around in an era before roads

and rails. When the canal opened 160 years ago in 1848, it provided the missing link of an inland water highway that ran from New York to New Orleans, from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico.

The hand-dug canal that started in what is now Chicago's Bridgeport neighborhood wended its way southwest some 96 miles to LaSalle-Peru, making it possible for people and goods to travel by water between the Illinois River and Lake Michigan -- hence the name, the Illinois & Michigan Canal. The trip used to take up to 24 hours, which must have seemed like flying on the Concorde compared to the alternative: a long, bumpy journey in a stagecoach.

With the canal's debut, Midwest farmers suddenly had a cheaper, faster way to get their crops to market. Sugar and tobacco from the South -- not to mention passengers -- could flow into Chicago and beyond. The city blossomed into a major transportation hub.

The rise of railroads and other water routes spelled the end of travel and commerce along the I & M Canal. Boat traffic on the waterway dried up for good 75 years ago.

The canal's role shifted from transportation to recreation, with the tow path evolving into one of the best bike paths in northeastern Illinois: the I & M Canal State Trail.

The Chicago portion of the canal is buried under the Stevenson Expy., but you can bike nearly 75 miles of the original tow path from Romeoville to the trail's western terminus in LaSalle-Peru. (You'll need to deviate from the path and ride a few miles on city streets in Joliet.)

It's also possible to take your bike on Metra's Heritage Corridor line from Chicago's Union Station to Joliet, where you can pedal about 61 miles to LaSalle-Peru. (Get details on Metra's bike program at [www.metrarail.com](http://www.metrarail.com).)

For a slightly shorter bike trip, do what I did last fall and drive 45 miles southwest of the Loop to the town of Channahon. You can park your car overnight at the trailhead if you leave contact information and the date of your return on the dashboard.

And now, once you get to LaSalle, you can lock up your bike, board the boat and let the mules do the work.

## **IF YOU GO**

**GETTING THERE:** The canal boat is in LaSalle. From Chicago, take Interstate 55 south to Interstate 80 west. From I-80, take exit 77 and head south on Illinois 351 (Joliet Street) about three miles. The LaSalle Canal Boat is two blocks south of downtown LaSalle, where Illinois 351 crosses over the I & M Canal. You'll have to pick up your boat ticket at the Lock 16 Visitor Center, 754 First St., two blocks north of the boat in downtown LaSalle.

**BOAT RIDES:** Through Oct. 31, hourlong cruises depart daily at 9 a.m., 11 a.m., 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. Reservations are recommended. Call (866) 610-7678 or go to [Lasallecanalboat.org](http://Lasallecanalboat.org).

**LODGING:** Visit [Heritagecorridorcvb.com](http://Heritagecorridorcvb.com).

**I & M CANAL TRAIL:** For a map of the I & M Canal trail and interesting sites along the route between Lemont and LaSalle-Peru, call the Heritage Corridor CVB, (800) 926-2262, and ask for a driving tour map of the I & M Canal Passage.