



The National History Day Theme for 2006 is “Taking a Stand in History: People, Ideas, Events.” History provides many examples of people taking a stand for things that they believed in. Taking a stand can mean taking a stand for or against some thing, but in either case it usually requires great courage and perseverance. In the I&M Canal Corridor we have several fascinating cases that can be explored to further our understanding of why people have stood for or against certain causes or beliefs.

The Underground Railroad in Illinois. Why did people risk their lives in taking a stand against an unjust law?

The Underground Railroad was an escape route traveled by numerous slaves fleeing the South. The phrase probably stems from the lament of a slave owner who after searching for his escaped slaves exclaimed that they had taken the “underground railroad.” Several Corridor towns, including Chicago, Ottawa and Joliet, have been identified as important stops on the Underground Railroad, but these stories have not been fully documented. By the 1850s Illinois had become one of the battlegrounds over the issue of slavery.

The 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, which allowed for escaped slaves who had fled to the North to be sent back to slavery, aroused fierce opposition in parts of Illinois. Many otherwise law-abiding citizens defied the law (risking fines and prison sentences) by helping runaway slaves escape from bounty hunters. Abolitionists who spoke out against the law were vilified as America haters and traitors, and several were threatened and beaten by lawless mobs. Slave owners had the law on their side, while those who helped slaves defied the law. One famous case in Ottawa involved former canal contractor John Hossack.. He and others helped escaped slave Jim Grey elude bounty hunters, and they were put on trial for violating the Fugitive Slave Law. Hossack’s speech explaining his actions is one of the most stirring and memorable documents in Illinois, indeed, U. S. history.

Sources:

Glennette Tilley Turner, The Underground Railroad in Illinois, Newman Educational Publishing, Glen Ellyn, IL, 2001.

Underground Railroad, National Park Service Handbook, 1998.

Larry Gara, “The Underground Railroad in Illinois,” Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society, vol. 56, 1963, pp. 508-528.

Larry Gara, The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad, reprint edition Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996; original edition 1961.

John H. Ryan, “A Chapter from the History of the Underground Railroad in Illinois,” Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society, vol. 8, 1915, pp. 23-30.

“Historical Note,” Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society, vol. 41, pp. 67-74.

This contains a copy of Hossack’s speech before he was sentenced.

“The Underground Railroad in Illinois Special Issue, Historic Illinois, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, vol. 22, no. 6, April 2000.

Carol Pirtle, Escape Betwixt Two Suns: A True Tale of the Underground Railroad in Illinois, Southern Illinois University Press, 2000.

Norman Dwight Harris, History of Negro Servitude in Illinois and of the slavery agitation in that state, 1719-1864, Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1904.

August Maue, History of Will County, 1928, vol. 1.

Illinois Underground Railroad Association

Yale Law School Avalon Project

Chicago Tribune, March 16, 1860, other dates as well.



The 1847 strike of I&M Canal laborers. How do workers fight for safe conditions and fair pay? What are the consequences of going out on strike?

In 1847 canal diggers near Chicago, most of them Irish, went on strike for higher wages and shorter days. They stated that they often worked 15 hours a day for \$1. Sixty-one men signed a petition in which they complained that they were treated “worse than Common Slave Negroes.” Canal Superintendent William Gooding refused their demands for higher wages, arguing that if he increased wages for these men, laborers all along the canal would demand increases. If this happened canal contractors threatened to abandon their contracts. Within 2-3 weeks the strike was broken, and the men returned under the old conditions.

Sources:

Peter Way, Common Labour: Workers and the Digging of North American Canals 1780-1860, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

George Joseph Fleming, “Canal at Chicago: A Study in Political and Social History,” PhD dissertation, 1950, Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C., 1950.

Catherine F. Tobin, “The Lowly Muscular Ditch Digger: Irish Canal Workers in Nineteenth-Century America,” PhD dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1987.

Cite 1847 worker’s petition, CHS.

Cite A Man of Conscience letter, 1838.

D. L. Hough to David Leavitt, Sep. 16, 1845, Illinois State Archives, RS 491.005.



The Black Hawk War of 1832-Native Americans taking a stand against loss of their land. Is war a justifiable way of taking a stand?

Written treaties were an integral part of communication between Native Americans and European Americans. The land that now makes up the I&M Canal Corridor once belonged to Native Americans. After their defeat at the battle of fallen Timbers, the Potawatomi signed the 1795 Treaty of Greenville, which ceded land at the mouth of Lake Michigan that later became the site of Fort Dearborn. As a result of siding with the British in the War of 1812, the Potawatomi signed a treaty in 1816 in which they gave up a long strip of land to build the I&M Canal. Subsequent Native American leaders disavowed these and other treaties, arguing that they had not signed them or that they had not been told of all of the provisions of the treaties. By 1828 the governor of Illinois was demanding that all Indians leave Illinois. In 1832 the Sauk chief Black Hawk led his people back into Illinois. The Black Hawk War resulted in defeat for a mixed band of Native Americans, leading to the 1833 Treaty of Chicago, in which Native Americans agreed to give up their remaining lands in Illinois.

Sources:

James A. Clifton, The Prairie People: Continuity and Change in Potawatomi Indian Culture, 1665-1965, University of Iowa Press, 1998.

Bruce G. Trigger, editor, Handbook of North American Indians, vol. 15, Northeast, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1978.

