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**Selected Papers in Illinois History 1980**

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**The Politics of Transportation**

**John M. Lamb**

Even before the construction of the Illinois and Michigan Canal was begun in 1836 it faced competition from railroads. Five years earlier, the Canal Commissioners Board, frustrated in their efforts to raise funds for a canal, were convinced by advisors that it would be cheaper to build a railroad from Chicago to Peru, Illinois. After members of the board recommended a railroad to the general assembly, their positions were abolished.<sup>1</sup> Public opinion seemed to shift, however, and by 1834 the pro-canal forces had gained control of the governor's office and the general assembly. That was a reversion to the attitude that had prevailed since Illinois became a state in 1818. The canal was seen as the most important of all possible internal improvements, particularly by residents of the northern part of the state. Of all the projects started in the 1830s the canal was the only one completed in a useable fashion.

Unfortunately, by 1839 the internal improvements program had become mired in debt. The only project that held any promise of paying its way was the Illinois ad beco

at heart as the good of the Canal, and that I feel a pride in being connected with it. At one time I fondly hoped that I should gain some credit for the services that I had rendered. But I now feel a perfect indifference. So much have all canal officers been abused (except thorough going locofocos) that I am sat

connected to the canal and happy to use his political influence to benefit allies. For example, on May 4, 1845, one C. C. Wilcox writes to David Leavitt, a trustee, praising Oakley.

On June 30, 1845, Oakley writes to Leavitt urging that Wilcox be appointed to a post on the canal staff and asking for credit from Leavitt's bank.<sup>11</sup> Also, Oakley was spreading doubts about men long associated with the canal, including Captain William H. Swift,<sup>12</sup> a trustee, and Chief Engineer William Gooding. In an 1845 letter to Leavitt, Oakley carps:

"I was on the line of the canal a few days since, and I find there is a perfect scramble there by many of the old c

One of the things the other canal trustees feared was that Oakley and his supporters would gain control of awarding preemption claims. These claims had been bought up from the original claimants by speculators. One of those speculators was Joel Matteson, who observed to William Ogden that if there were profits to be made out of claims on canal lands, individuals should be able to make them.<sup>20</sup> Another speculator was William Reddick.<sup>21</sup> As a result, attacks from this quarter began on Canal Land Agent Robert Prescott, who was denounced to Leavitt for some past events.<sup>22</sup> This was to no avail, and thus the ire of Oakley and others was turned on Leavitt and Swift. Robert Stuart<sup>23</sup> observed that Trustees Leavitt and Swift were "ever likely to continue to impede the fertilizing benign flow of the Nile over the otherwise naked bottom of Egypt."<sup>24</sup>

The fears about the new administration in Springfield were expressed not only by Gooding but also by former Governor Ford, who in an 1847 letter to Ogden says:

"I would not allow my name to go before the governor [for State Canal Trustee] for several reasons. I foresee enough to know that it will not be desirable to be in anyway connected with or under obligations to his administration. This is private. I am making no opposition to the Governor...I

honesty earned him a great deal of popularity in Illinois. By 1847, however, he was not anxious to return to the state and face the calumny of the Oakley faction, as he writes in December:

“I get so weary and disgusted with selfishness and intrigue which have everywhere characterized these transactions in the West that I am quite willing to forget them if not too outrageous. I had hardly placed my foot in the business before its character and the characters of those concerned became so obvious that I firmly resolved to have nothing to do with it after making a report and have never repented an adherence to this opinion. When I saw the state of things last summer and encountered the endless misrepresentation I thought the pay, much as I need the money, a poor equivalent for the abuse that is heaped upon you.”<sup>29</sup>

Oakley brought a number of charges against Gooding. Governor French seeking to back up his anticipated discharge of Gooding, sent a judge along the canal to take affidavits. These were never released, but on April 18, 1848, French removed Gooding. The canal by this time was finished and the first boats upon it.

After Gooding was fired, the trustees-- instead of appointing an associate of Oakley's-- appointed Talcott, Gooding's assistant, as engineer. That Oakley did not rest in his efforts is indicated **eking**

"It is no doubt important, however, that all committees having in any manner to take charge of Canal and Railroad interests should be composed of right minded and influential men. The best way to bring this about is to give early attention to all preliminary arrangements for the organization of the legislature or its committees and other appointments, and reasonably apply all available means that can be brought to bear on these gatherings."

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But it was difficult to defend the canal in Springfield in 1850. The legislature proposed to grant a charter to the Rock Island and La Salle Railroad extending its line from La Salle to Chicago. The railroad had been originally granted a charter so that it could link the western terminus of the canal to the Mississippi at Rock Island. The extension to Chicago would put the railroad on the canal property and was obviously designed to undermine canal traffic. When on January 8, 1851, Trustee H. B. Wells informed Swift and Prescott what was proposed, Prescott hurried down to Springfield.<sup>33</sup> He found the old canal enemies had their work. As he informs Swift:

"Reddick and Matteson...led off well, and when I got down had an act for the last named road [the Rock Island] passed the third reading in the Senate. Upon my constant remonstrance it was referred to a select committee who could only be induced to allow as tolls

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the profitable passenger traffic on the canal. In 1853 the road bought out all the packet boats. The canal, however, continu

## FOOTNOTES

1. Putnam, James W. , *The Illinois and Michigan Canal: A Study in Economic History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1918, pp. 21-22.
2. Krenkel, John H., *Illinois Internal*



21. Reddick, a native of Ireland, came to Ohio in 1813 at the age of two. After learning the glassblower's trade, in 1835 he came to La Salle County. In 1838 he was elected sheriff and moved to Ottawa. In 1846 he was elected to the Illinois Senate. He was appointed one of the canal lands appraisers in 1848.
22. See Swift Manuscripts.
23. Stuart was born in Scotland in 1810. He joined John Jacob Astor and was sent to Mackinaw as an agent for the American Fur Company. In 1834 he moved to Detroit. He became secretary of the Canal Trustees