Frederick E. Hoxie, editor, Encyclopedia of North American Indians: Native American History, Culture, and Life from the Paleo-Indians to the Present, Houghton Mifflin 1996.

James E. Davis, Frontier Illinois, Indiana University Press, 1998.

Black Hawk: An Autobiography, edited by Donald Jackson, University of Illinois Press, 1990.

Charles Winslow, Indians of the Chicago Region, 2nd edition, Chicago: Charles Winslow, 1946. This contains the eloquent speech of Potawatomi Chief Metea to the Governor of Michigan, protesting the Treaty of 1821. "My Father, a long time has passed since we first came upon our lands; and our old people have all sunk into their graves. We are fearful we shall offend their spirits if we sell our lands; and we are fearful we shall offend you if we don't sell them. This has caused us great perplexity of thought, because we have counseled among ourselves, and we do not know how we can part with our land. My Father, our country was given us by the Great Spirit, who gave it to us to hunt upon, and to make our beds upon when we die. And he would never forgive us, should we bargain it away. When you first spoke to us for land we said we had a little, and agreed to sell you a piece of it, but we told you we could spare no more. Now you ask us again. You are never satisfied."



The Lemont Massacre of 1885. Labor strikes and communicating grievances.

Limestone quarrying became a huge business in the I&M Canal Corridor between 1850 and 1900. Dozens of quarries opened in Chicago, Lockport, Lemont, and Joliet, and the I&M Canal served as the primary method of shipping the stone. Many stone buildings made of this limestone are still found in corridor towns, including the old Chicago Water Tower, the Gaylord Building in Lockport and the Joliet Penitentiary.

Lemont's quarry workers, like many American workers in the late nineteenth century, protested low pay, long hours and hazardous working conditions by going out on strike. In 1882, they walked out, but the strike failed. Three years later, Lemont and Joliet quarry workers struck again, and their action resulted in a bloody fight known as the Lemont Massacre. A month into the 1885 strike quarry owners threatened to replace the strikers, and some Joliet workers returned to the quarries. Angry strikers from Lemont fought pitched battles with these returning workers. Eventually the state militia was called out, armed with machine guns. A large crowd of Lemont strikers and their wives waited in the streets to meet them, and refused to leave when ordered to do so. The militia charged into the crowd with bayonets, and the strikers met them with stones and clubs. Three men were killed and scores of men and women were injured. The next day Albert Parsons, a noted labor activist from Chicago, arrived in Lemont to rally the workers. The strike failed, however, and the following year Parsons was tried and executed for conspiracy in Chicago's Haymarket affair. By the 1920s organized labor had improved both pay and working conditions for many workers.

Sources:

Sonia Kallick, Lemont and Its People, 1673-1910, Chicago Spectrum press, Louisville KY, 1998.

Lemont: 125th Anniversary Edition, 1873-1998, Village of Lemont, 1998.

Michael Conzen and Carl Zimring, editors, Looking for Lemont: Place and People in an Illinois Canal Town, Studies on the Illinois and Michigan Canal Corridor,, no. 7, University of Chicago Committee on Geographical Studies, 1994.

Joliet News, various dates, April 1885.



The Great River Reversal: Chicago Sewage and Canal Communities How did people take a stand against receiving Chicago's wastes?

In July 1871, the I&M Canal played a central role in one of the boldest engineering feats ever attempted—the reversal of the Chicago River. Contemporary observers called the river a “sluggish, slimy stream, too lazy to clean itself.” Chicago’s water supply had been polluted for years by sewage and other waste dumped into the Chicago River, which emptied into Lake Michigan. By deepening the canal, the waters of Lake Michigan now carried Chicago’s sewage down the canal and into the Illinois River. Although Chicagoans celebrated, residents of canal towns and river communities as far away as St. Louis were furious. Students can explore those who take a stand against the decision to send Chicago’s sewage to other communities, as well as Chicago’s stand on dealing with a serious public health issue.

Primary Sources:

Chicago, Lockport, Morris, Joliet, newspapers, 1871. Don't have specific dates.

Secondary Sources :

George Joseph Fleming, “Canal at Chicago: A Study in Political and Social History,” PhD dissertation, 1950, Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C., 1950.

James William Putnam, *The Illinois and Michigan Canal: A Study in Economic History*, University of Chicago Press, 1918.

Libby Hill, *The Chicago River: A Natural and Unnatural History*, Lake Claremont Press, Chicago, 2000.

Louis Cain, *Sanitation Strategy for a Lakefront Metropolis: The Case of Chicago*, NIU Press, 1978.

Cain, Louis P., “Creation of Chicago’s Sanitary District and Construction of the Sanitary and Ship Canal,” *Chicago History*, vol. 8, no. 2 (1979), pp. 98-110.

Ashton, Bessie Leona, *The Geonomic Aspects of the Illinois Waterway* (Urbana: University of Illinois Studies in the Social Studies, no. 14, 1926), 177 pp.

Odenthal, W., “The Illinois Waterway,” *Bulletin of the Illinois Geographical Society*, n.s., vol. 1, no. 2 (February 1957), pp. 2-10.

Waller, Robert A. “The Illinois Waterway from Conception to Completion, 1908-1933.” *Journal of the Illinois Historical Society*, vol. 65, no. 2 (Summer 1972), pp. 125-141.